



ALTAR OF UNCUT STONE

The world is a place of polar opposites, in some respects at least. That doesn't mean it's always as black and white as some people think (the world is complex, especially where human beings are concerned). But there are hundreds of opposites, in the natural world, and the supernatural.

And regarding that last one, it's vital that we recognise it.

Joshua 8:30-35

Joshua here does what Moses had commanded needed to be done, before he died (Deuteronomy 27:1-8). Now it might sound strange to 21st century ears, but Joshua is presenting us with a picture, a very binary one. Not just of Israel, but of the whole world.

We've got:

1) 2 hills. According to ch8, Joshua picks out 2 hills. A hill in the south, and a hill in the north:

- South is Mt Gerizim, a fertile hill with olive and fig trees, and springs of water: a place of blessing.
- North is Mt Ebal, a barren, rocky hill (*Ebal* is actually the Hebrew for 'bald'): a place of cursing.

Between them is Shechem (interestingly, a city that the Israelites *didn't* besiege. Did the Shechemites surrender to the God of Israel, as Rahab did?

Are they the foreigners mentioned in this chapter? It's a possibility). This is where the Ark of the Covenant – that OT symbol of God's presence – is situated. The hills either side are a picture of 2 states of being, of 2 spiritual locations. Breaking it down, these hills can mean different things:

- Blessing and curse
- Good and evil
- Life and death
- Obedience and rebellion
- Truth and lie
- Freedom and slavery
- Salvation and condemnation
- Positive and negative
- Heaven and hell

Whatever the words, you're either on one hill or the other.

2) 2 groups. The nation of Israel is split into 2: 6 tribes stand on the slopes of one hill, 6 tribes on the other. And the Levites read out God's blessings and curses, as prescribed in Deuteronomy, and the groups respond with a loud 'Amen!' or 'Yes!' to whichever one applies to their particular hill (bit of a bummer for those on Ebal).

What's the point? It's a very physical way of saying, "Israel has a choice: to live in relationship with God, or live outside of it." Because not everyone in Israel was truly Israel. Hey, there were non-Israelites like Rahab who were more Israel than Israel was!

And what was true of Israel is true of the entire human race. Everyone has the potential to be a part of God's people, but we also have the potential to not be. The warning signs are flashed up throughout the Bible. He calls us all, but the decision as to which mountain we stand on is our decision to make.

It's our choice.

3) 2 sets of stone. On top of Mt Ebal are:

- Tablets of whitewashed stone, bearing the *Torah*, the Law of Moses, or the 10 commandments at least.
- An altar of uncut stone (as per the requirements in Exodus 20:25).

Let's think about that a bit more. The Law of Moses is a reminder of what righteousness means to God, but also how we all fall short of that. It's not a bad thing, it's a good one, but it doesn't provide us with the help we need, especially when we mess things up.

The altar, on the other hand, is a reminder of how we are loved. In what way? It's a symbol of sacrifice and reconciliation; it's in a place of failure and curse; and it's made up of these uncut stones. Why uncut stones? Because

salvation is not about our attempts at righteousness, about our efforts, or what we bring to the table. It's about the grace of God.

To be precise, it's about Jesus.

Just like that altar, Jesus came to us where we are, in our place of sin and failure, rather than expecting us to come to Him. And He offered Himself, on a cross, a symbol of shame, to atone for that failure, to carry our curse and make us the people we need to be – to take us from Ebal to Gerizim. And this is important, because many of us have been told, or have told ourselves, "If I'm good enough or strong enough or busy enough or successful enough or prayerful enough or worthy enough, then God will love me."

And it's a lie.

We cannot save ourselves; we cannot make ourselves what God deserves us to be; we can never be 'enough.' I don't mean to sound negative: on the contrary, this is a *positive* message! Because this is why we all need Jesus.

Because He is the only one who could ever be 'enough.'

Gathering At The Altar

Why this ceremony? Because the Gentiles needed to hear it. And as a light to the Gentiles, Israel had to hear it, too.

But it was also important for Israel itself. There would be numerous times in their history when they would forget the hill they were meant to be standing on. Now I don't believe we can lose our salvation, but we can wander from where God wants us to be; or tell ourselves we're Christians because our parents are or because we do this 'church' thing. Whatever the context, we all need an altar; we all need the cross.

In the words of one of my favourite hymns:

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!*

*Oh, precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know;
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!*

Let's be quiet for a moment, and in our minds approach that ultimate altar of uncut stone. And as we do, let's acknowledge our mistakes, and just as importantly, that our attempts at righteousness are not enough.

But Jesus is.