

Mt. Ebal and Gerizim

Joshua 8:30-35; Deuteronomy 27:1-26

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This morning's passage takes place on, and in between two mountains, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. It is a strange account occurring two or three days after Israel's victory over Ai. In our text we find the entire nation gathering on these mountains to worship.

It is easy to miss. It is a short five verses wedged between the more lengthy accounts of Ai's conquest and the Gibeonite deception.

And then it is an unusual account. The nation gathers on both mountains with the priests in the valley. Sacrifices are made, the curses and the blessings of the law are read and the people on Mt. Ebal shout amen at the pronouncement of the curses, and the people on Mt. Gerizim shout amen to pronouncements of blessing.

After reading this account many times, I have always wondered, "Why did Joshua suddenly do this?" They just entered the land. There are still more battles to fight. But he leads the nation 30 miles northwest into the Promised Land for a dedication ceremony.

And secondly, "How could this even take place? How could the entire nation gather in one place and see? How could the people hear?" And third, "What is it that God wants us to know and apply in our lives?"

To understand this marvelous account we need to grasp a few things first.

1. Like where did this whole concept of a national gathering come from.
2. Then we need to understand a few things about the geography.
3. With those things settled then we might be better able to grasp the importance and application of this event.

So, allow me to describe this account.

It all began during Israel's yearlong campsite on the other side of the Jordan. During that time, Moses prepared the nation for their entrance into the Promised Land.

It was a land of milk and honey, but it was filled with a people whose wickedness had reached its summit. They were a godless people. They were so totally defiled and filled with violence and corruption that they were much like those before the flood, whose every imagination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually.

Or they were like those of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose cry of wickedness waxed great before the face of the Lord.

In preparing the nation, Moses instructed Joshua in what they were to do immediately upon breaking through the fortifications of the Land - Deuteronomy 27:2-8.

1. They were to claim the land, and dedicate it to the Lord.
2. They were to stake God's Law in the very heart of the land.
3. It was to be the new Law of the land.

“And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister: ³ And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee. ⁴ Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister. ⁵ And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. ⁶ Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God: ⁷ And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God. ⁸ And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.”

So there is no surprise in finding Joshua immediately leading the nation to Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim after they broke through the land's fortifications. There they set up the stone monuments and altar. Then they set up a monument to the Law and dedicated themselves to keep it.

So we have at least answered the first question, “Why did Joshua suddenly do this?” He was told to do this upon entering the Land.

Next we need to understand the terrain. When I first read this account my mind wandered to the little mountain range south of us, Sleeping Giant. Trees are everywhere on this mountain. Because of the trees, no one on the bottom of the mountain can see the castle on the top, and no one on the top can see the bottom.

Furthermore, I could stand at the bottom of the mountain and shout all day and no one would hear me on the top. So, I always wondered how this could take place.

Then as you look at these mountains, they are both standing side by side and are almost identical in height. Mt. Ebal rises 3084' while Mt. Gerizim rises 2849'.

Ebal means "bare" and Gerizim means, "waste places" or "shorn." Their name describes their terrain; these limestone mountains are bare of trees and shorn.

The mountains come together in a gentle slope and form a narrow valley, which is about 500 yards across. Their formation creates a natural amphitheater. The acoustics are so good that any one standing between the mountains can be heard on either slope. It was a perfect place for this meeting.

The size of this place could easily seat the nation of Israel. It is also the site of the city of Shechem.

It is also a historic setting.

1. **It is here that Abraham built and altar**, after the Lord appeared to him when he entered the Promised Land for the first time. God said to him,

"Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him." - Genesis 12:7

2. **It is here that Jacob built and altar.** He did this upon his reentry into the Promised Land after being with his father-in-law Laban and surviving his encounter with his brother Esau.

He named the altar El-El-ohe-Israel (A might God, is the God of Israel).

Yet during the ten years he lived in this valley and dug a well, he and his family drifted from the Lord. Finally a prince from Shechem raped his daughter Dina.

After that event, the family rededicated themselves, and gave over all their idols and worldly items and buried them under an oak in the valley between the mountains.

3. **It is also the place that Joshua will give his farewell speech to the nation.** There he says those famous words,
“but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” - Joshua 24:16
4. **It is here that the bones of Joseph will be buried.** After Joshua’s farewell speech to the nation, they buried Joseph’s bones. Remember they bought his bones with them out of Egypt.
5. And finally, **it is also the place were Jesus would meet the Samaritan woman** at Jacob’s well.

So we answered the question,

“Why did Joshua suddenly do this?”

And the answer was Moses had instructed the nation to do this when they entered the land.

We also answered the second thoughts,

“How could this event take place? How could all the people see? How could all the people hear?”

We also found that this is a very significant biblical site.

Now we understand the context and setting, we need to move to the more important question,

“What is it that God wants us to know and apply in our lives?”

There are three prime elements we must see in these few verses.

The Need for Dedication

1. Within this scene we can find the historic setting of great men dedicating and even rededicating themselves to our Lord.

- a. Abraham as he entered the Promised Land for the first time.
- b. Jacob as he reentered the Promised Land. And later after his family drifted for a time, they rededicated themselves.
- c. And now in our context the nation of Israel is dedicating themselves yet again to the Lord. It is a time of sacrifice, dedication, worship, and celebration before the Lord.
- d. Which suggests our need to dedicate ourselves to the things of God. It is a conscious choice. It is out of a grateful heart that we come. Are we not entreated in Romans 12:1-2 to dedicate our lives?

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. ² And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

- e. But the dedication in our text goes even deeper than just the historic setting.
2. This is the dedication of a new life
- a. A violent and vile people have occupied this land. Their sins have reached the heavens and it is the end of God’s patience.
 - b. Israel is now to establish God’s Law in this defiled area of the world. They were instructed to place large stones in the center of the Promised Land and plaster them, in order to write on them God’s commandments - Joshua 8:32.
 - c. So once Jericho and Ai were breached, the Land was opened to the nation. So immediately Joshua marches the nation from Ai, 30 miles to the center of the Promised Land to raise stone monuments with the Law of God on them. Then the people dedicated themselves to the Lord and to keep His Law.
 - d. I find it interesting that the stones were plastered over and then the Law was written on them. They were not engraved. Had they

been engraved the wording would last for centuries. But being plastered they would only last a generation or two.

e. I suspect that even though God's Law is intended to be binding for all generations, each generation must take up the burden of keeping the Law. We can only make the decision to dedicate our lives. We cannot make our children be dedicated. They have to choose. Hence the plaster. Every generation has to renew the plaster and the writing and then dedicate themselves to the Lord.

f. Two more thoughts on this:

First our nation was founded on biblical principles. Our courts, public buildings and schools all had at one time the Ten Commandments hanging in them. The Bible was once openly read, prayers were once openly said, and people generally gave respect to the Judo Christian principles of the Land. But the plaster to these monuments has faded, grown brittle, and broken off. Today we have a nation bent on making it's own laws and going its own ways. They have moved away from God.

Second, the biblical principles of a nation are only as good as the biblical principles of the individual and the home. Just as Joshua had the stone monuments erected in the valley of Mt Ebal. So we must erect the monuments of God's Word in our hearts and in our homes. Not as a piece of paper but as the standards by which we are going to live.

g. If we don't we will soon learn the curse that comes upon us for continual disobedience.

h. If you have not established that God's word will be the standard by which you will live. Then today is the day to begin.

i. Note the example of Joshua. It was his standard. Right from the beginning, as Israel entered the land Joshua did not delay to post the standards. He brought the nation and his household to the center of the land and dedicated himself and all the people to keeping God's word.

- j. And again, at the end of his life as he gave his farewell speech, he no doubt walked up to these stone pillars plastered with the commandments of God, and pointed to them and said,
- “but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” - Joshua 24:16

So this passage speaks of our need to dedicate ourselves to the Lord and His word.

A Need For True Worship

There are several very important points we can find in this passage regarding worship.

1. The monuments with the Law of God and the altar for sacrifice and priests were placed on Mt. Ebal.
2. It was the mountain from which the people were to Amen the curses that would come upon those who are disobedient.
3. It is interesting how God arranged the nation. Six tribes were set on Mt. Ebal - the mountain of cursing. And six tribes were placed on Mt. Gerizim - the mountain of blessing.
4. Several significant things occurred here. First the tribes placed on this mountain came from the Rachel and Leah's servants.
5. The only exception was the tribe of Reuben. Reuben had an incestuous relationship with one of Jacob's handmaidens, which caused him to lose the blessing of the firstborn.
6. On Mt. Gerizim God placed the tribes that were born to Jacob's legitimate wives, Rachel and Leah. So there seems to be some distinction between right and wrong.
7. Furthermore the number of people on Mt Gerizim was greater in number than those on Mt. Ebal. So when the shout of Amen came for the blessings, it was louder than the shout of Amen regarding the cursing's.
8. Another thing about this arrangement. The altar of God and priests on Mt. Ebal - the mountain of cursing is significant.

- a. It reminds of God's love. He made a way of escape. As sinful as we are, all we need to do is repent and turn to Him and there is a cleansing.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." - 1 John 1:9

- b. It is a reminder that we can't keep the Law perfectly. We are all sinners. Hence the High Priest and the Sacrifice. It points us to Christ who is our Sacrifice for sin and our High Priest who keeps us.
- c. The stones of the Altar were to be undressed. That means, they were not to be touch with hammer or pick. There were not to be shaped in any way.

It speaks to them and us that there is nothing that we can do to add to God's grace. Anything we do or add to it only makes things worse. God's grace is wholly and solely provided by God and not by anything we do.

- d. **Lastly it speaks to us that no human system is enough to get us to heaven.** To understand this we need to see our Lord in John 4. There our Lord meets a woman from Samarian at the well at Sychar, which is the well Jacob dug 1800 years before, which is by Mt. Gerizim.
- e. The Samarian's are a product of Israel's disobedience. The northern nation was bad that Assyria carried way the Israelites and brought in Arab captives. They intermarried with the few Jewish people left. They also decided they wanted to worship the God of this land so they brought in a Jewish priest to teach them God's ways and they built a temple on Mt. Gerizim, the Mount of blessing.
- f. She said to Jesus "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" - John 4:20
- g. "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. ²² Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we

worship: for salvation is of the Jews. ²³ But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. ²⁴ God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” John 4:21-24

- h. The point is this; no human system of worship is enough. Ritual sacrifice is not enough. Being good or doing good works is not enough.
- i. The Samaritans had it wrong. The Jews had it right but they replace sincere worship with heartless ritual. It is not ritual. It is not doing. It is that we humble ourselves before God and yield entirely to Him. Then we’re adopted into His family. There is no other way.

There is a Need For Our Dedication

There is Need For Genuine Worship

There is Promise and Blessing

In Joshua 24:32 - “And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph.”

This site of dedication and worship is also the site of Promise and blessing.

Joseph understood the promise of God and the hope, which lay ahead. He made his people promise to bring his bones to the Promised Land. He knew God would be faithful to His word. So they buried his bones in the center of the Land and the place of dedication and the place of worship.

His bones, the monuments and the altar stand as a reminder to us of the Promise and Blessings that lay ahead for God’s children.

What should we do?

Some of us need to dedicate ourselves.

1. We need to set God’s Word as our standard.
2. We need to stop living our selfish ways.

3. If you're worried about our nation going wayward, then concern yourself with your relationship with God. Is His standard your standard?

Some of us need to renew our worship

1. It begins with acknowledging God's way of escape.
 - a. He loves us and gave us His Son
 - b. He is our Sacrifice for sin
 - c. He is our High Priest who intercedes for us.
2. We can't do it on our own. We can't find forgiveness and new life apart from Christ.
3. We can't add to God's grace. We simply need to come to Christ in faith and accept Him.

We need to rejoice in God's Promise, Blessings and Hope.