

## “All That is Written in the Book of the Law”

*The eightieth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Joshua 8:25-30; Philippians 3:1-11**

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This is about as good as it gets. In many ways, the events recorded at the end of Joshua chapter 8 are the high water mark of Old Testament redemptive history. At long last, the people of Israel have entered the promised land. The Israelites have conquered the Canaanite cities of Jericho and Ai. They have arrived at the city of Shechem in the valley between Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal, and they have built an altar on Mount Ebal just as Moses had told them to do. And there, in the very heart of that good land flowing with milk and honey which God had promised to give them, Israel renewed the covenant God had made with them more than forty years earlier in the barren wilderness at Mount Sinai. This is truly a high point in redemptive history.

But such moments are fleeting, sad to say, as the story of redemptive history is mostly downhill from here on. At this moment in the story of redemption, Israel is obedient unto the Lord and therefore will receive great blessing. But when Joshua eventually dies and Israel enters that period of biblical history known as the time of the judges, the people of God will forget YHWH and his law, and will do what is right in their own eyes. Human obedience to the law is not only external and fleeting, but our good works can never remove our guilt before God. Nor can the covenant God made with Israel and the revelation of his law on two stone tablets change the sinful human heart. At our best moments, we fall far short of those things God demands of us under the law. Looking back upon this period from the perspective of the coming of Jesus Christ, Paul tells us in Galatians 3 that all of these Old Testament events were intended to drive the people of God to faith in Jesus Christ, the greater Joshua. And as we read in Hebrews 10, all of the wonderful things we read about in Joshua chapter 8 are mere shadows of good things yet to come, namely the blessings of the New Covenant, blessings we enjoy as a result of Christ’s saving work.

We return to our series on the book of Joshua. Our current series on Joshua is part of a larger series entitled “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People.” Throughout this larger series we have been working our way through the story of redemption, focusing on the history of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as they unfold throughout redemptive history. In this series so far we have covered the ground from Genesis 1:1 through the first eight chapters of Joshua. We will now work our way through the rest of Joshua and the Book of Judges.

Recall that Israel had entered the land of promise under the leadership of Joshua, the covenant mediator who had taken the place of Moses. Israel defeated two significant enemies before the nation marched to the place Moses had told them to go in Deuteronomy 27:4-5. This covenant renewal ceremony on Mount Ebal was in many ways the theological climax of the entire Book of Joshua. The people had entered the promised land, YHWH had given them the victory over their enemies, and the nation was obedient unto the Lord. The people basked in the blessings of God and the nation renewed their covenant with YHWH. But while all of this is good and entitles the nation of Israel to material blessings from the Lord (the land and its bounty, protection from enemies, and so on), it also hides the fact that the human heart is full of sin, and all those countless Israelites renewing the covenant need a Savior who can deliver them from the guilt and power of sin. This is why Israel’s priests offer repeated sacrifices for sin, while the author of Hebrews reminds us that all of this is type and shadow, pointing us ahead to the reality, who is Christ.

In this sermon, we'll do some brief recap of those events which got us to this point in Joshua, and then we'll review our passage in Joshua 8:25-30, before we draw some application for us as God's new covenant people. Hopefully, our application will set the tone for what follows in the next chapter of the redemptive drama as well as provide us with a means to compare and contrast Israel's situation in Canaan with our own in pagan America.

**T**he Book of Joshua opens in the days after Moses' death, with Israel camped on the plains of Moab, directly across the Jordan from Jericho, which blocked Israel's way into Canaan.

Moab was high desert, parched and barren. The promised land, on the other hand, is described as flowing with milk and honey. From Moab, the people could look across the Jordan River at the bounty that awaited them. Joshua himself was one of those twelve men chosen by Moses who had scouted that land forty years earlier when he brought back to Moses large grapes and gigantic figs, indicative of the riches that awaited Israel. There were established crops and productive wells and the land was very fertile. But this land, called Canaan, was also home to a number of fierce pagan tribes, giving excuse to ten of the twelve scouts sent by Moses to doubt that God could make good on his promise to give Israel this land. This lack of faith in God's covenant promise resulted in God's curse coming upon Israel, and as a result the Israelites were forced to wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years more years. In fact, most of those living when Israel came out of their captivity and bondage in Egypt and who made it to the outskirts of Canaan only to be turned back, had already died in the desert. Those Israelites now camped in Moab looking across the river at their inheritance belonged to a different generation, a generation born in the wilderness and which was not characterized by the murmuring and unbelief of the previous generation. These people were faithful and eager to receive the promised inheritance.

After renewing the covenant at Moab (our Book of Deuteronomy), God chose Joshua to replace Moses (recounted in Joshua 1). In the second chapter we read that Joshua sent spies into Canaan and the city of Jericho. Jericho was a small but well-defended city (the fortifications covered seven acres), and effectively blocked Israel's way into Canaan. When the Israeli spies were discovered by the king of Jericho, they were hidden by a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab, who told the spies in Joshua 2:9-11 *"I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath."*

Rahab's words indicated to Joshua that the people of Canaan knew full-well that YHWH had promised to give this land to his people Israel—the descendants of Abraham—who himself lived in Canaan some four hundred years earlier. But instead of acknowledging that YHWH is the Lord of all and the redeemer of his people—as Rahab had done—the Canaanites rejected YHWH to worship and serve their own gods, gods associated with all kinds of fertility rites and earth worship. The worship of such "gods" produced the worst kind of ungodly behavior. YHWH will now use the armies of Israel to judge these people who know of him but who reject him—in fact, the judgment which comes upon the pagans throughout the Conquest is a graphic picture of God's judgment which will come upon the whole earth when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new on the last day.

In Joshua chapters 3-4, we read of God's miraculous provision for his people to cross the Jordan River on dry ground so as to finally enter the promised land. While the Jordan was at flood stage, God stopped the

river from flowing and then all Israel crossed through the river bed on dry ground, arriving just a few miles to east of Jericho at a place called Gilgal, where the Israelites erected a monument commemorating their entrance into Canaan. The news that the entire nation of Israel had unexpectedly and dramatically crossed the Jordan, sent fear throughout the tribes which inhabited the land. Their will to fight begins to ebb away, just as God had promised would be the case.

Once in Gilgal, we read in Joshua chapter 5 that the people of Israel renewed their covenant with YHWH, all the men were circumcised and together the people celebrated their first Passover in the land of promise. They also ate manna for the last time and were permitted to enjoy the bounty of the land—a tremendous blessing. After a week of recuperation, we then read in chapter six God led the men of Israel against Jericho, bringing down the city’s supposedly impenetrable walls after the priests of Israel had marched around the city for seven days with the ark of the covenant and sounding seven trumpets. Jericho was completely destroyed and all its inhabitants killed by the sword. It was a stunning victory and one which reminded all the Canaanites of YHWH’s power and covenant with Israel.

But after Jericho fell it soon became clear that YHWH was displeased with Israel, and the Israelites suffered a very humiliating defeat at Ai. Ai was a small city which nevertheless managed to kill a number of Joshua’s men, as well as put to flight the Israelite raiding party of 3000. Fearing that a defeat at Ai would give renewed courage to the Canaanites, Joshua then learned from the LORD that a certain Achan, a man from one of Israel’s most respected tribes and families—had disobeyed God’s express command not to take plunder from Jericho. Achan had kept for himself gold and silver from the ruins of the city, along with a decorative robe (a pagan status symbol), which had come from Babylon.

After Achan’s sin was discovered and Achan was put to death for disobeying the Lord’s command, Joshua then returned to Ai and used a clever ruse to trick the men of Ai, leading to a dramatic Israelite victory. When the defenders of Ai left the city to attack Joshua’s men, that left Ai completely unguarded. While Joshua’s men acted as though they were fleeing before the men of Ai, another group of Joshua’s men attacked the undefended city. As the Israelites attacked Ai, burned it, and killed all of its inhabitants, the men of Ai and nearby Bethel found themselves trapped between two Israeli forces and were completely wiped out. This defeat restored Israel’s prestige to the point that when the nation marched to Shechem at the foot of Mount Ebal—where Abraham had once lived—we read not of another battle, but of the sudden presence of aliens within Israel, probably the citizens of Shechem, who likely recalled their ancient connection to Abraham and who recognized the people of Israel as his descendants. That brings us to verses 30-35 of chapter eight and our text.

**I**t was here then, in that valley which lies between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim, the very place Moses where had commanded them to go before he died, that Joshua built an altar to the Lord and then aloud read to the people of Israel all that is written in the Book of the Law.

As we read in verses 30-31, “*At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, ‘an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool. And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings.’*” The use of uncut fieldstones in the construction of such altars was commanded by God back in Exodus 20:25. Joshua made two different offerings on Mount Ebal, a burnt offering and a peace (or “fellowship”) offering. In the case of a burnt offering, the animal is completely consumed by the flames, and the smell of the burning animal constituted a pleasing aroma to the Lord. These burnt offerings were designed to atone

for sins—in this case the sins of the people of Israel.<sup>1</sup> This is why Moses wanted Israel to build an altar here. There must be constant atonement for sin, even as Israel begins to receive their inheritance.

The fellowship offerings, on the other hand, did not consume the entire animal and those offering the animals were able to eat the remaining portions. This meal was a graphic picture of Israel's covenant fellowship with YHWH, as well as a foreshadowing to a meal yet to come in the messianic age, when Jesus himself sits down at table during the last supper with his disciples in preparation for the ratification of the New Covenant in his own blood. This kind of fellowship offering also points ahead to the marriage supper of Christ the lamb, when God feasts with his people at the time of Christ's return.

But here in Joshua 8, in the valley below Mount Ebal, the people of God could smell the aroma of these sacrifices being offered up on the mountain and then know that their sins were forgiven and that YHWH was in fellowship with them. When the aroma of these animals wafted through the camp, the people of Israel knew that YHWH was their God and that they were his people. This is what the author of Hebrews is getting at when he speaks of these things in the law (specifically, the Sinai covenant) as a shadow of good things to come—namely Christ's once for all sacrifice for sin. These burnt offerings had to be offered again, and again, and again. But Christ's death is once for all. His saving benefits are made new each and every Lord's day when we gather together to hear the law and the gospel and to feed upon Christ in our hearts through faith.

In verse 32, we read of what Joshua did next. *“And there [on the altar], in the presence of the people of Israel, [Joshua] wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written.”* This was the solemn witness that God had renewed his covenant with Israel as set forth back in Deuteronomy 27:1-8. This was not only testimony to the people of Israel that Israel was in covenant relationship with YHWH and that they would be recipients of both the covenant blessings and covenant curses, but it also was a powerful warning to all the surrounding Canaanite tribes—who were no doubt watching—that Israel was YHWH's people. Thus God had revealed his will to his people in the law, and then warned those Canaanites who rejected him not to mess with his people, Israel. YHWH himself is their shield and defender. He is covenant with them. This was also a graphic sign to them that YHWH was going to give Israel the land, and that there was still time to repent and turn to the living God.

In response to the building of the altar, the burnt and peace offerings and the inscribing of the law upon the stones of the altar, we read in verses 33-35, the amazing account of what happened next. *“And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.”*

We read that all the people of Israel assembled on both sides of the ark of the covenant, streaming up the slopes on the opposing mountains. This involved many hundreds of thousands of people. Not only did all Israel participate in the ceremony, but so did the aliens (sojourners) who were now living among the Israelites. This is an important sign that God's covenant promises extend to all who trust in him, even

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 215.

Gentiles. Aliens could participate in the major religious festivals, such as the Sabbath, the Passover, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. This group included people like Rahab and her family, but may also refer to many of the citizens of Shechem who may have seen the arrival of the Israelites as a family reunion of sorts. Abraham built an altar to YHWH in Shechem as did Jacob, who even settled there (cf. Genesis 35:4; 37:12-14). These sojourners joined Israel in this covenant renewal ceremony and were entitled to covenant blessings as well as taking upon themselves covenant responsibilities.

With all these people surrounding the ark and the priests, their number extending up the mountain as in an amphitheater, Joshua read everything written in the law to the assembled congregation. Most likely, Joshua read to them the Book of Deuteronomy, the covenant treaty document composed by Moses while still in Moab, in the days before the people entered Canaan. It is important to note the emphasis here on the fact that the whole law was read, included covenant blessings and curses—*There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.* In fact, as we will see when we come to Joshua 24, the covenant will be renewed again at Shechem shortly before Joshua dies. It will not be long before Israel takes possession of the rest of Canaan and makes that transition from wandering vagabonds to a great nation firmly settled in the land of promise. And as that transition takes place, so too a new set of issues arise as Israel struggles to remain faithful to the Lord and obedient to the covenant.

**T**he application that we will draw from this section of Joshua is important for us to properly consider, because this will set the tone for our time in the rest of the Book and the Book of Judges.

When we covered the Exodus (and went through the Book of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), it became clear that Israel's deliverance from bondage and captivity in Egypt served as an important picture of the Christian life. Just as the people of Israel had been rescued from the hand of Pharaoh by the direct intervention of God, so too Christians have been rescued from the tyrannical bondage of the guilt and power of sin. The account of the Exodus centers upon God rescuing his people and saving them from the Angel of Death when sacrificial blood was applied to the doorposts of Israeli homes. This was intended to point the people of God ahead to the cross of Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial blood redeems us from the guilt of our sin. And just as Israel was called out of Egypt through the covenant mediation of Moses, so too Christians are called out from among the nations by Jesus Christ. We are then formed (molded) into the ecclesia (or church) composed of all those purchased by his blood.

As Israel wandered throughout the wilderness of the Sinai for forty years—grumbling and murmuring—this too becomes an important picture of the Christian life. Just as Israel was making its way through the wilderness en route to the land of promise, so too the Christian is making their way through the wilderness of this present evil age (which includes the trials and struggles of life) before we receive our final inheritance when we enter the presence of the Lord. The Christian life is a journey which in many ways is much like Israel's journey through the desert. This is why the New Testament looks back at the messianic ministry of Jesus as a call to a New Exodus, and those who follow him constitute a new Israel.

Now that we've reached the point in the redemptive drama when Israel begins to take possession of the land of Canaan, there will be a whole new set of struggles for the people of God, as well as new application to be drawn by Christians. The people of Israel now live in the midst of pagans, surrounded by false "gods," false religions, and all of the temptations of the flesh. To many Israelites, pagan sexuality, pagan worship and pagan ways of thinking and doing were suddenly very attractive. God's people tired of being God's covenant people. Over time, they wanted to become more and more like the pagans. They want to do what the pagans do. They want to believe what the pagans believe. They will

worship pagans gods. They will marry pagan women. Sadly, they will become pagans.

While the wilderness had its own set of struggles—the perennial question “are we there yet?” led to constant complaining—life in Canaan is that much more difficult. No, the Israelites don’t have to eat manna and quail. Instead, the people of Israel must go about the task of working the land and building their homes, they must raise covenant children and remain faithful to YHWH, all the while surrounded by the temptations of paganism. As for application, we find ourselves in the exact same situation. How do we conduct the day to day business of life, raise our families and practice our faith, surrounded by pagans who hate what they call our “puritanical morality” and the fact that we won’t do what they do. But if we just give up our faith in Christ, the pagans will welcome us with open arms.

The question for Israel will become “how do we stay faithful to the covenant?” This generation entered the land with great faith. They were obedient to the covenant. But as their children grow up, the struggle to remain faithful to YHWH becomes paramount. One group in Israel will stress zeal toward YHWH, especially through outward conformity to the commandments. This is the legalist impulse which eventually produces the Pharisees. “We need more rules to control sinful human behavior.” “We need to get serious about obeying these rules.” This explains Paul’s self-righteousness as recounted in Philippians 3. *“I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”*

Another group in Israel goes on the opposite direction. They say “keep your covenant with YHWH,” but add to that covenant various pagan religious practices and thereby make everybody happy. While we see that at its heart this is a complete betrayal of the covenant with YHWH (who is a jealous God), we can also see that this approach would make perfect sense to the people of Israel by greatly lessening the tension with the neighboring pagans, thereby making daily life much easier. Every person hearing this feels that pull on a daily basis. Israel certainly did, and they succumbed to it. We must not.

Sadly, we see both tendencies in the church today. There are those who tell us that the solution to human sinfulness is found a renewed stress upon obedience. And there are those who tell us to remove anything from our lives or worship that might create conflict with unbelievers—in other words, anything distinctly Christian. One side risks creating a church of Pharisees, the other a church of pagans. As Israel struggles with these very issues, we will see that our hope is not in our ability to obey the commandments of God, or in becoming like the world. Our hope is in a gracious God, who delivers us from sin’s guilt and power, and who then forms in us the image of Christ, changing our conduct from the inside out. You know, guilt, grace, gratitude . . .

This is why we must learn to keep our gaze upon the faithful God, who preserves his people in the midst of a pagan world. Let us do as Paul instructs us to do. After renouncing his own legalistic righteousness, Paul goes on to say in Philippians 3, *“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”*

Beloved, we will keep ourselves from the dangers of legalism and paganism only by keeping our eyes upon Jesus Christ, our faithful Savior who will never leave us nor forsake us, and who is always with us, even as we dwell in Canaan.