

Joshua: God Keeps His Promises
Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series
Fall 2022
Pastor David Palmer
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TEXT: Joshua 8:30-35



Good morning beloved. It's a joy to be here and to open God's Word together. We need to pay close attention to all of God's instructions as He guides us and teaches us. There is a pattern of repetition built into God's Word, because God knows that we need to hear the most important things in life many times. How many times do children need to hear "I love you" before it is written on the tablets of their heart? How many times do we need to hear again that the death and the resurrection of Jesus is the center of our life together? We look this morning at a passage that's about recommitment. It's a passage about covenant ratification anew. It's a passage where we see discipleship played out in real time and where we see the influence of Moses on Joshua in a very dramatic and vivid way.

I want to give you just an insider view into what happens here Sunday mornings at 7:45 AM. As a pastoral staff, we meet and we pray, and we often get the tablets of our hearts warmed up as we share why we are praising God this morning. Pastor Alberto shared that his heart was really warmed this morning considering the truth of forgiveness, and it impacted him. We were all blessed as if the worship service started this morning at 7:45. Pastor Scott shared that he spent time with someone yesterday that he had invited to serve in ministry and teach a middle school class and that person became involved in ministry and is sharing the gospel multi-generations down. You just never know what's going to happen to you by being here. So I want you right now, as we look into God's Word, to say a short prayer: "Holy Spirit, open my heart for what You have for me this morning." I think God has something He wants to write inside of us this morning that we will remember forever.

Our passage starts with a construction project, and for those of us who been at Kenwood the last year and a half, we are familiar with construction projects. We praise God for the completion of Magnify Phase 1. In Joshua 8:30, we read:

“At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal,”

Joshua builds an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, and he builds it on Mount Ebal. Mount Ebal



is in the central hill country in the land of Israel. When you look west towards this area from the town of Shechem, you see Mount Gerizim on the left and Mount Ebal rises up on the right-hand side. These two mountains, if you will, are right next to each other. He built an altar on Mount Ebal, and we can ask ourselves why he does that. He does that, specifically as a consequence of the discipling relationship he had with Moses, because

Moses had said in Deuteronomy that when they get into the land, “you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.” So Joshua constructed an altar on Mount Ebal. It is an altar that's made with unhewn stones, and God in His Word desires that the altars are made out of natural stones. They are not to be carved in any way.

This is a unique feature in Israel, and why is that? It's because God is the One who provides for the altar of sacrifice. There is nothing man-made about faith in Scripture. There's nothing man-made about the place where forgiveness of sins happens. There's nothing that we do, and He wants to guard this imagery so that you and I know for all of Israel's history, and you and I know who have trusted in Jesus Christ, that there is absolutely nothing that you and I contribute to the altar of sacrifice. God says: “Make it with unhewn stones.” There are huge theological implications in the fact that this altar is made of unhewn stones. Fast-forward to the book of Daniel, which is not our topic today, but that's why the stone in Daniel 2 is cut without human hands. It's an altar stone that topples the kingdoms of this world and grows into a mountain that fills the earth, and all peoples are brought in.

Joshua builds this altar on Mount Ebal, and there in the presence of the people, he writes on stones a copy of the Torah. Here we see in Joshua 1 how the book of the law, the Scriptures, were to never depart from him. I need the Word of God every day, because if I separate from that life-giving Word, then I will end up with other words in my heart and my mind. I'll have other priorities, other things that I think will be really important. We need God's Word, and

Joshua now writes a copy of the Scriptures. He writes them on stone tablets that are covered with plaster. This is Deuteronomy 27:2-3.

“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, the God of your fathers, has promised you.”

Joshua is publishing a copy of the Bible on tablets in front of the whole community. It's astonishing. He publishes not just some of them, but all of them, and sets them up in front of the people. The Word of God is central to our identity. These are God's instructions. The word Torah, which is translated *law* in many versions, in Hebrew means “instruction.” These are God's instructions on how to live and how we are to worship and where we find life lived as it's designed. So Joshua was carrying out and reflecting discipleship that he has received. He builds the altar, unhewn stones; he sets up the stone tablets, covers them with plaster, and writes the Scripture. Now, we all participate, and Joshua 8:33 reminds us that some of the Canaanites are also joining the community:

“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.”

Did you know that the kingdom of God grows every day? Did you know that over 100,000 people will give their life to Christ today in the world? This is a growing kingdom, and it's growing in the book of Joshua. There are people like Rahab and her family. Pastor Scott will tell us next Sunday about a whole people group, the Gibeonites who will say: “We want to be in on this. We want to abandon the gods of our ancestors and worship the true and living God.” So, all Israel, sojourner, native-born, elders, and all the people stood before the ark. Remember, that's where the tablets that God wrote with His own hand are carried, and all the sudden we embody this response, and we split up. Half of the tribes go on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Ebal. Mount Gerizim was the mountain to recite the blessings. Mount Ebal was the mountain to recite the curses.

I want you to picture these two mountains that are next to each other. We separate into two large groups. It's an embodied response, and Joshua then reads all the words of the Torah. All of them. This is like the ultimate Scripture reading. Now some you are wondering how long that would take. It takes about 14 or 15 hours to read through the whole Pentateuch. We come to

the end of the Pentateuch, and there we are, half of us on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Ebal, and the climax of the Pentateuch is a covenant-ratification ceremony. It's not just a passive listening to the Word of God. It's a call and response, and there's biblical basis for call and response. Near the climax of the Pentateuch, the moment where we together as a community say "Yes" to God, "Yes" to this covenant relationship, we respond with "Amen." We respond with "All the Lord has commanded we will do." We are not just passively listening; we are actively responding.

The climax of the covenant ratification is the blessings and the curses. The blessings and the curses are the moment when we are honest with God, and we express back to God our willingness to enter into covenant relationship. It's our "yes" to God, a God who wants to bind Himself to us in covenant. If the word covenant is new to you, I want to plead with you that you open your heart and let this word come in, because this is one of the most important words in the Bible. This is the word that Jesus uses on the night in which He was betrayed, and He interpreted His death with this word. He said: *"This cup is the New Covenant in My blood."* It's a binding relationship. It's a word that means that God has absolutely committed Himself to you, and that nothing can separate you from Him. You and I respond in return and say: "We absolutely commit ourselves to You." It's a powerful moment. It's a legal moment. It's something that cannot be broken. It's a word we have to have, and the ending of that for our ancestors of the Old Testament moment of this covenant ratification is to recite the benefits—that is, the blessings and the curses of not following God's commands. In Deuteronomy, this is described, and the worship leaders stand up and we read what they said in Deuteronomy 27:

¹⁵ *"Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, ... And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'*

¹⁶ *"Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

¹⁸ *"Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

¹⁹ *"Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

²⁵ *"Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

²⁶ *"Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

I love to do weddings. They are a moment of covenant-making, and in the modern wedding service, we take vows of covenant-ratification. Those vows tend to be promises that invoke the

blessings, but there is curse language actually in the vows because, at the decisive moment, you say: “I commit all of my love to you,” and you say, “Forsaking all others, I pledge my love to you.” That line, “forsaking all others” is really an imprecatory line, because if you don't forsake all others, your marriage will not flourish.

Reading this passage, I wonder if we should bring back the curse language. Just imagine going to a wedding, and they give all these promises, and then the pastor turns and says, to the bride and groom, “Repeat after me,” and they say, “May God judge me if I am unfaithful to this covenant. May God pursue me if I dishonor the marriage bed. May my descendants be abandoned and forsaken and homeless if I reject these promises.” That would raise the stakes! Maybe we need that because we're not taking covenant seriously enough. But Joshua did. He took the covenant seriously enough to have the people recite the curses and say, “Amen,” and recite the blessings. In Deuteronomy 28, the blessings abound. The Lord says in Deuteronomy 28:3-6, that if we walk in His ways and are faithful to the covenant:

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.”*

The Lord will command blessing over you and He will establish you as a people holy to Himself. We need that.

I love the ending of the worship service and the chance to bless you. If God blesses us, then nothing can stop us. The blessings and the curses. So, this moment of covenant-ratification happens. It's a reflection of Joshua's own discipleship. Joshua 8:35 says:

“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.”

He did it, and we entered into covenant, and this moment, Beloved, is a powerful moment of repeating in a next-generation what would happen. This moment confirms to the next generation the reality of God and that He welcomes into covenant all who trust Him.

I want to introduce you to an Israeli man named Adam Zertal. Adam grew up in a *kibbutz*, a collective farm in the early period of modern Israel. The



kibbutz system was atheistic in its instruction. Children were actually removed from their biological parents and were raised on collective farms as children of the society. Adam grew up there. He was taught, as all Israelis are taught in the public school, that the Bible is a myth and that these events didn't really happen. It's an astonishing thing that that's the teaching in the public school in Israel. He later fought in the Yom Kippur war and was injured. After he left the



military, he began an academic career. He led the Manasseh Hill country survey. He started in 1978, and he surveyed more than 2500 km² in the central region of the land, and as he surveyed the land, he included the area of Mount Ebal. As he was surveying Mount Ebal, he noticed a structure. He began to clear the dirt away, and the

structure that emerged on Mount Ebal was an altar that dated from exactly the time of Joshua. As he excavated and moved bucket after bucket of dirt, he discovered that the altar was made of unhewn stones, and he discovered animal bones that had been sacrificed on the altar. They were all clean animals, and it



shook him to the core of his being. He said: "I've been taught in school that the Bible is a myth, that it didn't really happen, but here are the rocks. Here's the altar exactly where and how the



Bible describes it." Adam Zertal moved in that moment from an atheist to a believer. His life changed, and the rest of his life was radically different. Seven years after Adam Zertal died, this story continues under the leadership

of an American man named Scott Stripling, an archaeologist. He has directed the excavations at Shiloh, and Scott Stripling knew about Zertal's discovery of the altar. They wished they could have done more excavation in that area, but the political situation was unstable, and so Scott Stripling recommended that at least they could sift through the dirt that Zertal moved to uncover the altar. This process is called wet sifting, which is taking bucket by bucket of the dirt that's removed from an excavation and rinsing it off. Zertal had moved the dirt from Joshua's altar and they decided to look through



the dirt. As the dirt is rinsed away, ancient objects remain. To the untrained eye, you don't always realize what you have. You may see a little piece of something, but you need a trained person to recognize what you have.

One of the most gifted wet sifters of all time is a woman named Frankie Snyder who has her Master's Degree in Jewish studies. She has been serving on archaeological digs and she has been wet sifting for 12 years. When she wet sifts, she recognizes what's in her tray immediately. Frankie Snyder had a bucket that was dumped on her wet sifting tray from the dirt removed from the altar by Joshua, and she saw something there so small that you could hold it in your hand. She recognized it right away. It was only 1" x 1" (2 cm²). It was a tablet made of lead, and she found it in her wet sifting tray just before the coronavirus pandemic broke. Scott Stripling



and the team took the tablet, looked at it, tried to open it, but it was too brittle. So, they sent it to the Czech Republic where four scientists from the Academy of Sciences had technology together with epigraphers from the University of Haifa and also in Germany did a scan—thousands of layers of digital scanning of this tiny square piece of lead. They started to read the scans, and they were astonished because the small square of lead was filled with letters. Someone from the time of Joshua had taken an iron pen and had written on this piece of lead and then folded it up. They translated what was written, and they realized that next to Joshua's altar on Mount

Ebal it said: "Cursed, cursed, cursed by the God Yahweh. You will be cursed; you will die cursed. You will surely die cursed by Yahweh, cursed, cursed, cursed." It was a cursed tablet: six times, three at the beginning and three at the end, reflecting the covenant curses in Scripture. The text is written in a Hebrew script and is now the earliest Hebrew inscription we have. It is written in an archaic script.



The most important word on this tablet is the name of Yahweh. This is the first occurrence in writing of God's name. It is written in a script that doesn't look like Hebrew, but this is actually



proto-Hebrew or an early version of Hebrew. Let me just teach you how to read it. It's fantastic. This one actually goes from left to right. Hebrew was not fixed in its order at this time. The first letter is on the left side. It's like a hand. It is the Hebrew letter *yod*, which means hand, so it

just shows you the hand. My favorite letter is the middle one. It looks like a man. What's the greatest action a human being can do? It's to praise God. That's why this man is standing as he is because that's the Hebrew letter for *he* which starts the word "hallelujah." So praise God for the choir that taught us to lift our hands in total praise. When we do that, we are actually embodying the shape of the Hebrew letter *h* that starts "hallelujah," and that the best thing you can do as a human being. The last letter is the shape of a fish hook. So, this is the first time that we have God's name in writing, and the question I have for you to ponder is: "Who wrote that?" Who was there on Mount Ebal knowing the content of the covenant curses? Who was taught to make a copy of the Word of God? Who was taught to 'not let this Word depart from you'? I would suggest to you that we are looking at the handwriting of Joshua. He wrote down the covenant curses and represented all of us, and he set it down right by the altar.

You see, Beloved, there is no altar on Mount Gerizim. We have to have an altar on Mount Ebal because you and I will be unfaithful to the covenant. We will break our promises, and the wrath of God and the curses of God will move towards us. We must have an altar there, because at that altar sin can be confessed and atoned for. The sin of the world will one day be placed upon Jesus Christ, who is the Joshua who is to come. He will come and He will offer Himself on the altar. He will take the curse of the covenant upon Himself and tell us that "*this is the New Covenant, which is in My blood.*" You cannot have a covenant relationship with God without the altar of sacrifice, and we have an altar, Beloved. Our ancestors had an altar that looked forward to the altar that was to come.

Adam Zertal moved from being an atheist to believer, and if you came this morning or if you're joining online and you're at that spot in your life where you say: "I just don't believe in God," I'm glad you're here. And I'm also glad that the altar stones on Mount Ebal were unhewn and

date to the time of Joshua, so that you can know this morning with Adam Zertal and others that the Bible is real. I don't want you to stay an atheist, because that's a lonely, fearful place. It's a place that's filled with fear and uncertainty. I want you to move from uncertainty to certainty. Maybe you're here this morning and you came in and you said: "I do believe in God," but at the base of your heart you still have all kinds of fear and anxiety. You are concerned in the depths of your being that: "Is there really atonement for my sin?" I want you to move all the way forward, because our ancestors placed the curse tablet on the altar knowing that's where forgiveness is to be found. This morning I have the honor and privilege to share the best word that can come forth from a human mouth, and that is: "Jesus died for your sins and rose again, and if you believe in Him, then your sins are forgiven." That's not man-made religion. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I want you this morning to say: "Yes and amen."

Lord Jesus, You are awesome. You said, Lord, that if we are silent, the stones will cry out. We pray, Lord, now that we would hear the sound of Your voice. I pray specifically right now for any who are struggling to move from unbelief to belief, that You would open their hearts right now. I pray for those Lord, who have believed in You and yet have something in them that is holding them back from a wholehearted, whole-person "yes" to You. Would You assure them that they are forgiven by the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the altar? Would You assure them that they are loved more than they can ask or imagine? And would You assure them right now, Lord God, that You desire to be in covenant relationship with them forever?

In Jesus' Name, Amen.