**Sneak Attack**

**Joshua 8:1-35 (ESV)**

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It was a battle between two forces that would eventually reshape civilization. A ruler named Philip II was leading Macedonia to conquer some Greek city-states. He was joined by his talented teenage son. He was a personal pupil of Aristotle and was now eager for war. At one point in the fight, the Greeks gained control. The Macedonians turned and began to run, but not everything was as it would seem. In a flash, Philip and his young son performed what some believe is one of the earliest reported examples of this technical military maneuver called a feigned retreat. It’s where they pretend to run away and they purposefully allow the enemy to take ground, only to swiftly change direction and slice through the enemy lines in an expert ambush. The Greeks are caught off guard and defeated. Sometime after this triumph, Philip was voted to attack the Persian Empire. But before he could do so, he was assassinated. Thus, the kingdom and campaign passed on to his young son, who goes on to be an incredibly successful military commander who is undefeated in battle and reigned over one of the largest empires of all time, merely by the age of 30. We know him as Alexander the Great. But long before Alexander performed his ambush, another legendary leader executed a similar maneuver in an operation no one saw coming.

Joshua is at a low point. He has led God’s people into this long-awaited Promised Land that is filled with enemies. He has done so by faith. For four hundred years, God endured the evil of these nations in Canaan, but the time has come for them to be removed. Enough children have been callously sacrificed on the altar of idols. Enough vulnerable blood has been cruelly shed in violence. Enough depraved sexual rituals have been flaunted in public view. The city of Jericho had become so twisted and corrupted by evil that even when faced with the miraculous proof that Yahweh was God, even when given longsuffering opportunities to repent, she chose to stubbornly defy His rule and refuse His mercy. Sin was entrenched and wickedness was so resolute, God devoted everything within this city to destruction. Not one token of plunder was to be taken. And that’s where things went wrong.

A single soldier named Achan took some of the spoil and buried it beneath his tent. That unnoticed act of treachery led to a small city named Ai defeating Israel and chasing them away with ease. The superior force of Israel was resisted by pathetic opponents. The damage is such that the momentum has been entirely reversed. All of the people of the land had had hearts that were melted. Now, it’s God’s people whose hearts are melted. And in this failure, no lesson stands out more than the fact that without Yahweh, God’s people are hopeless. Now, by God’s grace, in chapter 7 they deal with the problem, but it’s not without pain. Thirty-six lives were lives lost on the battlefield of humiliation, and the haunting stench of burnt flesh beneath scorched stones was wafting from the gorge. It was their valley of Achor, the valley of trouble. It’s a low point. They have to face Ai again. The king is still smiling after his victory. Today we review one truth that Joshua knows and the king of Ai does not. It’s something we would do well to take to heart. The most important, the most critical, the most decisive factor in any battle is never human, but divine. Joshua knows that once you begin to factor in Yahweh, things are not always as they would seem.

Is it fair to say that many of us are at a kind of low point? Over the past several months, our world has flipped upside down. Have you at least for a moment had a feeling, a sense, a fear that evil has the upper hand? Have you ever hit a low point where it seems like the momentum for good is lost, like danger is imminent, like hope and safety are slowly disappearing? Perhaps, just perhaps, things are not what they may seem. That’s a truth we have to trust by faith. It’s the only way to experience true safety and peace. It’s the only way to truly succeed. Grasp unshakeable hope that good will win, trusting that things are not always as they seem.

There is only one God, and it’s not us. The final outcome of our victory or safety is ultimately up to Him. And through Him, there is more than meets the eye. Flooded rivers can be crossed. Stone fortresses can collapse. Momentum can be reversed. Things are not always as they seem. Living by faith in that fact is the only way to face challenges with courage. That kind of faith has benefits for the people who would trust God. In chapter 8, we’re going to try to draw four benefits of faith to help us face these low points with courage. Four benefits of living by faith.

**1. The grace that people of faith can embrace.**

This is the steadfast grace we can grab hold of and trust. It’s that undeserved kindness that is consistently given to us by God.

It was two nights ago that I was trying to help my three year old daughter get her pajamas on. She had these little pink pants and this little gray top with a blue heart on it. That night, she decided she wanted to do it on her own. Have you ever had that happen? Whether it’s with seatbelts or tying shoes or riding a bike, little kids say, “I do it myself.” It’s a good reminder that quarantine with kids is not easy. We need to pray for the moms. Everyone has challenges, but this certainly is a challenge because here is a child saying, “I do it myself,” but she can’t even get her arms through the little sleeves. It keeps getting stuck on her two bouncing pigtails. (Laughter!) And eventually, she gets exasperated. She says, “I can’t do it. I need help.” So I started to help her get one arm through, then she pulls away and says, “I do it myself,” and she tries again. Finally frustrated, she comes with defeated eyes and just puts her hand on my arm and says, “Please help.” So I help her get the shirt over the pigtails, pull it down, and I noticed next to that blue heart is stitched in the phrase that says, “Daddy loves me.” Then she whispers out, “Thank you,” and kind of just scampers down the hall.

Little kids are utterly dependent, but they want to act as if they aren’t. And aren’t we so like that? We try to do things on our own without God and we get in mess after mess. We get defeated doing things on our own. And even if our patience as parents is tested, the steadfast grace of God is consistent. He never gives up on His children. Faith remembers that we’re not our own. God is faithful to grant steadfast grace to keep us moving. We see that grace available to Joshua, here. We see gifts of grace that we also can lay hold of. First, look at the comfort that God offers.

***1*** *And the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not fear and do not be dismayed.*

This is comfort when we need it at those pivotal moments. He’s coming from a hard defeat and going into a hard battle. He’s going from the valley of Achor into the valley of Ai, and God offers him comfort. Don’t be afraid and don’t be dismayed.” This is a gift of grace.

After what happened with Achan, it might have been all over. “God is not with us anymore!” And yet, God is so steadfast in what He has promised. He has not left. He gives the same encouragement from Joshua chapter 1 that has been consistent with His people since the beginning of Genesis. Don’t we need to hear God’s comfort sometimes? It’s the grace of steadfast comfort that says at pivotal moments, you’re at a low point, but don’t fear and don’t be dismayed.

Maybe you’re at a low point where you’re experiencing all that isolation and the loneliness and you haven’t handled it all that well. Maybe you’ve lashed out in frustration at the restrictions and the cancellations. Or maybe you’ve grumbled about the harsh words and thoughtless insensitivity of others, whether in person or online. Maybe you’re criticizing the lack of empathy or interaction that you’ve received from people you thought would understand. Or maybe you’re carrying the weight of a past sin or shame or caving into despair. You say, “I’ve come today and I don’t want to give in to that. I want to believe and acknowledge by faith that things aren’t always what they seem and God’s grace is available to His own through comfort. Don’t fear. Don’t be dismayed. Look at how that grace often arrives through the commitments that God affirms. It often comes in the form of words, of simply repeated past promises. God says to Joshua,

*Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land.*

God reaffirms the commitment He has made in the past. This is actually nothing new. This is the same old promise. It’s the commitment He made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joshua. Israel may have lost the skirmish, but there is a difference between a battle and a war. Sin, even amongst God’s people, cannot stop the advance of God’s plan. And God reaffirms the simple commitments He has made in the past. When we hit those low points, sometimes we feel like we need something new. We feel like we need either a word from some family member or a friend or social media or even some help from a physician. Or we seek a mystical message that is new. We’re looking somewhere for something to help us move forward. The steadfast grace of God comes through comfort, but often through just His past commitments, His past promises. It comes through Scripture that just reaffirms what God says He will do. And we look third, at the clarity God gives. He gives clarity over moral decisions that we face.

***2*** *And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves.*

He draws the line where it should be. And this is one of the most important graces God gives. He clarifies morally what is ahead, what we’re to do. We know His desire for us and we see that God had made that clear in Jericho. No spoil was to be taken, and Achan crossed that line. And here, God gives clarity. But in this situation He says you can take the spoil. It’s surprising the grace God offers here because we think if Israel has overstepped the bounds, maybe God would make His commands stricter. Maybe He would have even greater warnings and requirements. And yet, God in His grace allows them to take the spoil and livestock. He provides for them graciously. He could have taken that gift away, but He speaks with grace and He gives clarity about what He expects. And here, we’re sort of reminded of the deceit of sin. If Achan had only waited just a few days, he could have had all the treasure he could carry. We doubt God’s goodness and His blessing, but sometimes we’re just missing the timing or the manner, recognizing God is so generous and kind, but we have to do things the way that He specifies. And He is clear about that.

He is especially clear in moral situations that we face. He gives food and rest and recreation and work and intimacy. And He gives clarity over how these are to be enjoyed. Perhaps right now, you’re struggling to really trust the clarity that God has given. You’re looking for joy on a different path. We’re reminded that path leads to sorrow. Whether we’re wrestling with sinful habits in overeating or under eating, or struggling with sinfully oversleeping or under sleeping, or maybe we’re binging on entertainment or movies or some kind of video game, or maybe we’re neglecting the work that is ahead of us to do or maybe we’re overworking, seeking to put out fires or to boost our reputation. Maybe we’re looking for intimacy through some sinful means outside of the spouse God has given us. There are so many good gifts to enjoy, but we have to embrace the clarity that God has given us in His Word about when and how they’re to be enjoyed. God is so gracious to give us what we need. The comfort He offers at pivotal moments, the commitments He affirms through Scriptural reassurances, the clarity He gives in moral decisions, is grace available to us.

Now, I’ve experienced low points in the last couple of weeks, to be sure. But it’s at these moments that we need to remember things are not always as they seem and to trust what God is giving us through His grace. But if we walk by faith, not only do we receive grace, but we can look at

**2. The guidance we can expect.**

There is sovereign guidance we can expect and we can be ready to receive. This is guidance and direction that comes from God.

One of the things that I always loved about South Africa were the beautiful game parks. They take you in these open-air jeeps. You’re outside and can see elephants and zebra and warthogs and baboons and cape buffalo and giraffes, hyenas, lions. But this is the thing. You don’t drive yourself. You’re driven by a guide. These guides are not like the Disneyland guides who tell you jokes to keep you awake. These are guides in Africa that tell you advice to keep you alive. And you’re secure because they tell you exactly what you need to know and then they personally walk you back to your tent to make sure you get in safely. When those guides give instruction, when they tell you to be quiet because a predator is nearby, you need to stay sharp with readiness to follow as they lead.

What kind of guidance should we be expecting from God? As you look at the next section of the story, there are a few features that are typical of God’s guidance that we can expect. The first is how much God guides. The extent to which He guides us is as much as we need. He guides us exactly as much as we need. If you look at the end of verse 2, God gave specific guidance. He says

*Lay an ambush against the city behind it.”*

Sometimes He gives specific strategy and sometimes He lets Joshua work it out. Here, He gives some guidance. Lay an ambush. It’s what Joshua needs. But how is this ambush to be carried out? What about the details? Well there is not only the extent to which God guides, but there is also the instrument by which God guides. How God guides is often through the people God has placed in those positions. The guidance that God offers is often through the people He has placed in authority. The instrument He uses is often very ordinary and normal. You see Joshua gather the men and unpack the strategy in verses 3-9. He takes the guidance that God has given and then he starts to unfold it the best he can.

***3*** *So Joshua and all the fighting men arose to go up to Ai. And Joshua chose 30,000 mighty men of valor and sent them out by night.* ***4*** *And he commanded them, “Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you remain ready.* ***5*** *And I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out against us just as before, we shall flee before them.* ***6*** *And they will come out after us, until we have drawn them away from the city. For they will say, ‘They are fleeing from us, just as before.’ So we will flee before them.* ***7*** *Then you shall rise up from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will give it into your hand.* ***8*** *And as soon as you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire. You shall do according to the word of the LORD. See, I have commanded you.”* ***9*** *So Joshua sent them out. And they went to the place of ambush and lay between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai, but Joshua spent that night among the people.*

He chooses to send a medium sized force behind Ai. Then he puts a smaller force over to prevent Bethel from coming to help Ai. And then he joins the major body of the people up in front of Ai to sort of lay the trap as the bait. This is the guidance that Joshua starts to unfold for the people and they respond to him as a leader that God has given. We can see just a few examples of the kind of leaders that we do long to be under and that we long to become. If you’re in a position of influence, there are some qualities that mark these kinds of leaders as ready to help guide God’s people. You see Joshua first, is strategically prepared. He is carrying out the details of God’s intent and he works it out to the best of his ability. You see him working it out, forming a plan, communicating it to the best of his abilities.

He is prepared, but especially we see that he is physically present. He is staying involved. After that hard defeat last time, you would think Joshua might just stay back to be safe, but he chooses to go and to be a part of the dangerous party right in the front, to sort of be the bait in front of the king of Ai. We see in verse 9 and in verse 13 that he spent that night among the people. He spends that night in the valley. He was there. He was present right in the crosshairs of the enemy. And then we see that he is proactive. He is sacrificially proactive, leading the way.

***10*** *Joshua arose early in the morning and mustered the people and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai.* ***11*** *And all the fighting men who were with him went up and drew near before the city and encamped on the north side of Ai, with a ravine between them and Ai.* ***12*** *He took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city.* ***13*** *So they stationed the forces, the main encampment that was north of the city and its rear guard west of the city. But Joshua spent that night in the valley.*

He rises early in the morning, mustering the people, leading them into the battle, taking the vulnerable position. There he is. He is prepared, present and proactive, working it out, staying involved, leading the way. This is often a way that God’s guidance unfolds. It’s through the people that He has placed in those positions. They are not perfect, to be sure. And yet, we need to be careful that we recognize that God places people in positions. It sobers us to recognize the weight that those leaders carry and the impact that their mistakes and weaknesses make. We need to pray for our leaders because their job is not easy. It’s not easy at all! In particular for church leaders, it is very difficult right now to be present. Praise God for opportunities that we have, but thank you for praying and seeking to make it at least in some part, easier to be present, whether reaching out with one another or sharing a need. Those are incredibly helpful at a time when it’s so difficult to be present and we need to be. Please pray for us.

We see the instrument through which God’s guidance is often unfolded through the people He has placed in those positions. But we also see the moment His guidance arrives. The moment is right when we need it. It may feel late, but it is precisely on time. The battle unfolds in verses 14-17. The king of Ai sees Joshua with his people, but he doesn’t know about the ambush, and he takes the bait.

***14*** *And as soon as the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the men of the city, hurried and went out early to the appointed place toward the Arabah to meet Israel in battle. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city.* ***15*** *And Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them and fled in the direction of the wilderness.*

This is a very vulnerable position. It’s dangerous because the pretended defeat can actually become a true defeat. So they’re running and fleeing and every single man leaves Ai.

***16*** *So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were drawn away from the city.* ***17*** *Not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open and pursued Israel.*

The bait is taken and it’s the most dangerous position they could be in. When is the moment God is going to give guidance? Here in verse 18, not a moment too soon or too late, God gives clear guidance.

***18*** *Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.*

God’s guidance arrives at the moment, exactly when you need it! And what follows is the ambush rising.

***19*** *And the men in the ambush rose quickly out of their place, and as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it. And they hurried to set the city on fire.*

They actually enter the city while the army is charging out and they light it on fire, and the smoke rises. As Joshua and his men turn and see the smoke rising from the city, the king of Ai turns and they see. “Uh oh! I think we’ve been had.”

***20*** *So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that, for the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers.* ***21*** *And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.*

God’s guidance comes at the exact moment and we can trust His timing. We can trust not only His timing, but His intent. This is why God guides. The intent His guidance serves is to bring Himself the greatest glory. It’s to show how great He is. In verse 2, God is the one who sets the trap. And God in verse 18 is the one who springs the trap. And in verse 18 it says

***18*** *Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.”*

The focus in this text is Joshua’s hand. That’s where Ai is given. It’s into his hand. It’s the hand that stretches out the javelin. It’s the hand that secures the victory. It’s how the ambush is triggered. But the whole point is not merely His hand, but that the plan, the direction, the victory are all results of God’s word. He is the one ultimately as the decisive factor.

We look at all the events swirling around us and we might wonder why is God guiding things the way that He is? Why is He waiting for this timing? Why is He using that person? Is He giving us enough guidance? You can trust the intent that God has and that He is guiding things so that it becomes inescapably obvious that it’s not some kind of advisor’s hand who saves us from financial ruin. Or it’s not some kind of pastor’s hand that saves a church from foolish decisions. Or it’s not some kind of doctor’s hand that saves us from an illness. Or it’s not a politician’s hand that saves us from some kind of crisis. There is only one hand strong enough, one heart good enough, one will wise enough to accomplish the exact salvation we need. The battle javelin, the surgeon’s scalpel, the ballpoint pen are serving the grand intent of bringing glory to the only hand who can truly save. And all things are working toward that end. This is the sovereign guidance we can expect. It is sufficient to our need and through authorities He has placed us under. It comes precisely when we need it and is strategically to bring Him the most glory, and we’re ready for that.

We recognize that the kind of guidance God gives is not from far away, but it’s up close. We have a leader who guides us not from a distance, but through sandals on the ground. He came to us; God as a man. He is not unaware of our weaknesses, our grief and our sorrows. He is well acquainted. He worked out the Scriptures, growing in wisdom as a young child, stayed involved in our world, deeply acquainted with grief. He led the way of righteousness, ultimately sacrificing Himself. He was not only washing the grimy dirt off of our sweaty feet, but laying down His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. And He is the one who continues to guide all who are ready to follow Him.

So not only do we see the steadfast grace that we can embrace and the guidance that God gives that we can expect, but if we walk by faith there is

**3. The solemn judgment that we can beware**

It’s the judgment that we can beware with fear.

One of the most interesting parts of the venus flytrap is how it uses nectar like bait to attract flies. It has some bristles that the flies brush up against. The thing is, that the flies come and they brush the bristle once and nothing happens. But it seems to send a signal down to the plant that it’s ready. When the fly brushes it a second time, that’s when the signal goes and the trap snaps shut.

It’s one of the things that is so sobering about sin and God’s judgment over sin. He doesn’t tempt us, but as we’re tempted we step into a sin. The first time around, often we don’t get burned. We think it’s safe. It’s okay. But trusting that things are not always as they seem, trusting by faith in what God warns us of, there is a judgment we can beware and we don’t get lulled into the trap. There are some sober warnings about God’s judgment that we can heed if we believe Him. The first is the false illusion God allows evil to believe. It’s the illusion of escaping judgment. It’s the illusion of undeniable victory even in sin.

That’s what lures the king of Ai out into battle. He has conquered. He has escaped judgment. He wasn’t afraid. “I defeated Israel. I think I’m okay.” And he actually hurries out to battle. He is ready to take on Israel, totally unaware of the ambush. He is completely committed to his victory over God.

***16*** *So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were drawn away from the city.* ***17*** *Not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open and pursued Israel.*

They are all in to their sin. For some people, past failure leaves them paralyzed. And for others, past victory makes them reckless. They think, “I can keep doing this.” And that’s what happens here. Ai is committed to the illusion and overconfidence that he can trust his own strength.

Chapter 8 begins with God telling Joshua not to be afraid, even though Joshua has a superior force. If he were to trust what he saw maybe he would think, “I can take Ai.” But Joshua recognizes that things aren’t always what they seem. “I need God. If I don’t have God, we’re going to lose.” Ai is the opposite. The king there thinks, “I’ve already conquered Him once. I can do it again. I can defeat Yahweh.”

At the end of chapter 7, we realize that the reality that was at stake was spiritual. And there was a change that happened at the end of chapter 7. They dealt with the spiritual need and a switch or restoration has taken place. But in chapter 8 verse 1, we see that it takes some time for spiritual realities to sink in. Joshua recognizes that he believes what God tells him; Ai thinks he’s got it made. We see a sober warning that especially when we think we’re okay and our strength is sufficient and we won’t suffer judgment, we need to beware. We can’t outsmart God.

We need to beware not only the illusion, but also the destruction it brings. It is the full destruction God ordains for evil to face. What Ai thought to be a certain victory is actually certain defeat. Jericho had a whole week to watch and prepare for the destruction, but Ai doesn’t even see it coming. The ambush is upon them. They look back and see the smoke of the city rising up, but it’s too late. The home and the battle have been lost. And with swiftness, they meet the edge of the sword.

***22*** *And the others came out from the city against them, so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side. And Israel struck them down, until there was left none that survived or escaped.* ***23*** *But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him near to Joshua.*

***24*** *When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword.* ***25*** *And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai.* ***26*** *But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction.* ***27*** *Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the LORD that he commanded Joshua.* ***28*** *So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day.* ***29*** *And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.*

This is solemn judgment and it signifies no compromise with the enemy. There is no compromise! They’re going to follow what God says. These are people who Israel hasn’t judged or condemned and decided that they are worthy of this fate, but God has. He had over four hundred years of patience in the deepest of evil and they are resilient in not choosing to follow God. So judgment falls, and it’s very, very sobering. It’s gruesome, even. These are solemn images meant to strike fear into the hearts of everyone who watched, that there would be a sudden and comprehensive destruction. God takes sin seriously and we feel the gravity of it. We heed those warnings. This is how sin is. It lulls us into complacency and God uses these kinds of warning to wake us up. There will be a time of judgment. Living by faith helps us remember that things are not always as they seem and we beware that judgment.

These are not easy passages. Some of us come from churches where there is preaching on judgment and fire and brimstone. The Bible is far more than a book about mere judgment, but it is not less. It is an unavoidable part of the story, but praise God, it is only a part. We can see the judgment here, but we don’t miss the mercy that He has extended and continues to extend. Judgment is not the final word. Even in the last chapter, the valley of Achor or trouble, God would later say through the prophet Hosea that in the valley of Achor, trouble, God will open up a door of hope. In the midst of the judgment, there is a way of salvation.

The king of Ai deserved to be cursed, but he wasn’t the only man to be hung on a tree in a gruesome public fashion. There was another man who died hanging on a tree, cursed by all, removed quickly before sunset, buried in a tomb, covered with a stone, but He didn’t deserve it. He did it on behalf of His people. Only that stone does not stand there to this day. That tomb is empty! There is a way of salvation and mercy, and that is the ultimate ambush upon evil; God triumphing over death through death. It appeared evil had triumphed, but it was through the apparent defeat that true victory was secured. God’s way seemed foolish and weak, but it’s on purpose, to show that surpassing glory belongs to Him. He faced the judgment that we deserve so we could enjoy the favor that He deserved. The good news about Jesus Christ seems so foolish and weak, but we point people towards a Savior and remind them every day that things are not always as they seem. That is how we are able to beware this kind of judgment. And last, the benefit of living by faith is

**4. The glory we can ascribe.**

This is sincere glory; giving praise to God in worship.

There are a few commitments that we see here that true worshipers will take on to ascribe God glory. It’s what worship looks like. First, we do what He says. If you look at verses 30-35, right at the beginning, there is a careful adherence to God’s will. An altar is built.

***30*** *At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal,*

This is out of the way.

***31*** *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.*

So Israel goes off the campaign trail, takes time out to give careful adherence to God’s will, and they build an altar. It’s a key moment where they choose to adhere to God’s will. And then we see that not only they do what God says, but they trust who He is. Upon that altar, they place sacrifices. The second commitment is that they have a clear, not only an adherence to His will, but a reliance upon His love. They offer two kinds of sacrifices; burnt offerings as an atonement for sin, but also peace offerings as a reminder of the relationship that they hope in and can enjoy. They do all of this trusting that God in some way has promised that relationship can actually exist between God and man. Some kind of sacrifice will make a way. They acknowledge that they’re relying on God’s love to accomplish that.

He made a promise that this would be possible and He accomplishes it ultimately through His own Lamb as a sacrifice. The chosen one that is to come, the Messiah, is Jesus, the Christ. He is the basis of our worship in life. Yes, we want to do what God says, but it’s because we trust who He is and we rely upon His love that He has provided through this sacrifice. We see where that leads is that we seek what He wants. The third commitment is complete allegiance to His way. It’s allegiance to His way. We want to do what God wants.

***32*** *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.*

Here is what God has said. It’s the way that we’re to live.

***33*** *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.*

There are two mountains next to each other; Ebal and Gerizim. The Israelites split and they stand there. This is a strong stand of allegiance and commitment. This is what God wants. There is no neutral. They’re in half, just like Moses had instructed. They choose allegiance with Yahweh. It’s a decisive moment where everyone around can see who they stand for. As worshipers, we need to take those stands at times. There are decisive moments and opportunities where we show the world this is who we stand for. We will seek what God wants. We trust who He is and we’ll do what He says. And last, we see that we heed how He speaks. Our fourth commitment is a convinced reverence for His Word. You see in verses 34-35 that Scripture is read. Here they are. There are two mountains and they’re standing in a valley in between

***34*** *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.*

He read the blessing and the curse which God had given. If Israel were to obey, then they would enjoy blessing. If they were to disobey, then they would experience the curse. He read them all right there, after this sober valley that they just went through and saw God keeping His Word. He read those words from the Book of the Law. And here’s the key in verse 35.

***35*** *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.*

He read all the words, and there was not a person who was not there. They heed how God speaks with a reverence for His Word. They don’t treat it lightly. They’re committed. They gather and they listen to God. It’s the kind of reverence that we seek to build into the culture of our church, but also our families. It’s that we take God’s Word seriously, even down to the little ones. Do you think there were some little ones wiggling? Do you think they were wiggling as they tried to listen? That’s a long section of Scripture. But to the best of their ability, they were sober-minded. After what they had just gone through, they recognize, “We will give God reverence. We will heed. This is how He speaks. This is the people that we are. We ascribe God glory through listening to Him.

In the middle of these two mountains, there is a valley. But this is far from the valley of Achor, the valley of trouble. This is a different valley, and there is a little city named Shechem. This little city, Shechem, is actually where this book is going to end. Joshua is going to gather all the people of Israel there at Shechem. It’s a decisive point where there is no neutral. You must decide! Are you going to believe in what God has said? This place, Shechem, is a special place. That’s where God promised Abraham in Genesis 12,

**Genesis 12:6-7** Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Later in Genesis 35, God told Jacob,

**Genesis 35:1-4** God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem.

It’s a significant place where a stand is taken. And here, in Joshua chapter 24, at the very end, we’re going to come back here. Here is a sneak peek, a preview. In Joshua 24, he gathers all of the tribes of Israel to Shechem. They all gather, and that’s where Joshua would say in that moment,

**Joshua 24:14-15** “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

There is idolatry all over the place. Everything that would seem the way it is here. But he says there is a God above who reigns, named Yahweh. Things are not always as they seem. You choose who you want to serve. As for me, I will serve Yahweh. As for me and my house, we’ll serve the Lord. And the people commit.

**Joshua 24:16** Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods,

They’re the ones who say, “God, we’ll obey.”

It was some time ago that my wife, Janea, was a teaching aid for a pre-k class. They had their little moment and they were reciting some songs and some verses. They were really cute, but they’re kind of little rascals. They’re reciting these verses and one of them ended with them sort of shouting out, “We will do everything the Lord has said. We will obey.” They were quoting back from here. And even as they’re saying it, they’re pushing each other and complaining and kind of pulling each other’s shirts. All the parents just laughed because it’s not real. They’re saying that, but we know their guarantee isn’t really worth much. At this point, we see Israel is making a commitment. They’re moving forward. It’s celebrated. And they’re going to try to do it again. But we realize the story never ends there.

The commitments of men fail. We know they will. They’re not secure. Our hope is not in our own commitments, in our own ability to ascribe worship to God in glory. We know that ultimately, it’s been perfectly given through another. It comes through a guarantee that comes through a man who fulfilled the law perfectly, who died as a sacrifice on behalf of all that we might live. He is a God who makes guarantees and says “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” He is a man who is the promise, the God-man Jesus Christ. It’s through Him that the greatest ambush took place and ultimately that the victory will be secured. He is the God-man who rules over the serpent and we await that by faith. As much as people would accuse us or condemn us or mock us for what we believe, and potentially even attack, we know the only way to enjoy the benefits of that good news is to live by faith and to trust that we’re safe in the knowledge that things are not always as they seem.