

## Joshua 8:30-35

### “Worship from the Mount of Bareness”

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##### I. Intro

In the 29<sup>th</sup> verse we were told of Ai’s king being hanged on a tree and a great heap of stones laid upon him and we start this section by noting that Joshua took the nation 30 miles north to erect another pile of stones this one an altar to the King of Kings. The monument at Ai was a memorial to God’s forgiveness and victory in the area of defeat and the memorial at Mt. Ebal proclaimed the greatness of the Lord. It must be noted that the timing of the building of this altar was in the midst of the nation’s military campaign when the entire region was afraid, yet the people took the time to reestablish the worship of God in a most unusual place. The timing of this should suggest to us that **our worship must be based upon who God is not just what He does on our behalf**. From the start until this location three battles have been fought with only two kingdoms and Israel’s record is 2 and 1 with 100 miles of territory gained. To say that this is still in the first quarter would be an understatement yet with the erection of this altar the nation is proclaiming victory over all the land. How could Joshua and the nation be so confident? We shall see that the clues to this are to be found in these verses.

##### II. Vs. 30-31 An altar on Mount Ebal

Vs. 30 Right after the victory over Ai Joshua builds an altar, a place of worship to the Lord but he does so in an unusual place on **Mount Ebal**. If you go back to Deut. 11:29 we read that Moses instructed the nation that, *“When the Lord your God has brought you into the land which you go to possess, that you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.”* Then again in Deut. 27:4 Moses says, *“When you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime.”* It is interesting that years before Moses words in Deuteronomy specifically listed the location of the altar to be on Mt. Ebal yet Moses had never and would never enter the land of promises. What this suggests to us is that the location of this altar was by divine direction not a mere whim. So Joshua led the people thirty miles north to Shechem, which lies in the valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. This was the very place that Abraham had come into the land and God gave it to him and his future generation. Here the nation obeyed what Moses had commanded them to do in his farewell speech in Deut. 27:1-8. What this shows is that Joshua saw both the victories and the defeat as an opportunity for the nation to make a new commitment to the authority of Jehovah as expressed in His Word. Mount Ebal means the mount of **“bareness”**, where as Mount Gerizim means *“cut up or rocky”*. Mount Ebal is rugged, barren and rocky where as Mount Gerizim is wooded and beautiful. It was these two opposite mountains about 2 miles apart with the city of Shechem in between, where the tribes were divided and on Mount Ebal the curses of rebellion were to be spoken while on Mount Gerizim the other half of the nation was to proclaim the blessings of obedience.

I believe that the specifics as to the location have a deeper meaning for our lives and it is that we need to **set up the altar to worship the Lord during times of bareness, times when we feel as if we are under a curse**. Most often we find ourselves worshipping the Lord only during times when we feel blessed when we are standing upon the **“Rock”** of the blessings of Gerizim but the Lord says, *“Folks, I’m not just in love with you when things are going according to your expectations, I’m your Dad when things seem to be barren and your life seems to be under a curse!”* The first lesson God teaches the nation is that He loves them even if there lives lie under a curse of a *“heap of ruins”* (Ai) or if the enemy has been defeated under a heap of ruins. **We tend to look at the situations and circumstances that we face as the determination of God’s love for us instead of His word**. And I believe that is why God instructed Moses and Joshua to set up the Altar on the mount of **“bareness and cursing”** instead upon the **“rock of blessings”**.

Vs. 31 The second thing that we learn is that the place of worship on the “*mount of bareness and curing*” was to be erected with whole stones that “*no man has wielded an iron tool*”. Joshua was careful to obey Gods word in the construction of the altar:

- Exodus 20:25 told him not apply any tool to the stones picked up in the field: Thus no human work was to be associated with the sacrifice lest sinners think their own works can save them (Eph. 2:8-9).
- God asked for a simple stone altar, not one that was designed and decorated by human hands: “*That no flesh should glory in His presence*” (1 Cor. 1:29).

It’s not the beauty of man-made religion that gives the sinner forgiveness, but the blood on the altar. The peace offerings, or “*fellowship offerings*,” were an expression of gratitude to God for His goodness. By these sacrifices, the nation of Israel was assuring God of their commitment to Him and that such commitment was based upon God’s goodness not theirs. **The Alter was to be about God’s workmanship not man’s ability so that man would glory in the Lord not what they had created.** The word for alter here is a word in the Hebrew that means “*place of slaughter*” and reminds the worshipper that without the shedding of innocent blood there is no forgiveness, no worship of God, it is God Himself that has provided the opportunity.

**God doesn’t want us to gather stones to chuck at sinners He wants us to gather stones to worship Him because He has provided forgiveness for our sins.** Not a tool was to be laid upon those stones to remind them that no work of man can be added too His work of salvation. Years had passed since those words of Moses in Deuteronomy about writing God’s word upon the alter of stones at Mt. Ebal. The Law of God was inside the Ark and had traveled with the nation and across the Jordan, around Jericho and now was to be written upon the white uncut stones of the alter at Mt. Ebal. **The importance here is that they were to be worshipping what God had done and will continue to do with out the help of men. It was to a monument of God’s greatness not man’s skill and ability.** When we put this next to the fact that it was to be on the mountain of bareness it is a reminder that we have the tendency to try to help the Lord out when we don’t think He is working the way that He should. So this altar was to be built with whole stones and not fashioned by human hands as to say, “**Just because you don’t think I’m working doesn’t mean that you should stop worshipping Me and trusting that I do all things well.**”

During a particular difficult season in my life the Lord brought me to the song of the martyrs in Rev. 15:3. This song will take place in heaven before the Lord by those who witnessed intense cruelty at the hands of those who worshipped satan and we are told that “*They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: “**Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!**”* What’s important to realize is that these dear martyred saints are singing this song with complete and full understanding of everything that has transpired in their lives and they sing as a fact two things:

1. **Great and marvelous are Your works:** They sing that with regards to **what God did** in their lives it was and is “*great and marvelous*”. There wasn’t one single work of God in their life that was anything less than “*great and marvelous*”.
2. **Just and true are Your ways:** Second they sing that not only “*WHAT*” God did was great and marvelous **the WAY in which He accomplished** it was “*just and true*”. They couldn’t find one instance where the way God did something in their life was anything less than “*just and true*”.

Now if you are anything like me I can’t yet sing this song based upon knowing all the facts as those martyred saints sang but I do have a choice to sing it and praise Him based upon His character and nature!!

### III. Vs. 32-33 The Hound of Heaven

Vs. 32 The distance from Ai to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim was around 30 miles which was a good distance to move all the tribes of Israel some 3 million people. I’ve been to this area in Israel and it forms a nice outdoor amphitheater where all of them could hear the reading of the Word of God. Geographically this event shows us that the nation is now in control of the middle of Canaan and the highlands. Next we are told that they were to write on those stones a copy of the law of Moses. **In the Middle East it was customary for kings to celebrate their greatness and victories by writing a record of their military exploits on huge stones covered with plaster. But the secret of Israel’s victory was not their leader or their army; it was their obedience to God’s**

the secret of Israel's victory was not their leader or their army, it was their obedience to God's Law so they wrote of Him and His word of those stones and then read it before the people. This is already the fourth public monument of God's greatness:

- a. Gilgal (stones from the midst of the Jordan)
- b. Valley of Achor (stones piled over Achan)
- c. Ai (the stones piled over the king)
- d. Mount Ebal (uncut white washed stones)

This was an altar of praise centered upon the Word of God and the key here was obeying the Word which was predicated upon relying upon the Spirit not the flesh. **I can't help but marvel at this whole scene of worship on a mountain of bareness with stones that represented God's work not man's with the Word of God written on them reminding them that success and joy was dependent not upon favorable circumstances but rather on obedience to God's Word.** The Bible is God's instruction manual someone has well said that the Bible stands as an acronym for **B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth and often we tend to want to blame God when things aren't going well or to try and go around His Word but the Lord had them place His word upon the altar of praise.

Vs. 33 Next we are told that the people lined up on either side of the Ark of the Covenant which as we have seen was the representation of the presence of God amongst them. Here the focus is up recalling that no matter how things might seem God would not *"leave them nor forsake them"* (1:5b). *"Oh I don't know where the Lord is He left me, I know this because of my circumstances and my situation"*, we say. But saints the Lord says otherwise His presence is right here amongst us as David cried out in Psalm 139:7-11 *"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me; Even the night shall be light about me"*.

Francis Thompson said it best in his 182-line poem that inspired the likes of J.R. Tolkien called the **"Hound of Heaven"**. Listen to his words, *"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter."* And in the final stanzas of his poem he writes of himself *"How little worthy of any love thou art! Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, Save Me, save only Me?"* To which the Lord replies *"All which I took from thee I did but take, **not for thy harms, but just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.** All which thy child's mistake Fancies as lost, **I have stored for thee at home: Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"***

#### IV. Vs. 34-35 Words from the alter of sacrifice

Vs. 34 According too Deuteronomy 27:11-13 the tribes were assigned their places in front of the two mounts Ebal and Gerizim, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali were to be in front of Mt. Ebal, the mount of cursing; and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), and Benjamin were at Mt. Gerizim, the mount of blessing. The tribes at Mt. Gerizim were founded by men who had either Leah or Rachel for their mother, while the tribes at Mt. Ebal were descended from either Zilpah or Bilhah, handmaids of Leah and Rachel. The only exceptions were Reuben and Zebulun, who belonged to Leah but had lost his place due to sleeping with his father's hand maid. In the valley between the two mountains stood the priests and Levites with the ark, surrounded by the elders, officers, and judges of the nation. The people were all facing the ark, which represented the presence of the Lord among His people. When Joshua and the Levites read the blessings of the Lord one by one (see Deut. 28:1-14), the tribes at Mt. Gerizim responded with a loud united "Amen!" which in the Hebrew means "So be it!" When they read the curses the tribes at Mt. Ebal would respond with their "Amen" after each curse was read. Hey friends today you and I also stand in a valley between two mounts:

- A. Mt. Calvary, where Jesus died for our sins
- B. Mt. Olivet, where He will return in power and great glory

Today believers aren't living under the curse of the Law, because according to Gal. 3:10-14 Jesus bore that curse "on a tree" called the cross. So you and I are blessed with "every spiritual blessing in heaven places" according Eph. 1:3 because of the grace of God.

Then we are told that they *"read the words of the law, the blessings and the cursing's"*. Half the people in front of the mount of blessings and half in front of the mount of cursing's all

heard both regardless of their location. Saints nothing will change our circumstances quicker than our response to His Word. To stand before the Mount Gerizim with blessings being bestowed yet not applied or followed would certainly bring defeat upon us. Ah but to stand before the bareness of Ebal and hear the curses that would come our way if we won't choose to trust the Lord would equally change our circumstances. If you and I want to continue to put the enemy under a heap of ruins, we need only heed the Word of God in our lives. People often wonder if they can still be a Christian if they do this and that in disobedience and I suppose practically they can as no lightening bolt comes down to destroy them but they can live victoriously in His grace that I know for certain.

Notice that the law was written on the stones of the alter of sacrifice, as if to say that the obedience to the law is possible through the sacrifice on the alter. It isn't through the law that we escape the judgment for our sin it is by Jesus sacrifice on our behalf. Also note that 1000 years later when Jesus met the Samaritan women by the well she pointed not to Mt. Ebal but rather to Mt. Gerizim and said it was their that they had built an alter to worship God and Jesus pointed back to the sacrifice not where it was located but to Himself.

Vs. 35 So the Law was read to which the response of the people after each one was read was amen. What an amazing scene as you would have heard in this natural amphitheater as the word of God was being read and the blessing being announced if you obey the word and the curses being announced if you don't. They had recently seen the effects of this truth in their own experience with the defeat and then the victory at Ai. The clear understanding of this passage is that obedience leads to blessing and disobedience leads to a lack of blessing in our lives.

Finally, they we are told that this word being read lack neither content no hearers as "*all the word was read*" to "*all the people*". Friends if we are to reach the next generation we must be willing to reach that generation first with those who are in our homes. The time is now to impact this up coming generation which will inevitably inherit our mess and if we are to change the course of our community, country and world it will come from those whom live in our homes and sit at our tables!