

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

A Tale of Two Mountains – From a contrast and comparison of two cities to a contrast and comparison of two mountains, this week we will consider the account given in scripture and summarized in six verses: Joshua 8:30-35. These six verses relay a story that is a visual demonstration of the gospel for the OT church. However, unlike the two cities, both of which were delivered by God into the hands of his people although one was by supernatural means, and the other by natural means, the two mountains tell a haunting tale. This tale provides a context for all that comes after and is critical to understanding the story of Judges and the age of the kings.

Part One: *The Mountains of Blessing & Curse* – Near the end of his life, and during his final address to the people of God, Moses offers the following command: *“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. 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, God of your fathers, has promised you. 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. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly. When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulon, Dan, and Naphtali...”* (Deuteronomy 27:2-8, 12-13).

This command is what the people of the covenant are responding to in the current passage. They had newly witnessed the power of God fighting on their behalf with the recent conquests of Jericho and Ai. They knew that the God of their fathers, who was faithful to the covenant made with their fathers, was among them as attested to by the ark of his presence. They saw first-hand how disobedience brought the scenario of Achan. The vast majority of the land of promise lay before them, but they paused momentarily to obey the above mentioned command. It is notable that there are two mountains here referenced: Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Moses instructs the people of God that they are to divide into two camps and stand one camp on each of the mountains. On the top of Mt. Ebal they are to erect an altar for the sacrifice of peace offerings. This altar was not to be made with human tools, but was to be erected from organic, natural stones.

From the top of Mt. Ebal the curses were pronounced against all manners of disobedience. At the end of each curse, Israel was to add their consent. The blessings for covenantal obedience were to be pronounced from the top of Mt. Gerizim. It was from here that the blessings associated with remaining faithful to the covenant were identified and expressed. Between the two mountains there was a valley

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in which was located the ancient city of Shechem. The ark of God's presence rested between the two mountains. When you consider the geography of the land, Mt. Ebal was higher in elevation than Mt. Gerizim; however, Mt. Gerizim factors more into the history of Israel moving forward than does Mt. Ebal. We will explore this in greater depth later.

The text before us relays the story of Israel's obedience. One notable characteristic of this event, which was not mentioned in detail when we explored the Pentateuch is the conditional nature of the covenantal blessing. Was not the covenant communicated to Abraham upon which the Mosaic covenant was built an unconditional one? One helpful distinction to make is that the law of God (the terms of the agreement between God and his covenant community) does not require obedience *so that* Israel might become the people of God, rather obedience to the law is required *because* his people already are the people of God. The law of God, "translates God's grace into action."¹

Therefore, when we consider the election of God, particularly as it is conveyed in the Abrahamic covenant, we witness that God's election is unconditional based solely on his grace. The people whom he elects have a covenantal obligation to live in a manner that demonstrates the reality of their election. This distinguishes justification (the basis of our acceptance and accounting as righteous in the sight of God) from sanctification (the weakening of the dominion of sin and the practice of true holiness) in the life of the covenant community. The blessings associated with the covenant are conditioned on obedience. God's election is not conditioned on obedience. God's presence among his people is a "blessing" – the ultimate blessing – associated with his covenant. For those who are elect (justified) to live in disobedience to the covenant says something about them which is not true. They are to live as the people of God, whose they are, and they deny his gracious election by living in disobedience to the covenant. In essence, they fail to represent his kingdom rule in their lives through their disobedience and bring the just judgment of God upon them. This is why the blessing and the curse of the covenant are inseparable in the life of God's people; blessings for obedience, a curse for disobedience.

In a similar fashion, the NT church is instructed to discriminate when partaking of the Lord's Supper, a sacrament or sign and seal of the covenant that correlates with Passover for the church of the OT. When an individual partakes of the elements of the Lord's Supper without having saving faith (a gift of God's good grace) they are likewise eating and drinking damnation, because they are making a statement about their relationship with God that is not true. This does not mean that the life of a believer must be free from sin in order to partake of the Lord's Supper, because it is a meal for sinners – those who see their need for the gospel. Rather, by taking of the Lord's Supper, the believer is saying that they are looking to the righteousness of Christ for their justification and trusting his work in their life (by tasting of the gospel) for the practice of true holiness. For this reason, the presence of the altar atop Mt. Ebal is revelatory. We will move to consider this below.

Part Two: The Altar atop the Mount – One of the noteworthy events in this account is the erection of an altar atop one (not both) of the mountains. Verse thirty of our text states, "*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.*" This command is referenced above and was accompanied with the explanation: "*...you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God.*" You might expect the altar to have been erected on Mount Gerizim, the Mount of blessing; however, the command was to build one altar and

¹ Williams, Michael D. *Far as the Curse is Found*, pg. 151
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build it atop the same mountain on which the curses for disobedience were to be enumerated. According to Moses' command the people of God were to do the following on the altar:

- 1) *Offer burnt offerings* (part of the redemptive sacrificial system of substitutionary atonement).
- 2) *Sacrifice peace offerings* (peace that is the result of the sins that cause the curse being atoned for and forgiven).
- 3) *Eat there* (a meal was usually part of the act of cutting a covenant, and was an intimate symbolic event in the world of the ancient near east. What is assuredly being communicated here is that the reconciliation that resulted from the offerings of sacrifice makes possible a level of intimacy with God that would otherwise be unobtainable).
- 4) *Rejoice before the Lord* (a natural consequent of being in restored relationship with God). David said in Psalms 51:2, 8, "*wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...let the bones that you have broken rejoice...*")

Again, it goes without saying that such an altar with associated activities seems out of place atop the mountain of cursing. I believe that Francis Schaeffer in his book, *Joshua and the Flow to Biblical History*, is correct in saying, "This was a strong reminder to the people that they were not going to be perfect and that they would therefore need an altar. In this we should hear God saying, 'You shouldn't sin. But when you do sin, I will give you a way to return to me, through the altar.' So while the people were warned of what would occur when they sinned, they were also taught from the very beginning that there would be a way of return."² Indeed this is the heart of the message of the Pentateuch, and is important to remember as we journey throughout this era of the OT church. God graciously chose his people and delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He then gave them his law, his instructions on how they should live as a kingdom under the dominion of a Heavenly King. Built into the law is the expectation that God's people will disobey, and will consequently be judged. A means of their return (a ransom) is provided. They do not cease to be his people because of their sins, but the very covenant that binds them to him calls them back. The message of the OT is clear: the holiness demanded by the God of the covenant (Leviticus 11:44) is unattainable by fallen man. Grace becomes the prevailing means that God employs to continue relating to unholy people. Present in the altar of Ebal is the shadow of Calvary, another mountain where the curse brought about by disobedience would be forever dealt with. This is the only way that the curse of sin could be reversed and the true covenantal blessings for the OT and NT people of God, might be realized.

Part Three: Living on the Mountain – There is a pastoral application that can be made from this passage in light of a seemingly chance encounter that would happen here many generations later. The site of Mount Gerizim would later become the abode of the Samaritans. This group of "outsiders" believed from their earliest origins that the temple of God was not to be built in Jerusalem, but on Mt. Gerizim. Their view of God was one that longed for covenantal blessing without sacrifice. One such member of their tribe, a lady, met Christ at a well in John chapter 4. After recovering from being startled that he, being a Jew, would converse with her, a Samaritan, she reverted to arguing about the correct location of the temple. She emphatically stated, "*Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship*" (John 4:20). In other words, one religion saw the epi-center of their worship as the very symbol of self-righteousness (Mount Gerizim) and the other of

² Schaeffer, Francis. *Joshua, and the Flow to Biblical History*. Pg. 130
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legalism (Jerusalem). Christ informed her that neither were correct. Instead, he replied, *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. But the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the father in spirit and in truth, for the father is seeking such people to worship him”* (John 4:21,23). Christ pointed her neither to the mountain of blessing (Gerizim) nor to the mountain of sacrifice (Jerusalem), but to himself. In his perfect sacrifice the curse would truly be addressed and God’s presence would reside within the heart of all who belong to him.

Referencing this story, Schaeffer states the following, “What Jesus did, without her realizing all that was involved, was to lift her from Mount Gerizim, where she was trying to come to God on the basis of her own good works (and, like all people, her works were not very good, as you will remember), and to put her on Mount Ebal, where she could come to God in the proper way, through him.”³ In other words, Mt. Gerizim has come to represent the attempt to please God and obtain his covenantal blessings apart from substitutionary sacrifice, on our own merit. This, of course, ends in failure.

So, the question easily ascertained from this passage for the church of today becomes, on which mountain will you reside? Do you look for obedience to the law and the covenantal blessings that come with obedience apart from the finished work of Christ? Are you convinced that your good deeds or attempt to live rightly is enough to gain access to the covenantal blessings? If so, then you have encamped on Mt. Gerizim with thousands of others. If, however, you are looking to Christ and his righteousness, his obedience to the law of God and sacrificial death on the cross, then you are living at the place of sacrifice where God and man are brought together in intimate fellowship.

Part Four: The Law in Stone – One final point that must be made is the fact that Israel was instructed to write the law of God on the altar atop Mt. Ebal. They were to literally feast in the presence of the law. How could this be if the law was the source of their condemnation? After all, they were feasting on the cursed mount. Between them and the mount of blessing was the presence of a Covenant keeping God. Sacrifice, momentarily performed in obedience to God’s commands but eternally sacramental in nature (signifying the future death of the pure and spotless Lamb of God), was what brought the two together. Though the ark of the covenant divided, sacrifice united. They could rejoice before God because the curse of their disobedience had been remedied by sacrifice. Therefore, the law was the object around which they rejoiced. The law is holy, it is an expression of God’s will for man and remains eternally pure. Man, however, is unholy. Paul alludes to this when he states, *“So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin producing sin in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure”* (Romans 7:12-13). The law was etched on the altar of sacrifice as a reminder to God’s people of the way they were to live. The altar of sacrifice was a reminder that they would fail. The presence of God symbolized through the ark of the covenant, stood between the two showing God’s covenantal commitment to his people to be unconditional, even if the blessings associated with covenant obedience were not.

Conclusion: Today we have explored the tale of two mountains. We have come to understand the significance of the two in the life of God’s people. We sense the presence of each in our lives today and are challenged by God’s word to ask, upon which do we reside? A curse awaits disobedience, and God’s blessing, obedience. Christ, our sacrifice, has borne the curse so that we might bear the blessing.

³ Schaeffer, Francis. *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*. Pg. 134
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