

# The Christian (Church) Lives by God's Word

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our focus today from Joshua 8 is on the Word of God in the life of the people of God. And so I wanted to begin reading from Matthew 4, where we read of Jesus' response to temptation with the Word of God.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, if you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.

Jesus answered, it is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

So let's hear God's Word. Then the Lord said to Joshua, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged.

Take the whole army with you and go up and attack Ai.

For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its kings as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves.

[ 1 : 17 ] Set an ambush behind the city. So Joshua and the whole army moved out to attack Ai. He chose 30,000 of his best fighting men and sent them out at night with these orders.

Listen carefully. You are to set an ambush behind the city. Don't go very far from it. All of you be on the alert. I and all those with me will advance on the city.

And when the men come out against us as they did before, we will flee from them. They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say they're running away from us as they did before. So when we flee from them, you are to rise up from ambush and take the city.

The Lord your God will give it into your hand. When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the Lord has commanded. See to it you have my orders. Then Joshua sent them off and they went to the place of ambush and lay in wait between Bethel and Ai to the west of Ai.

But Joshua spent that night with the people. Early the next morning, Joshua mustered his army and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai. The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it.

[ 2 : 27 ] They set up camp north of Ai with the valley between them and the city. Joshua had taken about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai to the west of the city.

So the soldiers took up their positions with the main camp to the north of the city and ambushed to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley. When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah.

But he did not know that an ambush had been set against him behind the city. Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before them and they fled towards the wilderness. All the men of Ai were called to pursue them and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city.

Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel. They left the city open and went in pursuit of Israel. Then the Lord said to Joshua, hold out towards Ai the javelin that's in your hand. For into your hand I will deliver the city. So Joshua held out towards the city the javelin that was in his hand. As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward.

[ 3 : 35 ] They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire. The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising up into the sky. But they had no chance to escape in any direction.

The Israelites who had been fleeing towards the wilderness had turned back against their pursuers. For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going

up from the city, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai.

Those in the ambush also came out of the city against them, so they were caught in the middle with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving neither survivors nor fugitives. But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua.

When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it.

Twelve thousand men and women fell that day, all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who had lived in Ai.

[ 4 : 38 ] But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the Lord had instructed Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day.

He impaled the body of the king of Ai on a pole and left it there until evening. At sunset Joshua ordered them to take the body from the pole and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day. Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, 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.

There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on stones a copy of the law of Moses. 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.

[ 5 : 43 ] 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.

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. 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.

So there's a lengthy reading there about the second time Israel goes to battle against Ai. But our point this evening is that the Christian and the Christian church lives by the word of God.

And I hope we'll see that clearly in our text. But I want to begin with something that you may have watched over the last year or two.

The rise of, as it were, fly-on-the-wall football documentaries. You know, those programmes that usually seem to be on Amazon Prime that follow a team throughout a season.

[ 6 : 57 ] Trying to help viewers to understand what makes this team tick. What kind of manager and leader do they have? How do they prepare for a match? So one of the early ones was Sunderland till I die.

And that was really interesting for giving an insight between the close connection between the city of Sunderland and the team. You know, in a sense to be from Sunderland is to be a follower of the club. And that really became clear.

Another one that we watched was the one about Juventus. You know, very different club Italian. Giants, champions mentality. And it focused on, a lot of the episodes came back to their motto. Fino alla fine. Which means to the end. This is a team who fights and ultimately fights for victory and success. Now, take that idea.

Apply it to what we've been reading in the book of Joshua. Joshua chapters 5 to 8 stands as a window into how the people of God tick.

[ 7 : 57 ] Or how they shoot. They are called to follow God. They are called to fight under God for promised victory.

And if we think of Joshua 5 to 8 giving us a window into the life of the people of God, then the frame. What we have at the beginning of Joshua 5, we have a covenant ceremony.

Reminding them that they are God's people. And it ends, end of chapter 8, with covenant renewal. A reminder that they are God's people. That first and foremost, they are to work on their relationship with God.

The point then is that Israel's life and identity is understood in relation to their God. And between that frame, so chapters 6 and 7 and most of 8, there is a focus on the place of God's word among the people of God.

So last week, chapter 7, we had Achan. And the negative example where Achan didn't listen to God's word and sin and judgment came.

[9:01] Chapters 6 and 8 are different. They are positive examples of hearing and obeying God's word. And success follows. This was not a new message or concept to God's people.

In Deuteronomy 8, verse 3, Moses speaking to the people says, God humbled you to teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And of course, we just listened to Jesus then using those words as he faced temptation. So the key lesson of Joshua 8 is that God's people, the church, are called to live by the word of God.

We'll see that it gives direction for living as God's people, especially thinking about holiness and obedience. We'll see that it gives strength in the spiritual battles that are faced.

And we'll see that the word of God thoroughly helps to maintain and enjoy covenant relationship with God. So let's begin thinking firstly about God's word and direction.

[10:15] And we can see this in the first nine verses. Chapter 8 brings us back to fighting against the people, the city of Ai. There's a very different outcome from the humiliation of last chapter.

Why is that? The difference, if we were to overview the whole story, is that God and his word this time are central. Joshua, as God's chosen leader, is now the central human figure.

There's been a shift. They've come to understand their sin and now they want to be listening to God and obeying. And so if we begin at verse 1, we see God's words.

What does it do for the people? God's word, first of all, reassures them. You know, they've just failed. Judgment has come. Then the Lord said to Joshua, do not be afraid.

Do not be discouraged. The sin of chapter 7 has been dealt with. The judgment has come. And now God has restored them to favor.

[11:16] It restored them to their right relationship. The commander of the Lord who had fought against them at Ai because of their disobedience would now be for them in their obedience.

So God's word gives them reassurance and God's word directs the people of God. And that's so clear in the way this chapter flows.

So, for example, God's word directs who's involved in the battle. Chapter 7, they said, let's just send up a few. There'll be no problem.

This time, send up the whole army. Verse 1, take the whole army with you. What are they to do in this battle is directed by God's word.

Verse 2, you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. How are they to achieve this success in battle is made clear. End of verse 2, set an ambush behind the city.

[12:17] God is directing at every point. And God's word doesn't just direct. God's word also promises. As they go into this battle, as they've been defeated one time, there is a promise in verse 2.

You shall do to Ai as you did to Jericho. Victory will come. And this time, at the hands of a generous God, they are allowed to carry off the plunder and the livestock. The spoils of war that belong to God are now given to his people.

And so from those introductory words, we then see that God's word is obeyed. Here, Joshua comes into focus. And what we see is that Joshua and the whole army moved to attack Ai.

We see that Joshua sets that ambush. So the main army is in one place. And then the ambush lies to the west. And in verse 8, significant words.

Do what the Lord has commanded. That's what the army of Israel is to do. Do God's word. So remember what's going on here.

[13:23] Israel has been called to be God's holy nation. Living in the promised land, which was to be God's holy place. So as the people of God, they are called to be obedient.

Holiness looks like obedience by grace. And that requires them to hear and to do God's word.

And nothing has changed for us. So it's important for us to hear this today. So boys and girls, remember our instruction books over here. Remember that the Bible is our instruction guide.

If we ask ourselves, how am I supposed to live for God? What does living for God look like? We need to know the Bible and to be reading the Bible so that we can better understand how to live for him.

The Bible stands as the marching orders for God's church. It is the one voice we desperately and consistently need to hear.

[ 14 : 31 ] Against all the many voices of culture, against the voices of our peers and contemporaries, we need to hear, to trust and to respond to God's voice.

And that then means we need to think about how we can make room for that in our own lives. You may find yourself in this present season time rich.

And because of a change in your work or because you're retired, well, let God's word encourage you to get to know him better, to invest in studying the Bible, in meditating on it, in chewing it over, so that you might increasingly enjoy knowing God, communing with him and putting it into practice. But if, by contrast, you find yourself time poor because homeschool is manic or you're just crazy busy and the inefficiency of this working pattern means you've got more to do, then maybe you need to sort of seize opportunities to read a verse from God's word and to pray about it, to reflect on something you've heard from a sermon.

Whatever our circumstances, we must make time to hear God's word because to obey it, we must first hear it and know what it teaches. And we must recognise that God's word, it has authority.

[ 16 : 04 ] That's one of the things that becomes clear for Joshua and Israel. They understand they stand under the authority of God's word. That we must submit to the idea, the reality that God is Lord, that Jesus is Lord.

And remember, Jesus said, if you love me, you will obey what I command. So again, to grow in our love for the Lord Jesus, we must be listening and doing God's word.

And not just in some areas of life, not just in some compartments, but for all of life. In our family relationships, where either we're spending a lot of time with our family, and that brings its own challenges for obedience, or where we're missing and we're far from our family, and we're still called to work out how to honour, for example, our parents in that setting.

God's word has authority over our work life. You know, our routines and our structures are all changing, but that foundation of looking to apply God's word to our work patterns, our integrity, doesn't change.

God's word has authority over how we use our leisure time, how we spend our time on the internet, how we spend our money. So we need to recognise that God's word gives direction and it has authority.

[ 17 : 38 ] So from there, having set the scene, the bulk of the chapter, from verse 10 to verse 29, focuses on the battle of Ai. So I want us to think about God's word and spiritual battle.

Let me just give a brief summary of the battle scene. You can follow along in your Bibles. So verse 10 to verse 13, what have we got there? We've got Joshua setting up the army, following God's orders.

So there's the main army and then there's the smaller group ready for the ambush. Verse 14 to 17, we see that this trap has been sprung.

Because the king of Ai and the people of Ai see the people of God and they decide, hang on a minute, we won an easy victory last time.

Let's go chase, pursue and destroy. And notice the entire city, all the men of the city come out because they want to destroy God's people. We need to recognise that, that part of Israel's battles is a judgement against the people who are in sinful rebellion against God.

[ 18 : 51 ] And we saw that last week. Notice verse 18. Again, here's the Lord's words. And it leads to the plan being put in action. So Joshua has to hold out the javelin.

As soon as he did that, the men in the ambush get up. And we see it's an effective ambush. Verse 19 and verse 20. The city is destroyed by fire.

And verse 20, the people of Ai lose hope. 21 to 27 focuses on destruction. The spoils of war that are taken in. And at the end, there's that really grim memorial of the events of the judgement that's taken place where the king of Ai is killed and then stuck on a spike on a stick for the day.

And there's memorial stones placed. And we'll think about that in a little while. That's the battle. I think it's significant too to recognise that the battle scene here, some of the details very much mirror the victory at the Red Sea over Egypt.

So if you were to read Exodus 14, what you would find is again the Lord delivering his people. And we would find the Lord giving orders and instructions.

[ 20 : 14 ] And we'd hear God saying to Moses, not raise your javelin, but raise your staff. Just as Joshua was called to stretch out his hand as a sign of power.

So Moses was called to stretch out his hand as a sign of God's power. And there is that reminder there as here that that day it was the Lord who saved and rescued Israel.

So very much the same theme because the same God is working at his same covenant purpose to bring his people into his place to live under his rule and blessing.

And that will mean both judgment on the enemies of God and salvation for the people of God. What can we say about these distant, historical, violent battles?

These battles for us reflect spiritual battle. God brings salvation by his grace for his people while judgment for sin falls on the enemies of God.

[ 21 : 17 ] And it's so important that we recognise that central to that spiritual battle stands listening to, obeying and trusting in the word of God.

That's what the people of Israel do versus the people of Ai who are resisting and rejecting the word of God. So by way of application, let's remind ourselves, and the New Testament is clear on this, that as Christians and as a church, we are engaged in spiritual battle.

Ephesians 6 verse 12, Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our struggle is against dark spiritual forces. Our battle is against the devil outside of us and our sin nature and the law of sin that still would drag us and make us captives of sin, even while we are saved by grace.

The desire of those enemies, the devil on the outside and sin, our sin nature on the inside, is to wreck God's plans, just as Ai wanted to wreck God's plans. Their desire is to destroy God's people, to destroy our hope, to destroy our peace, to destroy our witness.

That is the temptation constantly to drift and to rejection of our God and our faith. And in response to that fierce enemy attack, and in the heat of the battle, we need to, as the people of God did here, depend on God and his word.

[ 22 : 53 ] Again, to go back to the book that we're reading with our student guys, The Hole in Our Holiness, Kevin DeYoung, he talks about one of the gifts that the Bible has for us is that it has, he calls them, specific medicines for dealing with the presence of sin in our lives.

So sometimes the Bible gives us negative warnings against being comfortable with sin. It will remind us about future judgment. It will warn us about falling away from God.

It will warn us about falling under the displeasure of God, of bringing God's name into disrepute by failing to live as we should. And we need to hear that.

Other times the Bible gives us positive encouragement. It will remind us of the gospel and all the blessings that we have.

It will remind us of God's power with us and for us. It will speak to us of future glory so that we might stand fast, that we might persevere, that we might fight the good fight of faith.

[ 24 : 04 ] Because it's clear in the Bible and it's clear for our own experience that we must constantly be fighting to kill sin in our own lives.

We must fight with God's help, by God's grace, with the help of God's spirit to become who we are. In Jesus we are holy, but then we are also called to be holy.

And holiness comes by listening to, responding to, obeying the word of God. And to follow that a little bit further, we also need to follow our spiritual leader, our commander.

For the battle of Ai, the clear commander that God had appointed was Joshua. We don't follow Joshua, we follow a greater than Joshua.

We follow the Lord Jesus. Both their names mean God saves. We follow Jesus, God's son and God's chosen saviour. Moses had been chosen as God's saviour.

[ 25 : 10 ] Now Joshua has been chosen as God's saviour. But each point to the coming of God's son to be the saviour of the world. And so we need to recognise that our judgement or our salvation depends on, am I trusting Jesus or am I rejecting Jesus?

And it's important too that appreciating the rule of Jesus in our lives isn't just something we pay lip service to. Yes, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King.

Do I truly submit to his lordship? Do I obey when it suits me and when it doesn't? Do I obey in my church life, for want of a better word?

But do I also obey in my home when nobody else sees me? Is my life in my workplace characterised by faithfulness to Jesus as Lord?

Does it cause me to make hard decisions that sometimes set me apart from others because I want to see Jesus, the one who died for me, is Lord? And then to return to verses 29 and 30, we need in the spiritual battle the grim memorial of the ugliness of the battle.

[ 26 : 41 ] Thinking about this memorial to a war that's passed, made me think of Auschwitz. So in 1947, so very quickly after the Second World War ended, the Polish government chose to make Auschwitz a memorial.

Auschwitz, the German, the Nazi extermination camp, where hundreds of thousands of Jews and Polish citizens of various kinds were so horrifically executed.

And the question then is, why choose to make this grim place a memorial? Why not just knock it down and sort of build over it?

And the reason is that they wanted to make sure that the memory of the horrors of World War II would never be forgotten. The Polish government and those now running this Auschwitz memorial want to avoid that kind of horror ever happening again.

And they are aware that with the passing of time, there can be complacency and passivity. And so they want this vivid memorial to the horror of war.

[ 27 : 58 ] Verse 28 and 29 is that grim memorial. There's a king on a stick who's then buried under memorial stones.

But why? It's still the question we need to ask. Why this memorial? Well, it's a reminder to Israel, to the nations, and to you and me today of the horror of finding ourselves under God's curse, of being under God's judgment for sinful opposition to God, for rejection of God's will and God's word and God's purpose.

In Joshua's day, this stood as a solemn reminder that the people would never forget the realities, on the one hand, of sin and judgment upon disobedience, but positively grace and salvation that the people enjoy.

We need to remember the horror of sin and judgment. Perhaps, like the testimony of many, you find spiritually you have been drifting during the pandemic, perhaps drifting away from God.

Maybe as we find ourselves in all kinds of different circumstances, as we adjust constantly to what life in a new normal looks like with restrictions ongoing, perhaps there are sins that we have been tolerating.

[ 29 : 38 ] And we need this reminder of sin and judgment. The New Testament has its own grim memorial, which stands at the centre of our faith.

It's the cross of the Lord Jesus. What do we have there as we reflect on the cross? We reflect on Jesus becoming a curse for us, bearing the sin of the world for us, enduring the judgment, the wrath of God for us.

We recognise that we deserve it, but Jesus takes it. That Jesus shows incredible love and grace to us there at the cross, but the cross also reminds us of the seriousness of sin, that we'd be killing it, that we'd be running from it, we'd be turning away from it and turning to Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And that brings us to the final section and a return to the theme of the covenant. Let's think thoroughly about God's word and covenant relationship, verse 30 to 36, back to that frame through which to view Israel's life with God.

And that frame is the covenant relationship, because what's happening here in 30 to 36 is covenant renewal. So they are following God's word of instruction that came to Moses in Deuteronomy 27 and 28, when they crossed over the Jordan.

[ 31 : 12 ] They were given instructions on where to build the altar, on Mount Ebel. What they were to do there, they were to build that altar and they were to hear the blessings and the curses of the law.

Blessing for obedience, curse for disobedience. And we see that that's what they do. They obediently build an altar. And the nation is divided.

So they're standing by two mountains to hear God's word. Now, who's involved? It's interesting because it's the whole people of God that are involved. The focus is very much on the army up until this point.

But then we return to the whole people of God. And do you notice in verse 35, who gets special mention? Attention is drawn to women, children, foreigners within the whole assembly.

Here is a reminder of a grace from God that includes those who, by virtue of birth, would be excluded foreigners.

[ 32 : 24 ] But they are brought into the people of God. And there's a mercy that includes those most weak and most vulnerable in society. It's a reminder of God's generous mercy to any who will trust in him.

No one is excluded here. And when does it happen? Again, the timing is so interesting. So here's another fresh victory over Ai. Resounding success. You might expect, well, here's the next charge, next stage of conquest into the promised land.

But again, they're called to pause. Why? To make sure that their relationship with God is right. In other words, knowing God is more important than war. Hearing God's word is crucial to life as God's people in the promised land.

Think about what's going on here. Picture the scene. We've got the ark of God standing at the centre. We've got half the people standing at Mount Gerasim. We've got half at Mount Ebal. And the law is read. Those blessings and curses. And so the people that day are being invited to think, which path will you choose? What future do we want for ourselves?

[ 33 : 33 ] And that's the message of chapters 6 to 8. That your life with God, peace with God, your sense of hope for now and for the future rests on a covenant relationship with God.

And that depends on the word of God. And so just as they were invited to choose, so we are invited to choose and to respond then to God's word.

What makes a Christian tick? What makes a Christian church tick? Pull behind the curtains? What should be core to our DNA? Love for God. Love for his word. Should have first place in our hearts. Knowing and enjoying God should be our heartbeat. This was a covenant renewal ceremony. I wonder if we appreciate the extent to which Sunday worship is our covenant renewal ceremony. Where we praise God. Where we confess sin. Where we hear his word. Where we hear the gospel word. And we are invited to respond with faith and obedience. Let's hear this covenant renewal also as a call to personal renewal.

[ 34 : 48 ] That our lives will be built on that identity. I am a child of God. That it would be built on God's word. We would determine it would be our guide for holiness and obedience.

And that we would be built with Christ the Saviour as our foundation. Let that truth be your reminder. So whether you'll come Monday and you're on your fifth Zoom call of the day. Remind yourself that you're a child of God. If you're battling through homeschool. Hold on to that promise of the Lord who is with you in grace and weakness.

If you're frustrated or feeling sad. Due to the people that we miss. The relationships that are becoming more distant. Lean into this loving relationship with the Lord your God. Lean into God's word. The church, the Christian lives by the word of God.