

## **As It Is Written - Joshua 8:30-32**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

Well, this morning we return to the book of Joshua and pick up the account of God leading his people into the Promised Land in chapter 8 of Joshua, verses 30 to 35. We'll be tackling this section of Scripture in two parts, this week and next week, because we need to spend a little time today on background and context in order to understand what's happening in these verses. If you'll remember back to where we left off, Joshua and Israelites were back on track with God, fresh off a powerful and complete victory over the city of Ai, a victory that had been given by the powerful hand of God as his people followed his instructions and as their leader, Joshua, continued to communicate with God throughout the battle. A more complete victory could not have been had and it was all due to the power of God as his people trusted him and took bold and courageous action in obedience to his instructions.

Well, after this great victory at Ai, Joshua and the Israelites started heading north about 20 miles to a narrow valley situated between two mountains known as Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, near the ancient town of Shechem. **SHOW POWERPOINT SLIDE.** This trek north was being made in obedience to a command the Lord had given through Moses shortly before Moses died, a command which outlined some very specific things Joshua and Israelites were to do at this particular location. So before we look at our main text for today, we're going to head back in time to that moment when Moses commanded the people to do what they were about to do right now. That moment is recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy, the final book written by Moses which documents how he reviewed the full terms of God's covenant with Israel just before they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

So I want you to use your imagination this morning and imagine that you are the people of Israel, fresh off 40 years of wandering in the wilderness under the discipline of the Lord, but now having just defeated two powerful kings on the east side of the Jordan and making preparations to finally cross that Jordan River

and take possession of the land God has been promising to your people for over 400 years. Are you there in your imagination? Are you ready to cross the river? Let's do this thing! But before we do, Moses has some important words to share with you before he passes the leadership off to Joshua.

Now, I'm going to ask you to really stretch your imagination and imagine that I'm Moses. I know I don't have a long flowing beard or grey hair, but I am partially bald and my strength and vigor is not yet abated, so perhaps we at least have that in common! I'm not going to give you the whole speech, or we would be here all day, literally! Instead I'm going to give you some highlights and specifically focus on Moses' command relating to what the Israelites were about to do at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Listen carefully as Moses speaks to you today:

Deut. 10:12-16

***12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? 14 Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. 15 Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. 16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn..."***

Deut. 11:1

***1 "You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always..."***

Deut. 11:26-32; 12:1

***26 "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. 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. 30 Are they not beyond the Jordan,***

***west of the road, toward the going down of the sun, in the land of the Canaanites who live in the Arabah, opposite Gilgal, beside the oak of Moreh? 31 For you are to cross over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving you. And when you possess it and live in it, 32 you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the rules that I am setting before you today. 12:1 "These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.***

Deut. 12:2-26:15

[SUMMARY: Moses reviews all the statutes and rules that they need to be careful to do, the statutes and rules God had given at Mount Sinai for setting them apart from the world as God's holy people...the people of God's presence. He was sharing with them their manual, their guidebook, their bylaws for living life with the holy God.]

Deut. 26:16-19

***16 "This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. 17 You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. 18 And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, 19 and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised."***

Deut. 27:1b-10

***... "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." 9 ... "Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the people of the Lord your God. 10 You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today."***

Deut. 27:1-14

***12 "When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. 13 And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. 14 And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice: [SUMMARY: THE BLESSINGS OF WALKING IN GOD'S WAYS: Deut. 28:1-14; THE CURSINGS OF REJECTING HIS WAYS AND WORSHIPING OTHER GODS: Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68.]***

So this is the background we need to understand what Joshua and the Israelites are about to do as they traveled 20 miles north to that narrow mountain pass by the oak of Moreh, near the town of Shechem. This is what that location looks like today, near the modern day town of Nablus in the West Bank. POWERPOINT SLIDE. This is the view looking west with Mount Gerizim on the left (to the south) and Mount Ebal on the right (to the north). Mount Ebal is about 200 feet higher than Mount Gerizim and would be the mountain of cursing and also the mountain where the altar would be built and the stones containing the words of the law would be placed.

I want to highlight a few things from Moses' speech before we move on. First of all, Moses made it clear that the Lord had set his love on the Israelites and made them a special people for his treasured possession. They were of all people most blessed with the undeserved favor and love of the one true God. And this reality was the underlying motivation for listening to the Lord's commands and keeping them: the great love of God and how deeply he valued and treasured his chosen people and wanted to bless them beyond what they could imagine.

Secondly, the commandments God was giving them were not just arbitrary and random rules to test their submission to God. Instead, they were statutes and rules intended for their good and to lead to great blessing as they obeyed them. The commandments themselves flowed out of God's deep love for them and his desire to have close fellowship with them and be able to dwell and live in their midst.

Thirdly, God's commandments were to be obeyed. If you were paying attention, you probably heard the call to obey and keep God's commands at least 25 times. Well, I didn't actually count them, but that seems like a pretty good estimate. The call to obedience came back again and again, and obedience to God's commands was presented as the way they would love the Lord, their God. They would love him by trusting his Words and putting them into practice. This sounds a lot like Jesus' words to his disciples, doesn't it? ***"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"*** (John 14:15).

And finally, the key to obeying God's commands was this: ***"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."*** Being able to obey and keep God's commands was only possible by God's power, as his people rejected their own stubborn will and chose to trust God instead of themselves. Come to me in honesty and true repentance about your own sin and stubborn self-will, and I will give you what you need to be able to walk my ways: humility and trust.

And this introduces the final thing I want to clarify and make sure is completely clear before we tackle our passage today. And that is, we must always remember and keep clear in our minds that human beings have never been and never will be saved and justified before God by keeping the law. The Israelites' eternal salvation did not depend on them keeping all these rules and statutes perfectly. God's salvation has never been and never will be by works. His salvation has always been by faith. As clearly stated about Abraham in Genesis 15:6, long before the passage we're studying today: ***And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*** We each need God's perfect righteousness in order to be saved and spend eternity in the presence of a holy God, and that righteousness only comes to us through faith...through choosing to trust in God and his righteousness rather than trying to earn it on our own. And thanks to Jesus Christ and his perfect righteousness, made available to all who repent and

believe in his work on the cross, we can all be credited with God's perfect righteousness.

So as we study today, don't ever get confused and think that keeping God's commandments back in Old Testament times or now is about earning salvation. As we were reminded recently, salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, leading to the glory of God alone. The commandment guidebook the Lord gave to the Israelites through Moses was instead about how God's people at this point in history, saved through faith, could live in healthy, unhindered relationship with a holy God and experience his blessings...how they could love him and be the people of God's presence.

So enough introduction now...you now know the background and context for our passage today, so let's move forward in time a bit now and read Joshua chapter 8, verses 30 to 35, which take place just after the people had arrived at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim:

***30 At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, 31 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. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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. 35 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.***

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word and enable us to understand and apply it today and next week.

Before we dig in I think it's important that we notice the obvious, the theme that runs over and over through these 6 verses. And that is the simple fact that everything Joshua and the people are doing here in our passage today is being done in humble obedience to the command of the Lord given through Moses. Joshua and the people at this point in their history are right where they need to be in their relationship with the Lord: attentive to him, trusting him, following his leadership, and obeying his commands.

## **II. THE ALTAR AND ITS PURPOSE (vs. 30-31)**

Well, the first thing Joshua did after arriving at the appointed location was build an altar on Mount Ebal just as Moses had commanded; an altar of uncut stones that had not been modified or molded in any way by human beings...stones that were in their natural state as created by God. These uncut stones were to represent the holiness of God, who is set apart far above and beyond created human beings and anything they can offer. In Exodus 20:25, the Lord had told his people that stone altars to the Lord should always be built with uncut stones, because by using tools on the rocks people would profane them...or make them worldly and corrupted by the works of man. A stone altar, in contrast, was to represent the holiness and perfection of God.

We don't use altars much these days, do we? So it might be helpful to understand what they signified in the Hebrew culture and in Scripture. *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* has some helpful insights on the altar and its significance. First of all, throughout the Old Testament altars were built in places where God's presence had been manifested in a special way. After having an encounter with God, people would build an altar to him to offer sacrifices and worship him. Secondly, as we think about the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle and later the temple, we notice that it "stood in the outer court and directly in front of the door of the tabernacle...[and] all sacrifices were offered at this altar. Its position at the very threshold taught distinctly that man has no access to [the Lord] except as a sinner atoned for by blood..." The animal offerings on the altar were a constant reminder that the wages of sin had to be paid in blood if people were to be in relationship with a holy and just God. The animal offerings pointed ahead to the perfect and complete sacrifice the Messiah would one day pay once and for all, allowing people of faith to be credited with his perfect righteousness.

Additionally, altars were not only associated with God presence, but also with his blessing. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were especially significant when it came to experiencing both God's presence and his blessing. In Exodus 20:24, listen to what God said:

***An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.***

Burnt offerings and peace offerings on an altar to the Lord were associated with his presence and his blessing. But there's even more significance we find as we understand what each type of offering signified and expressed. The *Westminster Dictionary* is again helpful here. With a burnt offering, "the blood was sprinkled all over the altar and the entire animal was consumed on the altar." It signified "the entire self-dedication of the offerer to [the Lord]." It represented the offering of the whole self to God and his purposes. The peace offering, on the other hand, was of several types, including a "thank offering in recognition of unmerited and unexpected blessings" and a "freewill offering" expressing "irrepressible love for God. Peace offerings might also be prompted by the felt need of renewing peaceful communion with God." With the peace offering, "the blood was sprinkled; the fat was consumed on the altar; [and the rest was eaten as a] meal before [the Lord]...it signified that [the Lord] was present as a guest."

You probably now know a whole lot more about altars and offerings than you ever have! But I do love the significance of the two types of offerings the people offered to the Lord on this special occasion: offerings that communicated first a complete offering of themselves to the Lord, and secondly the renewing of peaceful communion and fellowship with the Lord as they enjoyed a meal together with him and rejoiced in his presence...as they expressed their love and thanksgiving and worship to him. And this all took place on and around an altar that reminded everyone that this special relationship with the Lord was only possible through shed blood for their sins, temporarily covered now through animal sacrifices, but one day removed forever as far is the east is from the west by the sacrifice of the coming Messiah, who would be the very Son of God, our Savior Jesus Christ.

And this is a hint to us as well as to how we also can experience life lived in God's presence and filled up with his power. First of all, coming to him through the shed blood of Christ...no relationship or fellowship with God is possible without that...but then, having come through faith in shed blood of Christ, we offer our whole selves to him to be used for his glory and purposes. And what do we experience as we approach God this way and offer our whole selves to him? We experience his full presence and great joy and peace as he comes to dwell with us. Are you holding back any part of yourself today or are you all in for whatever God has in mind? In the words of Jesus himself from Revelation 3:20:

***20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.***

Let's open the door all the way and let him come in to every part of our lives! What could be better in life than God himself being at home in our hearts and filling us up with his presence and power?

### **III. THE STONES AND GOD'S LAW (v. 32)**

Now as we look at verse 32 of Joshua, chapter 8, we see that after building the altar and offering burnt offerings and sacrificing peace offerings, and enjoying a meal in the presence of the Lord, Joshua took on a really big project and he did it in the presence of all the people of Israel. He wrote on some stones, separate stones from the ones of the altar, a copy of the whole Law of Moses. And from what we see a little further down in verses 34 and 35, this wasn't just the 10 commandments, but rather all of the statutes and rules Moses had reviewed with them prior to crossing the Jordan River. At a minimum that would have been all the words written in Deuteronomy chapters 10 through 28.

Some critics have tried to challenge this idea as improbable. But keep in mind that the well-known Behistun Rock Inscriptions from the ancient kingdom of Persia are about 3 times as long as the book of Deuteronomy (*Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). Also, if you'll remember Moses' previous instructions, he indicated that Joshua was to cover the stones with plaster to receive the inscription, so he may not have been carving it into the actual rock, but rather writing the words on plaster. Additionally the text doesn't tell us how long the Israelites stayed at this location,

and they could easily have been camped there for an extended period of time while Joshua wrote the full inscription.

Whatever the case may be and how it was carried out, Scripture is clear that Joshua set-up large stones, separate from the altar, and wrote on them a copy of the whole law of Moses, which Moses had written down for them in the book of Deuteronomy. These stones were to be a monument and clear reminder to the people of Israel of how to live in a healthy relationship with their holy God and experience his presence and blessings; as well as a reminder of the inevitable consequences of disregarding his commands and worshiping other gods. Moses had said to write the words of this law very plainly, so that all could read and understand them. No one would have an excuse for not knowing or understanding the terms of God's covenant with his chosen people...the blessings of trusting and following God's commands and the cursings of doubting and rejecting God's commands...commands which were intended by God for their good, for their blessing, and for their well-being.

One thing I love about what we see in our passage today is how intentional and committed and aggressive God is in communicating to the world who he is and how to live in relationship with him. He gives us no excuse for not knowing who he is and what he's like and how we can walk with him. Over and over he has revealed himself clearly and in powerful ways and took steps to preserve it for the all the world to see and have access to. Here he had it written down on stone and displayed for everyone who walked by. Altars and monuments to powerful miracles God had performed and places he had manifested himself were all over the place for all people to see. And best of all, God ensured that when people and other nations would destroy and deface his monuments there would always be a running record and report of who he is and what he's done and how people can live in relationship with him in the amazing book we call the Bible...a book that has survived and endured for thousands of years in spite of numerous attempts to destroy it and suppress it's teachings. I'd say it's worth paying close attention to, wouldn't you?

Well, so far Joshua and the people have offered themselves fully to God through burnt offerings, acknowledging the need for shed blood on the altar to cover their sins and make relationship with a holy God possible. They've enjoyed a meal with rejoicing in God's presence as they've sacrificed their peace offerings. And now

Joshua has written down plainly for all to see the words of God's law given through Moses, the keeping of which will lead to great blessing and fruitfulness and the rejection of which will lead to great cursing and discipline. The stage is set for that dramatic presentation on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim of the blessings and cursings, and the full reading out loud of God's law for all people to hear and understand. We'll pick up there next week.

#### IV. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

But as we wrap up today, we need to ask ourselves as always: What is God teaching us today that will help us in our walk with him? What can we learn from this passage and its background that can impact where we're at right now with God? Well, one of the primary applications of this passage is clearly the call to obedience...the call to carefully and diligently know and listen to God's Word and follow his clear guidance about how to live in relationship with him and be fruitful in him. God has clearly revealed to us in the Bible how to live in relationship with him and experience his continual presence and blessing and we would do well to listen closely and follow what he's revealed. From what we've seen so far in Joshua, God seems to be pretty concerned that we follow his way and not our own!

Fortunately, for believers in Christ today, we're no longer under the Mosaic Covenant, required to try and keep every jot and tittle of the statutes and rules Joshua wrote out on the stones. Thanks to Jesus Christ, those of us who repented of our sin and trusted in Jesus Christ are under the New Covenant...we've been freed from the law and now live with God in the new way of the Holy Spirit, rather than the old way of trying to keep the letter of the law. We now have God's Spirit dwelling inside, guiding us and empowering us to say no to sin and choose God's way instead. But living by the Spirit instead of the law in no way excuses us from knowing God's Word and putting into practice. We have lots of insight from God's Word that teaches us how we can walk in God's ways and live in unhindered fellowship with our God who has saved us forever.

Jesus, if you'll remember, was quite clear with his disciples that keeping his commandments was of great importance. In fact, it was how they would they would express their love for Jesus. They would express their love for him by living out his teachings. As we already mentioned, Jesus said in John 14:15 – ***"If you***

***love me, you will keep my commandments.***” And do you know what Jesus talks about in the very next verse?...the Holy Spirit, the Helper, whom the Father would send to those who believe in Jesus, and who would enable them to actually live out Jesus commands. And listen to what Jesus said a few verses later and see if it doesn't sound familiar: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” The picture again is of sweet, peaceful fellowship and communion, enjoying the full presence of God...as saved people love Jesus and learn to walk in his ways by the power of his Spirit.

Let's each be sure as we leave today, that we're each taking God's written Word seriously...that we're learning from it on a daily basis. God wrote it down and preserved it forever so that we would know without a doubt, how to come into relationship with him and then how to live life with him and experience his full presence and power. Let's offer our whole selves to him, holding back no part, rejecting stubbornness and hard hearts, repenting where needed, and offering our full love and worship and thanksgiving to God by taking his Word seriously and actually putting it into practice by the power of his Holy Spirit. Jesus' commandments are for our good and are truly the best way to live life and navigate the difficulties and challenges we face in this broken world. Let's believe that today and live like it's true!

Lord willing, we'll finish up this passage next week with the mountains of blessing and cursing and the public reading of God's law.

## SERMON APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Read Joshua 8:30-35 several times, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it.**

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scripture that comes to mind; 4) any questions you have.

God seems to be quite concerned with writing down and making publicly visible who he is and how to live in relationship with him. What does that tell you about God and his intentions toward people?

The importance of obeying God's commandments is repeated over and over in the book of Deuteronomy as Moses reviewed the terms of God's covenant and commanded the his people to do what they were now doing in Joshua 8:30-35. How does Jesus echo the importance of obeying God's commandments in John chapters 14 and 15, and what are some things we can learn there about obeying Jesus' commandments in our lives today?

When we talk about obeying God's commandments, there's always the danger of legalism and falling back into just trying to keep a list of rules to be pleasing to God. What are some of the ways that obeying God's commands by the Spirit under the New Covenant, differs from keeping God's rules and statutes under the Mosaic Covenant? (Some verses to consider: Romans 7:4-6; Romans 8:11-17; Galatians 5:16-25)

Burnt offerings signified the offering of the whole self to God and his purposes. Peace offerings expressed love and worship to God and involved fellowship with God, eating and rejoicing in his presence. After the burnt offerings and peace offerings were made in Joshua 8:30-31, Joshua then moved to displaying God's guidance about how to maintain that fellowship and unhindered relationship with God. How does Romans 12:1-2 echo these three principles and provide guidance for our relationship with the Lord today?

**Write down any other thoughts or notes you have from the passage or the discussion:**