



ENTERING THE MYSTERY

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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 Joshua 8:30-35
 Eleventh Message
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It was Annie Dillard who wrote the words, “We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery.” I want to invite you into a mystery this morning.

The Old Testament book of Joshua recounts the story of Israel’s battles during the conquest of the land of Canaan. In this series we have been relating these battles to the Christian’s spiritual struggles with sin, evil and fear. At times, the Christian life seems like one long series of battles. No sooner do we deal with one crisis than another one comes along. Just when we get a handle on one area of sin in our lives, another crops up. We see signs of progress, but we learn that we have a long way to go. Battling spiritual enemies is taxing work. We have victories, of course, but even our successes don’t seem to touch us at the very depth of our being. We wonder if we are missing something, if there something else we were meant to experience other than the victorious Christian life. I believe there is!

This missing ingredient is wonderfully laid out in the Joshua narrative. We have come to my favorite text in this book, a passage that covers the events that took place following the conquest of Ai. Chapter 8, verse 30:

Then Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, on which no man had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And he wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. And all Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. Then 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. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them (Josh. 8:30-35, NASB).

This holy moment repeats the covenant renewal that took place at Mt. Sinai, in Exodus 24. It fulfills the com-

mand given by Moses to Israel, in Deut. 27. There Moses explicitly laid out the events recorded here. This is the third of four covenant renewals between God and Israel. The first two, mediated by Moses, occurred at Sinai, and east of the Jordan, respectively, prior to Israel’s entering the land. The second two, mediated by Joshua, take place at Shechem, recorded here in chapter 8, and in chapter 24.

Shechem lay about thirty-one miles north of Jerusalem, a good distance from Jericho and Ai, in the heart of the hill country. By now, the base camp for the nation had been moved from Gilgal to Shechem. Israel must have had free access to this area, either because they had a treaty in place with the Shechemites, or because the Canaanites, cowering in their strongholds, were afraid to confront them in this sparsely populated area.

Shechem was a significant place in the history of the land. It was the site of Abraham’s first stop when he left Haran and journeyed to Canaan. Here Yahweh appeared to the patriarch and renewed his covenant promise. Jacob camped here on his return from Paddan-aram; and it was here that he bought a parcel of land from the sons of Hamor. Also, both Abraham and Jacob built an altar to the Lord at Shechem.

Shechem was flanked by two mountains. Mt. Gerizim, the mount of blessings, lay to the south of Shechem. Mt Ebal, the higher of the two, the mount of curses, lay to the north. Appropriately, Mt. Gerizim still is lush today, while Mt. Ebal is desolate.

Notice that all Israel is gathered for this time of covenant renewal. The leadership is represented by the elders, officers, judges and Levitical priests. Strangers and natives are mentioned, as are those least able to defend their rights—women, children, and strangers.

We have encountered this theme of community again and again in Joshua. All Israel, including the two and a half tribes who settled east of the Jordan, entered the land to defeat the enemies; all Israel crossed the Jordan together; all the men of Israel were circumcised; all Israel took part in the first Passover in the land; all Israel marched around Jericho; and all Israel shared the responsibility and subsequent consecration following the sin of Achan.

Though the church struggles mightily with this, God’s people have a corporate, not an individual identity.

Joshua builds an altar (according to Moses’ instruc-

tions, Deut. 11:29; 27:1-8) on Mt. Ebal and offers a sacrifice, symbolizing God's claim to the land. The altar is built with uncut stones. Having the same significance as uncut vines and uncut hair, this is a sign that the altar is dedicated to the Lord and belongs to him. These altar stones, untainted by human hands, prefigure the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. Interestingly, an altar has been excavated on Mt. Ebal, and all the scientific evidence fits very well with this biblical description.

Two offerings are placed on the altar. The burnt offering symbolizes Israel's total consecration to God, and it serves to ransom them. The fellowship, or peace offering, which was eaten, represents their relationship with God. These are the same sacrifices that were used in the ceremony at Mt. Sinai, when Israel initially ratified the covenant with God (Exod. 24). These offerings also prefigure Christ's blood, which would be sacrificed for the new covenant.

The other main activity at Shechem centers around the word of God. The law defined the character of God's rule in the land. On this occasion the law was written, read, and heard. First, Joshua covers the uncut stones with lime or plaster and writes on them a copy of the law. Second, the tribes are gathered on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal, surrounding the priests and the ark, the divine King's throne, symbolizing God's presence in the midst of his people. All of Israel participates. Six tribes gather on one mountain, six tribes on the other. As instructed in Deut. 27, the curses and the blessings recorded in Deut. 27 and 28 are shouted out. The tribes on Mt. Gerizim shout the blessings on obedience, and the six tribes on Mt. Ebal shout out the curses on disobedience. It is likely that this was done antiphonally. The setting of the two mountains provided a natural amphitheater, with splendid acoustics. Finally, Joshua reads the law, the blessings and the curses, all that Moses had commanded before all Israel. Not a word is left out.

What a holy and sacred moment! Connections are made to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Mt. Sinai. At last, Israel is in the land. They are still surrounded by enemies (twenty-nine kings have yet to be conquered), but the nation stops to enter into the mystery of God and his transcendence, the mystery of sacrifice, and the mystery of the word. There are plenty of battles yet to fight, but those can wait. It is time to enter into the presence of God.

Let me comment on three aspects of this holy scene: worship, salvation, and word.

We have already noted the emphasis on worship in these opening chapters of Joshua. Memorial stones are placed at the Jordan when Israel crosses. Circumcision and Passover are experienced as the first acts in the land. Memorials are built following the victory at Ai and to remember the sin of Achan in the valley of Achor. A Shechem experience follows military conquest at Ai. Over and over we see that worship is interwoven with conquest and victory.

We must conclude that worship is essential to taking possession of the land. The internal events provide the spiritual center for the external. We cannot expect to experience God when our life is an unending series of exhausting battles. We cannot expect to have spiritual and emotional vitality if all we do is fight. We must have space in our lives to remember, reflect, renew, and refresh.

We also see that these times of worship are not just for individual, but for corporate worship. All Israel is gathered: leaders and strangers, women and children, aliens and natives. The church is the one body of Christ. It includes young and old, male and female, long-standing and recent churchgoers. Something is gained in community that cannot be experienced alone. Jesus said, "Where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20).

The second thing we see is that God is a God of salvation. The Israelites build an altar on Mt. Ebal. The interesting thing to note is that this is the mount of curses. When Israel disobeyed God and experienced the curse rather than the blessing, it was here that the sacrifice was offered. Thus Israel would learn that there was a way by which God would provide salvation. Here we have a beautiful picture of how God would provide salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus. The curse that falls on the sinner is removed through Christ.

Also, the first eight chapters of Joshua draw a tremendous contrast between life and death, judgment and salvation, blessings and curses. Following God results in life, salvation, and blessing; disobeying God results in death, judgment, and curse.

Only four characters are named in these eight chapters. The first two, God and Joshua, are like the Father and the Son. Then there is Rahab, the harlot, and Achan, the son of a well-established line in the tribe of Judah. Achan had all the benefits of being among the people of God. He had family status; he went to Sunday School; he had the word of God; he witnessed the wonders of God. But Achan sinned and was judged. Rahab the harlot, lived in the midst of a perverse society. She had done everything wrong. She didn't have the Bible, she didn't go to church, but she had heard about this God of Israel, and she feared him and the coming judgment. The result was that Rahab and her house were saved by faith in a God who works salvation. She, too, was standing in the midst of Israel on this day, along with other aliens and strangers. Rahab was the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth. Thus Rahab was the great-great grandmother of King David. God's way of salvation is amazing.

This same story is repeated over and over in the gospels. When Jesus came to offer his message of salvation, the religious elite refused to listen. Just like the people of Jericho, they closed the door to their hearts. But the Rahabs, the prostitutes, tax-collectors, outcasts and sinners responded to Jesus' message. People who acknowl-

edge their sin reach out to a God of salvation.

Just like the sacrifice on Mt. Ebal, the sacraments of baptism and communion remind us of our salvation. As Christians, we gather to replay the drama again and again. We touch and see and taste, and we remember the sacrifice of Jesus, the One who became a curse for us.

Finally, at Shechem we note the care and priority given to the word of God. The word is written, spoken, and heard. God speaks, and God's people listen. The word is central to life in the land. God spoke to Joshua in chapter 1 and said: "be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left...This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall mediate on it day and night" (Josh. 1:7-8).

I don't think that curses and blessings were read and shouted so that the people would fear doing the wrong thing. The word encouraged them to live by faith, not by sight. They were being reminded that God alone could bless them. God was telling them that if they went their own way and lived life apart from him, then they would experience death. But even that was meant to draw them back to him.

Certainly Israel engaged more than their minds in this exercise. They were learning through repetition. The word was being engraved in their hearts and poured into their souls. They were being drenched with God's voice so that they would not only know the word in their heads, they would know it in their hearts, too. The word would separate them from all the other nations of the world. It manifested the beauty, the glory and the character of God. Israel was affirming with their hearts that they would follow the voice of God.

Imagine what would happen if we came here once a week and simply heard the word of God read for a half an hour. Week after week we would drench our souls in God's truth, young and old, strangers and natives alike. Through sheer repetition of the word our lives would begin to reflect the character of God as the Holy Spirit took that word and made it alive in our hearts. When we sit under the preaching of the word we aren't merely engaging our minds; we are coming with open hearts to listen to God's voice, as his word brings us into his presence.

This beautiful and powerful scene at Shechem speaks to a deep issue. It is saying that life involves more than battles and winning. Life is a mystery not to be solved, but to be embraced and enjoyed. Entrance to the mystery is gained through worship, through sacrament and word, through worship experienced in community. Everything around us speaks to the mystery. We feel it in nature. We read of it in books. We see it in the movies. Poets and philosophers ponder it. We know that there is something wonderful out there, but we don't know how to grasp it, because sin has caused a great disconnect in our souls and emotions. But Shechem is

the place where we reconnect. Worship is at the heart of life in the land.

Growing up as a child in the Midwest, I was filled with a sense of awe and wonder. I would spend summer nights lying in the grass, staring up at the heavens, listening, dreaming, sensing there was something out there. Now I can see that most of my early years were a journey in which I tried to connect to this mystery. But I was doing this in all the wrong ways. In college, I would come home from the bars and stay up until the early hours of the morning, reading Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson, the great poets of the romantic age. Their words expressed what I was desperate to feel. I could hear it also in the words to the music of the '60's and '70's. There was something out there that I was missing.

Then I became a Christian, and a lot of things began to become clear. New truth helped me to see life with a sense of freshness. But after awhile, the old aches and longings returned. I felt if I tried harder and won more of these battles, then I would solve what was behind my desire to connect all of my emotions and all of my heart. I was trying to control my feelings with religion and law, but it didn't work. Six years ago, through some difficult times, God allowed me to connect with the mystery that I sensed as a boy, a teenager, a college student and a parent. The sense of wonder and awe returned. But this time it was not a vague and abstract experience; it was the voice of the Father. And I began to be content with the mystery. I realized that this was not something to be solved, but embraced. I connected not with my mind, but my heart. I could relate to the words of C. S. Lewis, "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else."

We are part of a great mystery: the mystery of God, the mystery of Christ in us, the hope of glory. We are a part of a great love affair: God calling to us, longing for us, and we longing for him. The Bible begins with the mystery of creation and ends with mystery of revelation. This cannot be reduced to a formula. It can't be figured out and articulated in a theological statement. It cannot be grasped through winning battles. God is not a manageable deity. He cannot be tamed. Shechem is the place where we enter into this mystery: worship, word, sacrament. It is the place where God becomes the center, where we enjoy him and he enjoys us, where he loves us and we love him. What will our lives mean if we build companies, found churches or win battles, but never enter into the mystery and connect with all of our heart and soul to the deep things of God? When we are lying on our death bed, our record of wins and losses in battles won't matter. What will matter then is whether we know the heart of God.

But that is not easy. We cry our eyes out at movies that touch our deep desires, our longings and pain, but we feel none of these things in church. The difficult thing is to be able to connect all of our deep longings

with God. And yet that is what God wants. More than anything else, he wants his people to sit in his presence and experience this mystery. This is the sweetest thing in life—but it doesn't make sense.

In "Gideon," a play written by a Brooklyn Jew named Paddy Chayefsky, there is a scene in which

Gideon is out in the desert, in his tent, a thousand miles from nowhere, feeling deserted and rejected by God. One night, God breaks into his tent and Gideon is seduced, ravished, overcome, burnt by the wild fire of God's love. He is up all night, pacing back and forth in his tent. Finally dawn comes, and Gideon in his Brooklyn Jewish accent cries out, "God, Oh God, all night long I've thought of nuttin' but You, nuttin' but You. I'm caught up in the raptures of love. God, I want to take You into my tent, wrap You up, and keep You all to myself. God, hey, God, tell me that you love me." God answers "I love you, Gideon."

"Yeh, tell me again, God."

"I love you, Gideon."

Gideon scratches his head. "I don't understand. Why? Why do You love?"

And God scratches His head and answers, "I really don't know. Sometimes, My Gideon, passion is unreasonable." (Brennan Manning, quoted in Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* [Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995] pp. 104-105).

This is the kind of mystery that John Donne is referring to in his poem,

*Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you 'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.*

At Shechem, God invites us to enjoy this unreasonable, irrational mystery. He wants to ravish us. He wants us to reconnect with all of our hearts to him. When we gather in community we are coming into his presence. There is no formula, just mystery. It is the work of the Spirit. Word and sacrament become our means of worship. Our senses come alive as we act out the drama of our salvation and hear God's word pour over our souls.

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