

Sermon Outline

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

KEEPING OUR HOLINESS ALIVE (JOSHUA 8:30-35)

I. Introduction

II. Joshua Builds an Altar (Joshua 8:30-32)

A. In verse 29, Joshua executes the king of Ai.
—The king of Ai represents the kingdom of Satan, while Joshua represents the Kingdom of God.

B. After Joshua dispatched the leader of Ai, this happens: “At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal,”

C. Joshua builds an altar to the Lord in obedience to Moses and the elders of Israel (Dt 27:1-8):

Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, “Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. ² And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. ³ And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you. ⁴ *And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. ⁵ And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; ⁶ you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, ⁷ and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. ⁸ And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly.”*

1. Once again, Joshua comes through as the obedient prophet leader of God’s church.
2. True Israelite that he is, Joshua does the will of God, and leads God’s people with faithfulness.

D. What is the significance of Mount Ebal?

1. Along with Mount Gerizim, Mount Ebal is one of the sites associated with God’s judgment.
2. Deuteronomy 11:29: “And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and *the curse on Mount Ebal.*”

E. Joshua 8:31 confirms that Joshua builds the altar in obedience to an earlier instruction from the Lord: “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.’”

- F. So the people do as Joshua had instructed: "...they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings."
1. The burnt offerings were to atone for the sins of the people (Lev 1:3, 4).
 2. The peace offerings were to seal their renewed fellowship with the Lord (Lev 3:1-17; 7:11-21).
- G. Also in accordance with the Word of God, Joshua makes a copy of the law of Moses: "And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written" (v 32).
1. Joshua's role as *writer of God's Law* is closely related to his larger role as the leader of God's Church.
 2. Deuteronomy 17:18 instructs the king of Israel: "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests."
 3. By making a copy of God's Law, Joshua is performing one of the most basic functions of the Israelite king—he is being a scribe of the Law of God.
 4. While Joshua himself is not a king, he performs one of the essential duties required of the leader of God's people.
 5. Joshua is a model for all the leaders of God's Church in days to come.—God's appointed leaders are all students, guardians, and transmitters of God's Word.
- H. Both the priestly role of altar-builder and prophetic role of Law-writer are perfectly fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate King of God's Church.
1. Jesus became the *ultimate Altar* when he gave his life to God on the cross to reconcile us to God.
 2. Jesus became *the ultimate Law Writer* by writing the Law on our hearts by his Holy Spirit (Heb 10:16).
- I. All who believe in Jesus are themselves made into builders of altars and writers of the Law.
1. Christians build an altar to the Lord when we offer our entire lives to the Lord in sacred service.
 - a. Romans 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."
 - b. 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."
- J. Through our prophet leader, Jesus Christ, Christians also become writers of God's Law.
1. We "write" God's Law by speaking about it in our homes. See Dt 6:6-9:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

 - a. God wants his Word to be the frequent topic of conversation at home.
 - b. Additionally, Deuteronomy 6:6-9 instructs us to bind these words to our hands and write them on our doorposts.

—The idea here seems to be that God’s Word must be placed where we can see it on a daily basis.

2. Aside from speaking the Scriptures at home, *we are to also speak the Scriptures to one another, our fellow church members.*

a. Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...”

b. How are we to do this?

i. We do this by “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

ii. We do this by spending time with one another.

—Formal Bible studies, informal times spent in casual conversation with one another—all these *can* become teaching moments if we only allow them to be.

c. Of course, how we teach will look differently across each of these situations.

i. Teaching in a formal Bible study will look quite differently than teaching over an informal lunch conversation.

ii. Whenever we speak Scripture, allude to Scripture, or simply reflect out loud on Scripture in our conversations with one another, we are teaching one another.

iii. The ideal that our beloved Father wants for us is to have every word we speak, every conversation we have, thoroughly saturated and controlled by Scripture.

—Each of us must strive to become incarnations of the Word of God.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why does Joshua build an altar to the Lord? Where is he getting his instructions from? (2) What is the significance of Mount Ebal? (3) How is Joshua revealed to us? What are two key tasks that Joshua performs as God’s appointed leader? (4) How are Joshua’s roles as altar builder and law scribe fulfilled in Christ—and reproduced in Christians? (5) How do Christians become altars to God in the world? (6) How do Christians write/communicate God’s Law in the world?

III. The Church of Israel Gathers (Joshua 8:33)

A. After Joshua had finished writing the Law of God, the following happens.

1. The whole nation comes together.

2. Israel divides into two crowds: “...stood on opposite sides of the ark...”

3. One crowd stands in front of Mount Gerizim: “...half of them in front of Mount Gerizim...”

4. One crowd stands in front of Mount Ebal: “...half of them in front of Mount Ebal...”

5. They do all this because “Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.”

B. Prof. Trent Butler points out that the emphasis here is on *blessing*.

—Butler writes: “Israel, which has transgressed the covenant, is still the subject of divine promise and blessing before any mention of curse (v 34) appears” (*Joshua*, 93).

- C. It is also worth noticing those who make up the crowd.
 - 1. They comprise the “sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges...” (v 33)
 - 2. They comprise “all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them” (v 35).
- D. Consider that *all the leaders and officials of Israel* were present.
 - 1. No separation of church and state here—the whole nation and their leaders were part of the church.
 - 2. The leaders recognize that God is their Lord, and that they govern under the rule of God.
- E. Consider that *the sojourners* were present.
 - 1. Sojourners (*ger*) were included because God wants Israel to treat foreigners in their midst with hospitality and respect.
 - 2. Who were these sojourners?
 - a. They were different from “foreigners” (*nokrim*) (Ex 12:43; Lev 22:25; Dt 14:21; 15:3).
 - b. They were those who had embraced the covenant (Ex 12:43-49)
 - c. They were allowed to share in Israel’s sacred festivals such as...
 - i. Passover (Ex 12:43-49)
 - ii. Sabbath (20:10)
 - iii. Feast of Weeks (Dt 16:10-12)
 - iv. Tabernacles (Dt 16:13-14)
 - v. Firstfruits (Dt 26:10-11)
 - d. They were entitled to receiving care, alongside the poor and the widows (Ex 22:21; 23:9; Dt 10:17-22; 24:17-18).
 - 3. Sojourners were included because they had become a part of Israel.
- F. Consider that the “little ones” were present.
 - 1. The little children of God’s people were included in the Church of God.
 - 2. Even if they were not able to understand everything that was going on, their attendance was still expected at this national gathering.
 - 3. This is why we baptize infants—because God has always included the infant children of his people in his visible Church.
- G. What we have here is a nation-wide event.
 - The whole nation of Israel comes together as an assembly—a *qahal* or “church”—to renew their loyalty to the Lord—the Lord who has forgiven their sin, the Lord who has saved them from their enemies.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What happens after Joshua finishes writing the Law on the stones? (2) Who makes up the assembly of Israel? (3) Who are the sojourners? How are they different from “foreigners”? What were sojourners entitled to do? (4) Why is it significant that the “little ones” were included in the assembly of God’s people?

IV. Joshua, the Reader of the Law (Joshua 8:34, 35)

- A. After pronouncing the blessings and curses, Joshua reads “all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.”
 - 1. This Book of the Law may comprise the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

2. The “blessing” refers to the blessings for obedience in Deuteronomy 28.
 3. The “curse” refers to the curses for disobedience in Deuteronomy 27:9-26 and 28:15-68.
 4. “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel...”
 - a. This was not a short, one-hour church service!
 - b. It’s possible that this covenant renewal ceremony unfolded over several days, if indeed all five books of the Law were read.
- B. We must see the importance of this ceremony in Israel’s life at this point in time.
1. This ceremony comes just after...
 - a. Israel had sinned against the Lord in a very grievous way.
 - b. the Lord had forgiven Israel and defeated their enemies.
 2. What does this say about the function of this ceremony at this stage of Israel’s history?
 - a. Aside from the fact that it is done in obedience to Moses’ instructions, this ceremony also serves two possible purposes.
 - i. It is to atone for Israel’s sin (burnt offering).
 - ii. It is to renew Israel’s fellowship and allegiance to the Lord (peace offering, reading of the Law).
 - b. Thus, this covenant renewal ceremony commits Israel to *be* the holy people of the Lord God—or else lose the land that the Lord has given to them!

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why were the soldiers of Ai in no position to save their city? (2) What did Israel do to the soldiers of Ai? (3) How does Israel’s battle with Ai relate to our spiritual warfare? (4) What lesson can the Church derive from the soldiers of Israel? (5) According to Ephesians 6:12, who are the Church’s enemies today?

V. Keeping Our Holiness Alive

- A. The Church of today stands alongside the Church of ancient Israel in Joshua 8.
 1. Through Christ, the perfect Son of Israel, we Gentiles have now been joined to the people of Israel (Eph 2:12, 13).
 2. We may be considered similar to the sojourners who joined themselves to the Lord God.
 3. Thus, Joshua 8 is God’s Word to us as well.
- B. The lesson our beloved Father is teaching us is that like Israel, we need to continue being people of God wherever God places us.
 1. Just as God called the Israelites to stay loyal to him and his Words, God calls us Christians to stay loyal to him and his Words as well.
 2. Just as God called the Israelites to repent, God calls us Christians to live in continual repentance.
- C. While the Scriptures have grown in content since Joshua’s day, the principle continues: *God’s people are always readers of the Word of God.*
 1. We read the Word of God on our own.
 2. We read the Word of God as an assembly every Lord’s Day. —when we sing our hymns; when we read the Law and the Gospel together; and when we listen to the sermon, etc.

3. The Word of God saturates our worship in the Church.
- D. But much more is involved than just reading: *Being people of God's Word also means being obedient to God's Word.*
—Romans 2:13: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”
- E. Like the nations of Canaan, ours is an age where people idolize pleasure and worship false gods.
 1. In order to be distinguished from our society, we need to give our allegiance to the Word of God.
 - a. In the Scripture we see the face of our God.
 - b. In obeying Scripture that we become more and more like God in our thoughts, desires, and actions.
- F. So the challenge as we read Joshua 8:30-35 is this:
 - Will we be a people committed to hearing and doing the Word of God in twenty-first century Singapore?
 - Will we, on our own, read the Scriptures regularly?
 - Will we, on our own, seek to grow in our understanding of and obedience to the Word of God?
 - Will we, as a church, help one another grow in those ways as well?
- G. Yes, yes, imbalances are possible.
 1. It is possible for a church to become so focused on *studying* Scripture that we neglect other things we need to do (mercy deeds, building friendships, etc.).
 2. It is also possible for a church to become so imbalanced that its members seem more intent on opposing their theological opponents than on loving Christ.
 3. But a church that ignores the poor, that is more focused on criticizing their opponents than on loving Christ is precisely a church that is disobedient to the Scriptures.
 - a. It is a church that is not aligned to the priorities set by Scripture.
 - b. It is a church that does not know the heart of the Scriptures, which is to love our Abba Father.
 4. In the end, a church that is truly centered on the Word would also be one that abounds in grace, generosity, and good works.
 5. But for such virtues to grow, you and I cannot afford *not* to have the reading of the Word of God at the center of our lives.
—It is the Word of God that tells us what is right and wrong, and thereby equips us for every good word and work (2 Tim 3:16-17).
- H. No matter the arguments against keeping the Scriptures at the center of all that we do, we give ourselves to the Scriptures because that is how we keep our holiness alive—and because that was what Joshua did.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How is the Church today related to the Church of ancient Israel? (2) What is God's call for the Church today in Joshua 8:30-35? (3) What is the common principle (concerning the place of the Word of God in our lives) that links Joshua 8:30-35 to us? (4) What is involved in being people of God's Word? (5) What are some imbalances we need to guard against? But should fear of these imbalances displace the centrality of the Scriptures from the life of a church?

VI. Christ Jesus Keeps Our Holiness Alive

- A. But our merciful God himself comes to our aid.
- B. There is another side to the picture that Joshua 8:30-35 does not record.
—*The same God who wrote and read the Law through Joshua has himself heard and kept the Law for you and me.*
- C. God took on flesh in Jesus our Lord.
- D. Unlike Joshua, Jesus did not simply teach God's Law to us—he obeyed God's Law for us so that we can be righteous in God's judgment, and that the blessings of obedience can come down to us.
 - 1. Romans 5:19: "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."
 - 2. Galatians 3:14: "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."
- E. In addition, Jesus also took on himself the punishments of our disobedience.
—Galatians 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—"
- F. At the cross, the punishments of God were placed on our Lord in a single, agonizing moment in time.
—On the cross, our Lord knew violation, famine, shame, and exile all at once.
- G. As we hear Joshua read the Law, we are to see Jesus our Lord answering to God's Law with a wholehearted "Yes!" for each of us.
—Jesus is the Obedient Son of God. Jesus is the Fulfiller of the Law.
- H. Thus, Romans 10:4 says that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

Let us strive to be obedient readers and hearers of the Law of God. But let us also be faithful believers of the Obedient One who kept the Law of God for us. Jesus took the curses of *your* disobedience and gave you the blessings of *his* obedience. And through Jesus, who is also our ultimate burnt offering and peace offering, God takes us back to himself—and preserves us in joyful and loving service.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What is the other side of the picture that Joshua 8:30-35 does not record? (2) What did Jesus do that Joshua did not? (3) What happened to Jesus on the cross? Discuss this in terms of the curses of the covenant (Dt 27, 28). (4) Jesus obeyed the Law on your behalf. Jesus took the curses of your disobedience and granted you the blessings of his obedience. How do you think this truth should impact you?