

Joshua 8:30 – 35 (chs.7 – 8)

³⁰ Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, ³¹ as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses – an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the Lord burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings. ³² There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on stones a copy of the law of Moses. ³³ All the Israelites, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the Lord, facing the Levitical priests who carried it. Both the foreigners living among them and the native-born were there. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.

³⁴ Afterwards, Joshua read all the words of the law – the blessings and the curses – just as it is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them

Common objection to the gospel: *Do whatever you like 6 days a week and then get forgiven.*
(Communion or RC Mass)

Is there any truth in this. How far can we rebel against God before we stretch his grace and his patience too far? Is it possible for a Christian to commit an unforgivable sin?

The continuing story of the children of Israel and Joshua in chapters 7 & 8 has much to tell us as we wrestle with these issues.

Let's remind ourselves of where we have got to in the story. Over the last couple of weeks, we have heard about Israel crossing the Jordan with the miraculous help of God stopping the water and then last week about the conquering of the key gateway city of Jericho – again with God's miraculous help collapsing the walls. Joshua and Israel may well have thought they were on a roll! The next city they want to take is the little town of Ai. Well, compared to Jericho this would be a doddle. The Israelite scouts come back and tell Joshua *We'll have no problem at all defeating them – certainly no need to take the whole army*

7:3 Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there. Well, it was a disaster, the Israelite force was utterly routed, put to flight and about 36 of them were killed.

It wasn't just a set-back but it had a disastrous effect on morale:

7:5 At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.

Joshua is distraught – it seems like God has abandoned them. But he does the best thing anyone can do in these circumstances *v.6 he fell face down to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same.* Joshua is full of despair but not disbelief. He cries out to God *Why?* He fears for their very survival, that they will be surrounded and wiped out, but he also challenges God *What then will you do for your own great name?'*

God administers tough love: *'Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ¹² That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies;*

It turns out that one of the Israelites has disobeyed God's specific commandment that no plunder was to be taken from Jericho, rather it was to be sacrificed to God by being destroyed. But it turns out that Achan could not resist the temptation to take a beautiful Babylonian robe and a stash of gold and silver coins and hide them under his tent. *After all, Who would know?* Well no-one except Achan and his family - and God.

God exposes Achan and his sin and at this crucial point in the history of Israel as they begin their new life in the promised land, God has to make it clear that He will not be mocked. If he allows deceit and deliberate disobedience now right at the outset, what hope would there be for the new nation? *C.f. Ananias and Saphira in Acts* So Achan and his family pay the ultimate price. They are stoned to death. Then a pile of stones is heaped over their bodies as a permanent reminder and warning to the children of Israel.

This raises the question: Does this story mean that if we commit a grave sin, we too are rejected and condemned? Achan and his family were stoned, but we don't know their eternal destiny. We'll come back to this.

Meanwhile, God remains faithful to his promises, He instructs Joshua on how to defeat Ai and this time they have total victory.



It is in this context that we have the account of the whole of Israel gathered to recommit themselves to God on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Shechem. This was a place of huge significance to the children of Israel, even though they had never been there before. How many here have been to Bethlehem? Only a few, but for all of us: great significance. Where Jesus was born. This spot between the 2 mountains is like Bethlehem: where God first appeared to Abraham in the Promised Land and made his covenant promise to

him. *Genesis 12⁶ Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. Then note: 8v.33 Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.*

Viz: Deut 11²⁹ Moses "When the Lord your God has brought you into the land you are entering to possess, you are to proclaim on Mount Gerizim the blessings, and on Mount Ebal the curses..." So Joshua and Israel were carrying out the commands of Moses and what's more they knew the significance of the site, that this was the place where God had promised Abraham He'd make his descendants become a great nation for in *Deut 11* Moses also says: ³⁰*As you know, these mountains are across the Jordan, westward, towards the setting sun, near the great trees of Moreh,*

The Israelites must have had the most wonderful awareness of how God had indeed kept his promises. Just as God had promised Abraham in this very place, now here they were, 4 or 5 hundred years later, the descendants of Abraham, numbering 100s of 1000s if not millions. – a great nation like *the sand on the sea-shore and the star in the sky.*



Right in the centre of this gathering is the *Ark of the covenant*. The ark represented the holy compassionate presence of God in their midst.

In recent weeks the Ark had had a central role reminding them of the presence and power of God, as he led Israel across the Jordan and as they marched around the walls of Jericho. But now its main role, as it contained 10 commandments, was to remind Israel that the Lord is the God who had made a covenant through Moses with the people of Israel.

In *Deut. 27* Moses gives specific instructions about which tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: and which tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses. He also instructs that after each curse *"Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"* And presumably it was the same after each

blessing was declared. In other words, Israel wasn't there just to *hear* the blessings and curses of God, but to *receive* them, to *appropriate* them for themselves. They were affirming that yes they were richly blessed by God, but if they rebelled against him, if they violated the covenant, like Achan had, they deserved his curses, just as Achan had.

So what does this all mean for us today?

First, note how inclusive this gathering was: *An all age service: children and adults. It was also an all-comers service: men and women; leaders and lay, Hebrews and foreigners.* Did you know that from the time of the Exodus, God's people have never been just one ethnic group, just the physical descendants of Abraham? Last week you were reminded of how Rahab and all her family – Canaanites - were welcomed into the community of Israel.

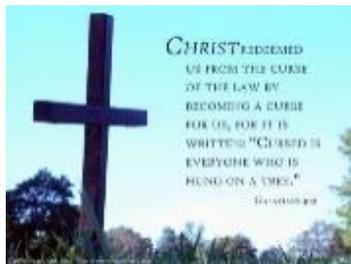
In *Exodus 12* ³⁷ *The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.*

³⁸ ***Many other people went up with them*** No doubt other slaves who wanted to flee the harsh regime of Pharaoh.

And on this day everyone received blessings as well as curses.

So we now come back to the question: does this story mean that if we disobey God's commands, we too come under his curse, like Israel?

And the answer - since Christ came - is emphatically **No!**



Listen to Paul writing to the Galatians: 3 ¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'* Jesus has himself taken that curse on his own shoulders in our place.

¹⁴ *He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that **by faith** we might receive the promise of the Spirit. "By faith" viz Rahab, viz the other refugees with Israel.*

For us the symbol of God's covenant love at the centre of our lives, is not the Ark of the Covenant, but Christ on the cross, with our sin upon his shoulders and Christ risen from the dead to clothe us with his righteousness.

I'm only in trouble if I wilfully reject Jesus and walk away from him out of the land of blessing into the land of curse.

If I am worried I have committed that unforgiveable sin, then that very anxiety is proof that I am still want to be part of God's family, and that means I am covered by the grace of Christ and eligible for God's covenant blessings.

We understand this in the context of that other great covenant relationship which, St Paul tells us is a picture of God's covenant relationship with us: marriage. We make solemn vows – but probably every day we fail to live up to them; we often have to seek forgiveness from our beloved and in a good happy marriage that forgiveness is freely given. But there is all the difference between that and unfaithfulness, deliberately violating the marriage vows, deceit, deserting your beloved. That is what will shipwreck a marriage.

How do we come back from great sin? Like Joshua, we pray, we ask God to show us where we have gone wrong, to identify the sin within us. We deal with it decisively and radically – we root it out. We remind ourselves of God's blessings and curses. We recommit ourselves to following Christ, faithfully.

BUT if we are wise, just as in our marriages, we will seek never come to that point, rather, we'll live by our marriage vows, to love and to cherish for that is the way to blessing and happiness and a rich life. So in our relationship with God, we will seek in Moses' words to *choose life* – not so much to obey laws and rituals, but to love the Lord our God with all our heart soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour, because for everyone, that is the way to blessing and a life in all its fulness. That is the very reason why Jesus came.