

Intended to Bless - Joshua 8:30-35 – Part 2

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I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

It had been a long journey already. After his father's recent death, the man and his wife and his nephew had gathered up their belongings and set out in a caravan to God knows where...literally. You see, the man had heard the voice of God, or so he told his family, and God had told him to start traveling to a place he would show him as he traveled. God had promised the man great blessing and that he would make his descendants into a great nation and would even bless all the peoples of the earth through them.

Well, the man and his caravan had already been on the move for over 400 miles and still there was no clear word from God on where they were headed. And people will talk, you know. Recently they had crossed the Jordan River and begun heading west toward the Great Sea through a mountainous region. As they ascended the heights they could see that the way ahead passed through a narrow valley between two large mountains. A small town soon became visible as well as a grove of oak or terebinth trees, including one that was quite conspicuous and obviously very, very old. The locals told him it was a well-known landmark recognized by travelers and had been named, the oak of Moreh. The nearby town was named, Shechem.

As the caravan set-up camp near the oak trees after another day of travel, the man wondered when he would hear from the Lord again and receive some reassurance that he was on the right path and heading where God wanted him to go. His wife was wondering too! As he looked at the old oak tree, he wondered what events it had witnessed over its long life and what people from history had passed by it. He wondered how soon after the Great Flood it had been planted and what secrets it held. He also spent time near the tree praying to God, seeking his direction and asking for guidance on the journey ahead. And behold, the Lord himself appeared. Near the oak of Moreh, in the narrow valley between Mount Ebal on the north and Mount Gerizim on the south, the Lord appeared. **SHOW POWERPOINT.** And not only did the Lord appear, he also spoke clearly to the man

we all know as Abram, giving him this simple message: ***“To your offspring I will give this land”*** (Genesis 12:7b).

Lo and behold, Abram found himself in the dead center of the land God would one day give to his descendants, a people through whom God would bless the whole world. Having moved out in obedience to the Lord’s command and having trusted that God would guide him as he went, Abram arrived exactly where God wanted him to be and God fulfilled his promise to show him the land. In thanksgiving to the Lord and to commemorate his appearance, Abram built an altar there to the Lord. And little did he know that over 400 years later his descendants, hundreds of thousands strong, would one day return to this same location to build another altar to the Lord and set up stones that outlined for all to see, how to live in healthy relationship with the one true God and experience his blessings...the blessings God had promised so long ago to Abram.

This week we finish what we started last week in Joshua chapter 8, verses 30 to 35, which take place in that narrow valley where the Lord had appeared to Abram by the oak of Moreh, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Joshua and the Israelites have gathered in this location after their recent victory over the city of Ai. They’ve come there in obedience to the previous command of the Lord through Moses. Last week we covered the building of a stone altar to the Lord there, on which the people offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, signifying the shed blood necessary for sinful people to be in relationship with a holy God, expressing their complete dedication to the Lord and his purposes, and inviting him to dwell among them and bless them as they walked in his ways. We also covered the setting up of large stones covered with plaster on which Joshua wrote the complete words of the Law of Moses as recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy...outlining how a people saved through faith in God could walk in his ways. And this guidance from God would be on display for all the world to see.

So let’s read our passage again today and then zero in on verses 33 to 35. Beginning in verse 30 of Joshua chapter 8:

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 it today by his Spirit.

II. THE MOUNTAINS OF BLESSING AND CURSING (v. 33)

Let's begin with the mountains of blessing and cursing in verse 33. SHOW POWERPOINT. As we briefly discussed last week, Mount Ebal on the north was the drier and more barren of the two mountains, being fully exposed to the heat of the sun from the south. Mount Ebal was the mountain to represent the cursing that would come from worshiping other gods and disobeying God's commandments. The barren landscape of Mount Ebal was a good representation of this. Mount Ebal was also the mountain where the stone altar was built and God's commandments were written out on stones for all to see. This seems significant because, as we know, all people, no matter how hard they try, are unable to fully keep God's law and are therefore under that curse and in need of the blood sacrifice of a Savior who could fully keep God's law. So on Mount Ebal was displayed the law that exposed everyone's sin and the curse that came with it, and the altar that pointed to their need for a Savior, whose shed blood was necessary to deal with that sin and its curse.

Now in front of and on the lower portions of Mount Ebal were arranged all the people from 6 of the 12 tribes of Israel, who were to represent the cursing. These

tribes are listed for us in Deuteronomy chapter 27. They were the tribes of *Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali*. The text doesn't tell us why these specific tribes were selected to represent the cursing, and I wasn't able to find anything else in Scripture that tells us why. But nonetheless, all the men, women, children, leaders, officials and judges from those tribes, and even sojourners or strangers who were associated with them, were arranged in formation on and in front of Mount Ebal. They were to respond to each cursing proclaimed by the Levites with the word, "Amen." Conversely, the other 6 tribes were arranged in front of and on Mount Gerizim to the south, to represent and respond to the blessings. These tribes were: *Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin*. Interestingly, the tribe of Judah is included on the blessing side...the tribe from which Messiah would come, offering the perfect sacrifice for sin and freeing people from the curse of breaking God's law.

You'll also notice that as Joshua arranged the people on the mountains of blessing and cursing, he placed in the center of the valley the Levites who were carrying the ark of the Lord's covenant. The ark with its lid, which was called the mercy seat, was symbolic of the presence and holiness of God. And as the people were arranged on the mountains they all faced back to the center of the valley, where the ark of God's presence was front and center. The symbolism and meaning was clear. With God present as witness, all the people of Israel, men, women, leaders, children, and strangers alike, were about to publicly hear a clear proclamation of the amazing blessings of worshiping God and walking in his ways, and the painful consequences that would inevitably come from rejecting their God and his ways and following after the false gods of the world. And they were to verbally affirm and agree to each of the blessings and cursings as they were called out by the Levites. No one would be able to say they didn't know what they were getting into or that God hadn't made it clear. Everyone would be without excuse and would be responsible for their own choice of either following or rejecting God and his ways.

Now as we already mentioned, this whole set-up and ceremony was being carried out in exact obedience to the previous instructions of Moses before he died. And notice in verse 33 why Moses had commanded all this to be done. It was ***to bless the people of Israel***. In other words the primary intention of God here was to bless his people...to make clear to them the beautiful and amazing blessings that would come to them if they would simply trust him and believe that his

commandments were for their good and intended to enable God himself to actually dwell in their midst...if they would look to him for the strength to be able to walk in his ways.

You see, God had no desire to curse them or cheat them out of better things or cause them to miss out on the good things of life. In fact, he wanted to give them the best things in life as we'll see now as we turn briefly back to Deuteronomy where the blessings and cursings are clearly stated for us. Keep your finger in Joshua, but turn for a moment to Deuteronomy 28, verse 1. I'm going to read to you verses 1 through 14, which outline the blessings God wanted to give to his people; the blessings which the Levites were now proclaiming in loud voices to all the people gathered on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Here we go:

1 "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. 2 And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. 3 Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. 4 Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 6 Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. 7 "The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. 8 The Lord will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 9 The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. 10 And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. 11 And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. 12 The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. 13 And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you

shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, 14 and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

Can you imagine a much better existence on earth than that? This was the future God was offering to the Israelites if they would simply trust him and reach out for his power to walk in his ways.

But in case that still wasn't enough to motivate the Israelites, God also made sure the Levites proclaimed loudly to all Israel, the other alternative that would result from rejecting God and following after the world and its ways. I'll read just a little bit of the cursings to give you the flavor. They're quite a bit longer and are detailed for us in verses 15 through 68 of Deuteronomy chapter 28.

According to Deuteronomy 27:26, these cursings would be for anyone who disobeyed God's commandments and did not confirm the words of God's law by doing them. And all the people said, "Amen," acknowledging with their mouths that they understood and agreed to the terms of God's covenant. Here are some of the cursings that were proclaimed out loud at the mountains of blessing and cursing:

Deut. 28:15-21; 25-27

15 "But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. 16 Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. 17 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 18 Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 19 Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. 20 "The Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. 21 The Lord will make the pestilence stick to you until he has consumed you off the land that you are entering to take possession of it...25 "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

26 And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away. 27 The Lord will strike you with the boils of Egypt, and with tumors and scabs and itch, of which you cannot be healed.

Deut. 28:45-47

45 "All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. 46 They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. 47 Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things...

Wow! Which option would you prefer?...The blessing or the cursing? Well, here, near the town of Shechem, all Israel was made fully aware of the blessings of walking in God's ways and the cursings of disregarding them.

III. THE PUBLIC READING OF GOD'S LAW (vs. 34-35)

Well, as we look on to verses 34 and 35 of Joshua chapter 8, we see the final element of these ceremonies through which Joshua was leading the Israelites as they renewed their covenant with the Lord their God; and that was *the public reading of God's law*. As they finished out the following of Moses' instructions, Joshua read aloud for all to hear, all the words of the law he had just written out on stones. All had an opportunity, whether they could read or not, to hear and understand God's law and know how to live in healthy relationship with him and experience his blessings rather than his cursings.

Now there are a few things we need to highlight and notice about this public reading of the law. First, the word "all" is used over and over again in these two verses: "he read ALL the words of the law;" "according to ALL that is written in the Book of the Law;" "not a word of ALL that Moses commanded" was left out; and it was done "before ALL the assembly of Israel." Do you think "all" is significant here? The clear idea communicated in these verses is that every single word of God's law was read out loud to every single person in the whole nation of Israel. There wasn't a person there who could claim ignorance about God's

expectations and how to live in relationship with him. All were without excuse and were fully responsible for the choices they made from here.

These verses also highlight the importance of proclaiming and knowing God's Word. The truths from God's Word were of incredible importance and the consequences of either heeding them or ignoring them involved life and death, health and sickness, blessing and cursing. God's Word was so important in fact that he had it both written on stones and read out loud to every single person in the nation of Israel. This public reading of God's whole law was also required by Moses to be done in the future, at least once every 7 years during the Feast of Booths (Deut. 31:11-13).

This public reading before the entire nation was to be done regularly so that all would have an opportunity to hear and learn to fear the Lord and be careful to do the words of his law. The public reading would also ensure that future generations would be able to know God and walk in his ways, because knowing God and walking in his ways was only possible as people heard or read his written Word and learned to put it into practice. Additionally there was a responsibility to make sure it was passed on to future generations. As we were reminded last week, through his written Word, God has given us the privilege of knowing who he is and how we can live in healthy relationship with him. So living and breathing in the Word of God and putting it into practice is truly our lifeblood!

And the final truth I want to highlight from verses 34 and 35 and from verse 33, is God's love and care for sojourners and strangers. Living among the Israelites were people who were not Israelites by blood or birth...Gentiles they were called. And yet, remember what God had promised to Abram before he set out on his mysterious journey? He had said that people from all nations would be blessed through his descendants. And here, even in the early days of Israel, we see that God is already allowing Gentiles to partake of his blessings. Other passages tell us that if non-Israelites were willing to be circumcised, they could even participate in Passover and be like treated like native Israelites.

Listen to a few of the things God's law said about strangers and sojourners:

Exodus 12:48-49 (NASU)

48 "But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. 49 "The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you."

Exodus 23:9 (NASU)

9 "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:33-34 (NASU)

33 'When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. 34 'The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

Do you sense God's love for people of all nations here? Even in Old Testament times, people from other nations who were willing to approach God in humility and faith, receiving circumcision as a sign of their faith in God, were to be treated just like full-blooded Israelites. And here at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, we again see sojourners and strangers who had taken refuge in God being treated as part of God's family. Rahab and her family would have been among the sojourners present here.

IV. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Well, as we wrap up these very significant and meaningful events taking place at the very center of the land God was giving to his people, we could summarize it's central meaning this way: *In fully obeying Moses' instructions, Joshua ensured that every person in Israel understood clearly how to live as God's people and experience his blessings and the cursings that would come from disregarding his commandments.*

And yet sadly, as we think about the long-term history we now know of the Israelites and the path they eventually chose, we realize that not even the beautiful promises of God's blessings and the terrible warnings of God's cursings are enough to conquer the sinful, selfish nature of human beings. Something or rather someone much greater is needed. While there have been many, many people saved throughout history by trusting in the one true God...in fact, that's the only way anyone has ever been saved...through a cry for mercy and trust in God's salvation...While there have been many saved through faith in God who did seek to walk in his ways by his power, no one other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has been able to perfectly keep God's law and avoid being effected by the cursing that comes from breaking God's law.

In the New Testament we learn clearly that the law, while containing God's truths that do lead to great blessing in the keeping...the law was ultimately intended to show us our desperate need for God and lead us to faith in him...to lead us to trust in him to give us what we need for salvation and to be able to walk in his ways. Paul in Romans reveals that the Israelites got off track in how they viewed and interacted with God's law. They came to view it as the way to earn God's salvation and approval. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 9, verses 30 to 32:

30 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.

Salvation and getting credited with God's righteousness is always by faith and not by works, just as it was for Abraham. And not only that, walking in God's ways and commandments is also by faith. God's commandments represent what life looks like when we live by faith in him and he changes us and empowers us and makes us like him over time. A true understanding of God's law leads us to put our eyes on God and seek his strength and transformation, because we know we can never do it on our own.

The Israelites switched things around when it came to God's law and began thinking it was up to them to keep the letter of the law and try to earn God's love and approval. The law, instead of leading them to faith and dependence on God,

became a matter of works and trying to do things for God. It became a list of rules which they used to demonstrate how religious they were and how worthy they were of God's approval. They became focused on themselves and what they could do and, of course, failed miserably, as all people do who rely on themselves instead of God. That's in reality the heart of sin, trusting in ourselves and what we can do rather reaching out to God and relying on him.

Well, I want to share to share with you something beautiful as we close today. It's found in Galatians chapter 3, verses 10 through 14, and it tells us some great news about the cursings that effect all who don't keep God's law. Paul says:

10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." 12 But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." 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"— 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.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, has paid the price to buy us out of slavery to the curse every human being is under for breaking God's law and choosing our way instead of his. On the cross Jesus actually became the curse for us and took the punishment and wrath we deserved for our sin. And he did it, so that all who will repent of sin and believe in him for salvation, will be freed forever from the curse of the law. If you haven't come to repentance and faith in Christ yet, please talk to me and I'll help you do it today!

But Paul echoes this same truth in Acts 13:38-39. He says:

Acts 13:38-39

38 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything 39 from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

If you've already trusted in Christ today, you are freed from the law and its curse. You're forgiven of your sins and are at peace with God. You've become a partaker of the blessings that come through Abraham's descendants...those who live by faith in God. You've been blessed with God's Spirit to guide you and empower you to walk in God's ways, which is summed up as loving God and loving other people. God's Word shows us what life looks like when we live by faith in him and allow him to change us from the inside out by the power of his Spirit. We need to know it and breathe it in, my friends. It's not a list of rules for us to try to keep in our own strength, but rather it's the wisdom we need to know where God is leading us and be able to recognize and choose the way of God's Spirit within us instead of the way of the world. God has gone to great lengths to make available in his Word everything we need to know to walk with him by faith and experience the blessings of living life his way. Are you using it as he intended and living your life by the wisdom it contains?

The blessings God offers his people today are much different than what he was offering to the Israelites in our passage today. He's not promising to bless us with riches, health and a trouble-free life. But he is promising us the richness of his presence and steadfast love, the wisdom to navigate life in a cursed world, the enduring joy only he can bring, the strength to endure and even thrive through the hardest of times, the power to be able to carry out his will and bring him glory, and a beautiful future with him in a place of blessings that will make the earthly blessings he offered to the Israelites seem pale and shallow.

To fully experience God's blessings, we need to know his Word. I talk to a lot of Christians who tell me that reading the Bible on regular basis is a real struggle and something they know they should be doing, but often never get around to. Or they tell me it's confusing or dry or hard to understand and apply. Well, I want to offer you a few pieces of very practical advice:

- 1) Get a good study Bible. In my opinion they don't get much better than the *ESV Study Bible*. The notes will help you in those difficult sections Scripture that you don't understand and will help you gain a much better grasp of the overall storyline of Scripture and how everything fits together.
- 2) If your attitude toward reading the Bible is negative or it's something that you know you should be doing, but you don't. Repent. Plain and simple. Tell the Lord that your attitude isn't good and that you've allowed life to

crowd out the gift of his Word that he's given to you. Tell him you want to change and need his power.

- 3) Make a plan and stick to it. Pick a daily time when you're going to stop everything else and spend a few minutes in prayer and reading God's Word. Think of something less important in your life and cut it out or reduce the time you spend on it. And if you miss one of your planned study times, don't throw up your hands and give up. Just regroup the next day and pick up where you left off.
- 4) Find another person you can check in with for 5 minutes each week to tell them what you've been reading and hear what they've been reading. A simple journal where you record what you've read each day and write down favorite verses or things God is teaching you will help you in this process and help you remember what you've learned.
- 5) Pray, pray, pray as you read. The Holy Spirit will enable you to understand it and apply it as you pray.

Don't ever repeat the second big mistake Israel made (the first being approaching the law as if it were by works). The second big mistake they made was leaving the Book of the Law sitting in its place next to the ark of the covenant or even losing it in some dark and dusty room, only to be found hundreds of years later, revealing just how far they had drifted from God's ways. The truths of how to fear the Lord their God and walk in his ways were neglected and ignored and lost, with terrible consequences. Let's never let that be the case in our lives!