

Message #16**Joshua 8:30-35**

I recently saw a book about church growth that was written by a United Methodist Minister. The title of the book was “The Church According to Starbucks: A Modern Approach to Church Growth.” The author claimed that by using Starbucks as a model for your church you can get people to come in the front door.

Just this week someone sent me an article about a new three week cosmic Christmas promotion that is spreading in many churches. This new church promotion is a promotion of “Star Wars.” It is designed to reach new people by remembering a force. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are being replaced by Star Wars characters. This is evil, blasphemous, adulterous stuff that is happening in churches.

Some of the most powerful things God ever did for the nation Israel occur in the book of Joshua. No one can deny this.

Joshua is a book that takes Israel into the Promised Land and gives Israel the Promised Land when it was filled with Canaanite powers. Now certainly we will admit that Israel is not the Church or perhaps more accurately, the Church is not Israel and does not replace Israel. However, we do know from I Corinthians 10 that we can learn a great deal from Israel. Paul said, “Now these things happened to them as an example and they were written for our instruction...” (I Cor. 10:11).

If we could ask Joshua what do you think we should do to make great things happen within our church, he would not give a pro Starbucks or Star Wars philosophy. His answer would be shock the modern day church growth mindset. He would not tell us to become user-friendly. He would not tell us to form cell/friendship groups. He would not tell us to build some center for entertainment where people can drink coffee. **What Joshua would say would be this—if you want God to bless your church, you get all of the people together to worship God and focus on carefully understanding all of the written Word of God—the positive and the negative.**

There is nothing flashy about this text. There is nothing flamboyant here. There is nothing here that would impress the church growth movement leaders. But what is found here is the key to real success with God. The formula Joshua presents here is as relevant for us as it was for Israel. The formula still works. What we see is this:

GOD’S WAY TO FUTURE SUCCESS AND BLESSING FOR ANY ORGANIZATION IS TO MAINTAIN REVERENT WORSHIP AND TO FOCUS INTENSELY ON THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD.

Here is God’s marketing strategy. When the nation Israel or the Church is focused on reverently worshipping God and accurately understanding His written Word, that organization is successful in the mind of God and it stands ready to be blessed by God. This is God’s formula for a victorious organization.

Any church that tries to get all of the people, regardless of age, dedicated to reverent worship and the systematic study of God's Word, is a church that is successful in God's sight and it is a church destined for many wonderful blessings. That point is very clear from this text.

In this passage, Israel was enjoying the aftermath of two great victories at Jericho and Ai. Joshua knew it was time to focus all of Israel on what it was that God would continue to honor in the future—namely a true, pure worship of Him and a total focus on His written Word.

It was not Israel's strategies that would bring victory; it was not her numbers that would bring victory; it would be her focus on God and His Word that would bring victory and that is exactly what Joshua wanted to communicate to Israel.

Now there are three main actions that occurred after the victory of Ai that led to future victory and blessings:

ACTION #1 – Joshua builds an altar to God. **8:30-31**

This is the first time the altar shows up in Joshua. Up to this point there has been no altar mentioned. There are four observations we may make:

Observation #1 - The altar was built to the God of Israel. **8:30a**

This is very important to see because in order for one to have the blessings of the true God, one must worship the true God and the true God is the God of Israel.

In Joshua's day there were all kinds of worship places that worshipped all kinds of deities. In modern times we could say there were Muslim mosques and Mormon Temples and Buddha Shrines, but frankly those places mean nothing to God. What does mean something is a place built for the true God of the Bible and the true God of the Bible is the God of Israel.

We may observe that the text says, "Joshua built an altar to the LORD (Jehovah), the God (Elohim) of Israel. So God, who is the sovereign creator, is also the LORD, who is the sovereign, covenant-keeping I AM. God is the plural noun for God that would indicate there is plurality to God. All members of the Godhead may be classified as the LORD (Jehovah). This altar was constructed with that view of God.

Until one is willing to come to terms with the true God of the Bible, no matter what one is building religiously, it means zero. The sovereign I AM, covenant-keeping creator is the God of Israel. Israel has a very unique relationship with God and it was this God to whom this altar was built. This was the God who brought Israel across the Jordan. This was the God who flattened Jericho. This was the God who defeated Ai and this was the God who deserved worship.

Observation #2 - The altar was built in Mount Ebal. **8:30b**

Mount Ebal is located about 30 miles straight north of Jerusalem. The construction of the altar at this very spot was in complete conformity to the command of Moses (Deut. 27:4-5). Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (**Josh. 8:33**) are located at the city of Shechem.

Mount Ebal sits to the north of the city with an elevation of 3085 feet and Mount Gerizim sits to the south of the city with an elevation of 2890 feet. So Mount Ebal is the highest mountain. **The reason why this spot is so important is that these mountains are located in the geographic center of all of the Promised Land.**

When one stands on the summit of these two mountains, one may see much of the Promised Land. This was a central point and if God's people would keep their focus on the true God and His Word, they would receive all of the land.

Richard Hess, in his commentary on Joshua, says that excavations actually discovered this altar. He writes: "Surveys and excavations on Mount Ebal have revealed a site there, on the third highest peak, that the excavator suggests could be identified with Joshua's altar. Several details have led to this proposal. Firstly, there is the date of occupation. Two levels were found at the site. On the basis of Egyptianized scarabs, a small decorated limestone 'seal' and pottery, the earlier level extends to 1200 B.C. and the later level terminates at 1150 B.C. The site was then abandoned. Secondly, the excavator, Zertal, has interpreted the stone structure in the centre of the site as an altar. Constructed of uncut field stones, its later phase includes a ramp up to what he has identified as a veranda around the altar. In the centre, there is burnt ash. Thirdly, bones found at this structure indicate animals appropriate for Israelite sacrifice, such as sheep, goats and cattle. Fourthly, the absence of figurines at the site has led some archaeologists to doubt that it possessed a religious significance, and to suggest a house or tower. However, a faith that rejected images in its worship would not use images. ... It remains the only thirteenth-twelfth century B.C. structure found on Mount Ebal" (*Joshua*, p. 174).

As Joshua was beginning the conquest of the land, he knew the importance of a right relationship with God and a right worship of God so he built this altar on Mount Ebal.

Observation #3 - The altar was built in a specific Mosaic conformity. **8:31a**

Joshua did not just come up with his own idea for an altar. He built this altar in precise conformity to the written Word of God that had been written by Moses. Moses demanded that an altar be built on Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:4) and he also demanded that the altar be built of uncut stones, which had not been touched or polluted by any man (Deut. 27:6).

Joshua had been with Moses and he knew God's Word. Joshua took the Word of God very seriously and very literally. Last week it was revealed that God's Word is not viewed as being literally true. Joshua interpreted literally when he built this altar.

He was not about to neglect this part of God's Word. God will not accept any worship that does not conform to His pure ways.

When it comes to worshipping God, it must be on His terms and to worship God on His terms, one must go through the altar, which is the cross of Jesus Christ. Joshua is very intent on obeying God's Word precisely and when your focus is on that, God will give victory.

Observation #4 - The altar was built to present offerings to the LORD. **8:31b**

The specific purpose of this altar was to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to God. The burnt offerings symbolized the entire surrender to God of an individual or group. It was an offering made by one who was already a believer. This was not a sin forgiveness offering, but an offering of renewal and sanctification and surrender.

The peace offering had its focus on having peaceful fellowship with God. Combined, these two offerings were statements which said we are dedicating ourselves to God and we want to maintain close fellowship with Him.

You take an individual or group with an intense focus on God's Word and with a desire to have close fellowship with God and a peaceful relationship with Him, and He will give victory. This is a strategy for victory that guarantees you will have it.

ACTION #2 – Joshua copies the written Word of God. **8:32-33**

Moses demanded that large stones be found and covered with white lime and that all of the law of God be written on these stones (Deut. 27:2-3). He also demanded that all of the words of God be written very distinctly (Deut. 27:8). Joshua carried this out with precision.

We do not know how much of God's Word was copied by Joshua, but Irving Jensen said that archeologists discovered pillars in Iran that are six to eight feet long which contain three times the length of the book of Deuteronomy.

Now we may observe from **verse 33** that "all" of Israel watched God's written Word being copied. The Elders, the Officers, the Judges, the Levitical priests, all of the aliens—such as Rahab's family and perhaps others who may have surrendered—they "stood" as the Word of God was being copied.

Just think about the reverence and respect here for God's written Word. When you have the leaders and the people so reverencing God's Word at this level, you have a group guaranteed to receive God's blessings.

Martin Luther said you can count on the fact that always before the judgment of God there is a light esteeming of God's Word.

ACTION #3 – Joshua reads the written Word of God. **8:34-35**

There are four observations we want to make from these two powerful verses:

Observation #1 - God's Word was read systematically. **8:34**

Notice he read “all the words of the law.” He did not jump around and choose a verse from here and there; he systematically read “all” the Word of God line upon line, precept upon precept. We may assume based on Deuteronomy 27:14 that he read with a loud voice, not some apologetic, wimpy whisper.

When a nation or church is on course for the blessings of God, the people will gather with reverence to hear the Word of God proclaimed authoritatively and systematically. Their focus will be on accurately hearing God's Word read and taught.

Observation #2 - God's Word was systematically read by Joshua. **8:35a**

It is very clear that there were Elders, Officers, Judges and Levites present, but it was Joshua who did the reading. Could you imagine the President of the United States standing at the podium in the White House and reading God's Word for the nation? Can you imagine him taking the Bible and opening it and reading it? I can't either. Well, Joshua did that.

I am still of the conviction that God singles out certain men and He gives them gifts to be able to accurately understand and handle His Word and it is their job to do it. Joshua had been given the job of being the leader and he took his leadership responsibility seriously.

Observation #3 - God's Word contained blessings and cursings. **8:35b**

What Joshua did and what he read certainly goes against the grain of the modern day church growth movement that says don't say things that could offend anyone, just make all feel welcome.

Joshua did not just read passages that were positive; he read passages that were negative. He did not just present a concept of God that He was only a God of love; he presented the truth that God was also a God of ferocious judgment.

God is a God who can bless and He can curse. This is true in any dispensation and Joshua was teaching this in the ears of all of Israel.

God is a God who can save. God is a God who can condemn. God is a God who can give rewards. God is a God who can deny rewards. People can end up facing God positively or they can end up facing God in shame. God is a God of the positive, but He is also the God of the negative and if you get focused on one or the other, you get distorted and lopsided in your view of God. However, if you focus on what is true and sound, you have a true grasp of God.

This is why it is so important to systematically study the Bible. You get the positive and the negative. People who will be blessed by God want the whole counsel of God, not just bits and pieces of it.

Observation #4 - God's Word was carefully read for all the people. **8:35c**

Now take a serious look at the end of **verse 35**. Joshua read the Word of God that stressed blessings and cursings to "all" Israel including the women, the children and the strangers that were living among them.

This philosophy certainly flies in the face of the modern day "user-friendly" church that says we need to really entertain the people. Joshua wanted all people at this service hearing God's Word. There was no nursery, there was no children's church, there was no Sunday school, and there was no special plan to make things enjoyable for the visitors. There was no Starbucks or Star Wars. There was a serious focus on the written Scriptures.

Why did Joshua have this focus? Because, ladies and gentlemen, this is the focus that leads to the blessings of God.

If someone would have walked up to Joshua with the kinds of promotional gimmicks we are seeing today in churches, he probably would have had them executed. What he wanted was for all people of all ages to be very serious about the written Word of God because he knew that this was the key to the blessings of God.

The key to God's blessings is a systematic focus on God's written Word that is willing to obey the positives and the negatives. That is the focus that guarantees victory with God at all times.