

## Providence Displayed

### *Joshua 8*

**Introduction:** Sometimes God teaches us through big, spectacular, and fantastic. Sometimes we have the story to tell, the dramatic way that things can only be explained by the sovereign, creative hand of God. But most of the time, God teaches us through the normal, mundane, and ordinary. He teaches us about His grace through the routine of work, the balancing of our checkbook, sleepless nights with sick kids, and strength to do it all again tomorrow. The problem with only seeing God in the spectacular is we **miss the hand of God working**, missing opportunities to grow, to be thankful, and to worship. Not only that, but we battle discontentment, question God's goodness, and wonder when we will have "one of those stories" of God working.

We come to the battle of Ai, which switches gears a little bit in how God orchestrated His will for His people. We still see God's power and ability, but we see it play out differently, but equally amazing. This is what we want to walk away with from the battle at Ai: we want to revel in the powerful, unseen, active hand of God's providence that is working in our lives today.

As we come to this battle, we are reminded that God's Word is true, inerrant, sufficient, and authoritative in everything it says. The city of Ai is a classic case of waiting for science to catch up with what the Bible says. Most older commentaries state that there was no archaeological evidence for the existence of Ai, since all the work at a place called Et-Tell had come up empty. However, under the leadership of Bryant Wood, excavations conducted at Khirbet el-Maqatir have shown the high likelihood that people were simply digging in the wrong places. In fact, in 1997 a young, strapping college student was able to dig in the remains of Biblical Ai (see handout for evidence that the Biblical Ai is really Khirbet el-Maqatir - if you are into that kind of thing, or check out this address: [http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/BibleInterp\\_2013\\_report.pdf](http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/BibleInterp_2013_report.pdf) . We are reminded as we begin that the Bible is to be trusted, believed, and obeyed.

Let's look, now, at a tale of two mountains, two battles, and two conditions to revel in the providence of God displayed.

#### I. **A Tale of Two Battles:** *Jericho & Ai*

##### A. **Similar outcomes**

- The Lord gave the city into their hands by His power (6:2; 8:7)
- They trusted the Lord's way by faith through active obedience (6:20; 8:21)
- They devoted the entire inhabitants of the city to destruction (6:21; 8:22) and burned the city completely to the ground (6:24; 8:28)
- They were both walled cities that guarded key routes into the center ridge of Canaan

##### B. **Different conventions**

- All the people were involved in Jericho (6:5); only the fighting men of valor went up against Ai (8:3). In other words, this was the ordinary way that wars were fought, with trained fighting men to go up to combat, as opposed to all the people marching around.
- The riches of Jericho were devoted to the LORD (6:19); The riches and spoil of Ai were given to the people of Israel (8:2, 27)
- God worked in a clearly miraculous way at Jericho (6:20); God worked in a clearly conventional way at Ai, using normal military strategy to accomplish a surprise attack and ambush (8:2, 12)

This look at the different conventions of the way God works is so important because this is the closest to how God works today. God is absolutely at work in our midst, and though there are times when extraordinary events take place (like salvation of a hard heart of stone made soft, or salvation out of "nowhere"), most often God works providentially, or with an unseen but active hand within the normal limits of nature and humanity. This is why we entrust ourselves to God by going to the hospital when we are sick or have a gangrenous Gall Bladder. We pray that God would work through the skill of the physician and through the defenses that He gave our bodies to heal. We trust God to provide a job, so we pray that God would open up opportunities to work, then we work our tail feathers off to secure that job. This is seeing all of life through the lens of God's active providence on display, which means we are absolutely dependant on Him for all things, yet we are called to actively pursue that which we are called to do.

The problem we have, which is the same problem Israel had, is that when we view life through God's providence rather than the miraculous, we easily can replace ourselves with the place God is supposed to have. We **take credit, do things in our own strength, or trust ourselves to get it all done**. This leads to the inevitable lack of **thankfulness, gratitude, and worship of God**. God's providential grace is what keeps us alive, keeps the sun shining, and gives us ANY ability in life. God is ALWAYS active, but we miss Him working when we only look for the miraculous, the glamorous, or spectacular. This presses us to have the right definition of spectacular, which is the transcendent God who is active among His creation and those He created.

This principle and truth is illustrated in what Israel did after they won the battle of Ai. They had to learn and remember that God's work frees us up to work.

## II. **A Truth on Two Mountains:** *Ebal & Gerizim*

**Joshua 8:30-31** At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal,<sup>31</sup> just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, "an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool." And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings.<sup>32</sup> And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written.

### A. **Limitations to the mount of blessing**

After the battle for Ai was over, the whole nation of Israel trekked over 20 miles to come a place near Shechem, a place where Abraham built an altar nearly 600 years before, and Jacob had dug a well near there (where the woman at the well would have a conversation with Jesus in John 4 – more on that later). They traveled to this place because Moses had commanded them to do this before he died in Deuteronomy 27. The intention was to go to the mountains that were about a ½ mile apart but both could overlook the promised land (they each meant "barren" and each stood about 3000 feet high and about 1000 feet above the valley, with Ebal being the higher). The command that Moses gave was to split the nation into equal tribes, 6 on each side, and would recite the law and particularly would recite the **blessings and curses** that God would lay out for compliance or failure to keep the law (read Deut. 27-28 for all the blessings and curses). The Levites would be in the middle, would recite the curses, and all the people would follow with, "AMEN".

There are a couple of unique features with this. **1)** Though the mountains were ½ mile apart at the top, they were only 500 yards apart at the bottom, with the contour of the mountains creating an amphitheater affect. Even without modern amplification, thousands of people could hear what was being read in this unique place and could respond in the affirmative. **2) Mount Gerizim** was designated as the place where the blessings would be read from. This was a reminder that **IF** they kept the Law,

they would be prosperous in the land (Deut. 28:11), their enemies would fear them (Deut. 28:10), and all the works of their hands would be blessed (Deut. 28:12). This was the place that they wanted to be, because though the blessings were immense, the curses were equally weighty.

### B. Provision on the mount of cursing

Mount Ebal was where the curses were to be read. The curses were to be read by the Levites and all the people would give affirmation:

**Deuteronomy 27:15** "'Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' **And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'**"<sup>16</sup> "'Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.' **And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'**

**27:18** "'Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.' **And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'**

The curses were severe. They included destruction, famine, death, and foreign invasion. They would become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD would lead them away (Deut. 28:38). These would come on the people because they failed to obey the voice and clear commands of the LORD. These were to be emblazoned in their mind so that there was no doubt what the LORD required.

Ebal seemed to be the place to avoid, and Gerazim would be the place to be. It seemingly was a bummer for the 6 tribes that had to lineup on Ebal because the news concerning the curses was heinous. In fact, after the Assyrians came and intermarried with the people of the Northern Tribes after 722 B.C. a new, half-breed group of people formed called the **Samaritans**. You'll remember the story of *The Good Samaritan* in the NT (Luke 10:25-37) where the glaring part of the parable was the fact a SAMARITAN helped the man, when a priest and Levite would not. The Samaritans were social and spiritual outcasts. They were partly Jewish, which was abhorrent to those who were *pure* Jews. Because they were shut out of temple worship in Jerusalem, they set up their own temple, worship, and sacrifices on this site. Which mountain would you suppose they set it up on? They set it up on **Gerazim!** Why? Because this was a place of blessing. But there is something more. They set it up here because they wanted to get to God on their own effort:

*"The Samaritans hated the Jews. The Samaritans set up their own worship and, following the thinking of men, made the center of it (amazingly) Mount Gerizim. They were humanists. When the Samaritans came into the land and were figuring out for themselves how to worship God, they must have thought, 'We won't choose Ebal. Who wants to say we're sinners? We'll worship on Gerizim.' In other words, they stood in the place of Cain, who tried to please God in his own way."<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus had a conversation with a woman at the well in between the two Mountains in John 4, with the conversation wrapped around the place of worship. After Jesus called out the fact that she had 5 husbands, she tried to turn the conversation to worship (which Jesus gladly obliged). She wanted to know whether Gerizim or Jerusalem were the proper place:

**John 4:20-26** Our fathers worshiped **on this mountain**, but you say **that in Jerusalem** is the place where people ought to worship."<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming **when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.**"<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, **when**

<sup>1</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Joshua and the flow of Biblical History*, p. 133.

***the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.*** <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, ***"I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things."*** <sup>26</sup> ***Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."***

Jesus did what Jesus does. He turned the conversation to its proper end: HIM! In other words, what Jesus clarified for her was the fact that worshipping or be accepted by God is not a matter of a percentage of effort or geography, but is found in Jesus alone. Jesus is the only way to be accepted by the Father. Jesus is the only way to satisfy the wrath of God and truly worship the Father. Jesus is the ONLY way of salvation. This is what Jesus taught His whole ministry and life, and what is verified in the NT. But this is also what was taught on the 2 mountains. There were two specific things that were placed on Ebal: the Law and the altar.

- **The Law written on stones** – There would be a set of stones that would have some sort of soft stone placed over top that the people could write and read the law of Moses. The law was not simply to inform them how to obey. The Law was given so the people would realize they COULD NOT KEEP THE LAW! This was exactly what Jesus tried to teach the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31). Salvation is NOT FOUND in our obedience or adherence to the Law, since the Law simply shows us our sin. The Law written on these stones was a constant reminder of failure, of the inability of mankind to find salvation in obedience. So where why was Ebal really a place of hope? Because of the altar:
- **An Altar of uncut stones** – Deuteronomy 27:4-8 specified that the altar was to be set up on Ebal, and it was to be made of uncut stones, meaning no tools or craftsmanship would be applied to it. This was an altar where sacrifices would be made on behalf of the people for their sin. Do you see the beauty of God's work here! The Law was set up to show the utter inability of the people to attain salvation through the Law, and when there was failure, there was an altar that was NOT CRAFTED BY MAN to make sacrifice, a substitute for their sin. This is God's perfect provision. God does not leave us alone and without a way of salvation, but He also does not leave it in our hands. He provides a sacrifice in the man Jesus Christ, who took our place on the cross. This, and this alone, is where salvation is found.

Last Sunday I was able to interact with some dear brothers and sisters who were saved in India and who have moved to the U.S over the last few decades. One new friend was explaining how the Hindu religion works in the south of India. In a caste system, each caste has a specific god (idol), and though for the most part the people are not passionate about their religious beliefs, still seek to appease (or not tick off) their gods. This was hugely informative, because this is like EVERY RELIGION in the world. Religion is man trying to appease whatever god they set up, and life is about finding a way to live life without bearing the consequence of that god's anger. Every religion is based on the premise that through effort, sacrifice, martyrdom, or obedience we can find salvation IN OUR OWN EFFORT. This is where the true freedom of Christ comes in. Christianity is distinct and set apart from all others because we recognize our utter inability to please, satisfy, or get to God on our own. All of our efforts fall short of God's glory and are worthy of hell. It is only through FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST WHERE WE CAN HAVE SALVATION.

So the question this morning, the question for all of life, is this: What mountain do you run to and live on? Are you living on Gerizim, trying to please God with your own effort? Are you banking on your own wisdom, your own goodness or morality, your own rap sheet of church attendance for salvation? Or do

you run to Ebal, recognizing your sin, your utter failure to live up to God's standard, and simply trust the sacrifice made on your behalf by Jesus Christ!

### III. **A Treatise on Two Conditions:** *Perfect & Continual Obedience*

**Joshua 8:33-35** 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.<sup>34</sup> And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.<sup>35</sup> 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.

Did this all mean that the Law was only a pointer to salvation and nothing else? What about all the blessings and curses? Where does the role of obedience play out in the economy of God's Law? In order to truly understand this, we have to understand the difference between the unconditional and conditional nature of God's law.

#### A. Our need for the unconditional

- **Salvation is conditioned on faith alone, not works**

**Romans 4:1-8** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?<sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.<sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? **"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."**<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.<sup>5</sup> **And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,** just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: **7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."**

- **Salvation is conditioned on Christ's holding us, not us holding Him**

**John 10:28-29** - I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.<sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (cf. Rom. 8:37-39).

Salvation comes through sacrifice. It is only when Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for us that we can have salvation. Salvation is final, secure, and sure because Jesus is the basis, and He does not fail or change. If it were up to us, we would fail, because we were dead in our trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1-3). Once salvation takes hold, we are freed from our sin and are ABLE to obey to the pleasure of God for the first time. This is where the blessings and the curses come in.

#### B. Our expectation in the conditional

**2 Corinthians 4:5-12** For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> **But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.**<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;<sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not

forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, **so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.** <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.** <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is **preparing for us** an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

We cannot miss the crucial order of this thought. We are called to be obedient. All those who truly love Christ WILL keep His commandments (1 John 2:3), knowing that His commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). BUT, our obedience DOES NOT secure our salvation. It was not our obedience to the Law that purchased our salvation, but Christ's obedience that purchased us. It was the fact that Jesus was perfect, that He fulfilled the whole Law (Matt. 5:17), and He substituted Himself for us on the cross. This means that it is by faith alone that we are forgiven, saved, and secured. All of the acts of obedience that we "tried" to do before were for naught, and only by repenting by faith are we saved.

HOWEVER, salvation has freed us up to obey! In other words, **we do not work or obey to get grace or salvation, but when we receive grace for salvation, we are freed up to work and obey.** This is not a small thing or simply an issue of semantics. This is the heart of the gospel and the entire Bible. Salvation is based on the work of God in Christ, and that frees us up to glorify Christ in every area, in every way, everyday, which is what we COULD NOT DO BEFORE. This is why obedience is so important, vital, and necessary. **It does not secure our salvation, but salvation secures our obedience.** This is exactly what the nation of Israel was faced with at Shechem. They were called to be God's people, were given the opportunity to sacrifice on behalf of their sins, and then to obey God wholeheartedly. With obedience or disobedience came blessing or cursing. In other words, obedience to God for believers brings **joy, contentment, happiness, assurance, fruitfulness, and thankfulness.** Disobedience brings **break in relationship, loss, lack of joy, no peace, and a lack of worship.** A true believer in Jesus whose sins are forgiven, whose heart is soft, and whose eyes are open has the ability to obey, to put off sin, and experience the true blessing of God.

So the question remains: **What mountain do you run to? God has provided the means through Christ to yield completely to Him in salvation, but have you believed it? Have you tried to get to God your own way, wanting God to bless your efforts, through Gerizim, or have you realized your inability to do it in your own strength and come to the altar of Ebal?**