

Joshua 8 (partial)

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[0 : 0 0] concerning which I commanded you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. That's what they did. They took big stones.

They put some kind of substance on it, plaster-like, and then they wrote the law on it. What am I going to make of this?

What do you make of this? Not only did they return to the place of God's promise, but here we find them actually moving forward in ways where they are now giving themselves to the publication of God's Word.

It's the first printing press in the Scriptures. It's rudimentary, but there is a publication of God's Word plastered in.

So that all could see it. So that all could read it. This is what's happening. They returned then to the mission of being the people charged to make God known through the publication of His Word.

[1 : 1 1] That's the sign of the church triumphant. A return to the mission. That you are called to publish God's Word.

To make it known. I was thinking of the seasons in church history where different people gave themselves to the mass production of God's Word.

And all that the world has done by way of benefit from that. But for us, this is the truth. Putting the text of Scripture before the eyes of people is a sign of a revitalized church.

The Word of God at the center of it. The publishing of it. The printing of it. The making it available to any who might want to read it.

You know, I was thinking even of our own little short history. My brother-in-law and I, who were part of a group of people that moved to Chicago to start this church some 24, 25 years ago, were privileged to be on an advisory committee of a Bible translation.

[2 : 3 4] At that time, it didn't exist. It was called the English Standard Version. And so we served proudly, as it was when we were young, on this advisory committee that was going to publish a new translation of the Bible, the ESV.

And you don't know this, but when that thing finally was birthed, they, as an organization, the publishers began to present it as an option for it.

For Pew Bibles. And we were the very first church in the world to ever have that as our Pew Bible because we just lived close enough to the publisher and we had an in so that we could drive out there and get them when they came off the press.

And men and women came into our assembly, this assembly, those many years ago, and they were handed blue volumes, first ones ever in print of the English Standard Version.

And we were using that version then, as we do now. The printed word. The publishing of God's word.

[3 : 5 1] You are called to be a people who make God known through the presentation of his word. The text of scripture before the eyes of readers.

I think of it even in regard to what Pastor Nee has done with the scripture journals. So that in any book we're going through, you can actually pick up in the back.

I see one there. I see them throughout the auditorium. I would love to see that grow where you are given a free journaling Bible. In this case of the book of Joshua, to take your own notes and to travel with you.

To actually have your eyeballs on the text of scripture. That's what the plastering of the law did upon those rocks. We ought to be known at Christ Church Chicago for continually drawing people's attention to God's word.

That's the sign of a triumphant church. When the word gets back to the center. In fact, the troubled church found its cause in moving away from the word.

[5 : 11] It shouldn't surprise us then that the first sign of revitalized church is the Bible suddenly matters again. Not simply some emotional or passionate speech from the Bible.

But the Bible itself and what it really says matters again. That this is the standard. That when you read God's word, as my mentors used to say to me, wherever you have God's word read, you have God's voice spoken.

Whenever God's word is read, God's voice is heard. God's word. Spurgeon put it this way. There's something definite in the Bible. It's not quite a lump of wax to be shaped at our will.

Or a roll of cloth to be cut according to the prevailing flat fashion. Your great thinkers evidently look upon the scriptures as a box of letters for them to play with.

And make what they like of. Or of a wizard's bottle. Out of which they may pour anything they choose. From atheism to spiritualism. I'm too old-fashioned to fall down and worship that theory.

[6 : 18] There is something told me in the Bible. Told me for certain. Not put before me with a but. Or a perhaps. Or an if. Or a maybe. And 50,000 suspicions behind it.

So that really the long and short of it is that it may not be so at all. But revealed to me is an infallible fact. Which must be believed. The opposite of which is deadly air.

And comes from the father of lies. The Bible. I think of John Wesley. When the Lord used him greatly. He began to say at one point in his life.

I want to know the one thing. The way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach us the way. He hath written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book at any price.

Give me the book of God. The book. That's the sign of Revitalize Church. I was just with one of our folks. Probably here this morning. At the picnic last Wednesday.

[7 : 19] And I was speaking to them about the name of their daughter. Which was in a name that I wasn't aware of. Because of all the ethnic diversities in our midst. They said, well, it actually means enjoy reading.

But it's a subversive way for us to say. The book. It's the book. I want to name my children. The book. I want them to be people of the book.

That's what they did. That's one of the early signs of a revitalized church. This publication of the word.

The verbs are not done there, though. Notice, it isn't just that he built something. Or that he wrote something. It's that the people stood while that thing was actually read.

Take a look again at Joshua chapter 8. Verse 33. All Israel sojourner as well as native born with their elders and officers and judges stood on opposite sides of the ark before the political priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

[8 : 30] Half of them in front of Mount Gerizim. 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.

And afterward, he read all 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 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.

This too has its roots in Joshua and Deuteronomy chapter 27. After the building of the altar in Deuteronomy 27. After the writing of the law on plastered stones, Deuteronomy 27.

You can read in verse 9. Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all of Israel, keep silence and hear, O Israel. This day you've become the people of the Lord your God.

You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and its statutes which I command you this day. That day Moses charged the people, when you've crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people.

[9 : 43] And then there are six tribes aligned, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children along the line of Mount Gerizim. And then across the valley, Mount Ebal.

And they were all to read the curses. And you can read the curses right there in verses 14 to 26 of Deuteronomy 7. To which all the people said in an antiphonal sound, Amen.

After hearing the curses of the Lord. Amen. So be it. Thanks be to God. And all of a sudden rising then on this valley floor is Israel.

Revitalized in triumph. Standing with the altar in her midst. The sacrifices rising in smoke. Six tribes along one valley floor.

Six tribes along the other. The Levitical priests themselves rising up to the top of the mountains. And an antiphonal sound. Bringing forth the curses of the Lord upon his people.

[10 : 44] And the blessings of the Lord upon his people. Can you imagine having been there on that day? It wasn't simply the publication of the word. It was the proclamation of the word.

And it was the receptivity of the word. That's the sign of a revitalized church. That's the sign of a revitalized man, woman, or child. There's an instant hunger for what does God have to say?

Yeah. Okay. And we mimic this every week in our own midst. Our own book of church order says, Through the public reading of the Holy Scriptures, God speaks most directly to the congregation.

Even more directly than through the sermon. The reading of the Scriptures is one of the most significant acts we replay every week.

And the verb in Joshua 8, where they stood to hear it read, informs our very practice here week by week.

[11 : 51] And if you're ever wondering, why are we always standing for the reading of God's word? Because we are asking those who are able to stand out of reverence that what we are going to hear is nothing less than the very word of God.

And at the close of the reading, the reader each week in our midst proclaims, this is the word of the Lord. They do not say, I hope you heard something that the Lord might use.

They don't say, listen for the voice of the Spirit in some of the things that were just now read. No, they say, this is the word of the Lord.

And the congregation says, thanks be to God. Because we are weekly joining the antiphonal response of a vitalized church where the word is at the center, where the cross is all things to us, and the publication and the proclamation of his word is everything, so that we might hear it, that we might understand it, that we might go out of these doors and live under it.

And this is why we would hope that over the years, it would have an antiphonal sound.

[13 : 20] That as this place swells over the coming fall, and as 50 years of ministry go forward from this hall, that there will be a moment where we are so captivated from wanting to hear from God, that when we have heard God's word read, and somebody says, this is the word of the Lord, there is this almost eruption.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Whether it's the sin of Achan and the judgment of God that I'm considering this week, or it is the mercy and the forgiveness of God that I'm considering this week, whether it is difficult things that I can't understand this week, or the most simple of truths that need to be reinstalled this week, each week, every week, all weeks, thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. That's what they did on that day. I served under a pastor that when I got converted at 18, he was 37 and just starting to preach in his main center of ministry.

And it wasn't more than about six years on that he preached from this book of Joshua. And he came on to this, and he put it this way, what took place around these stones of the law is still more dramatic, truly unforgettable.

All Israel, men, women, and children were divided into two massive camps, each bearing several hundred thousand. And in the valley, among all the white robe Levites assembled around the altar and the great white stones lay the gleaming ark of the covenant.

[15 : 00] And the ark was at the very center and the focus of everything. And the Lord's people surrounded his presence on all sides. And with everyone in place, Joshua led a great antiphonal chant based on the list of blessings and curses that accompany obedience or disobedience to the Lord.

Then a tremendous amen, a hundredfold louder rose from the thousands on the slopes of Ebal and thundered across to Gerizim echoing back again.

One after another, the curses were read each followed by a roaring amen. Then the blessings were intoned and the slopes of Gerizim roared and even louder amen, because the tribes were larger.

Amen, amen, amen, amen. Shirley writes Hughes, this must have been one of the greatest spectacles the world has ever seen.

And we replay that every week. What a difference a single day can make in the life of a local church.

[16 : 16] Yes, Lord. If she repents from her sins. Yeah. She is led into a time of return. Yeah.

It's a return marked by going back to the place of God's promised provision. For you, the cross.

And to a life that would be joyfully here and live under. That word. My prayer for our church is that we would indeed be this kind of people.

I'm old fashioned. I'm done. I'm done.

I'm done. But. You know, you know, the phones are great. Don't get me wrong. You keep bringing your phone.

[17 : 18] But the Bible is a Bible and a phone is about 8 million things. You can get a Bible on your phone. I get that. But. But there's this old fashioned sense to me of seeing.

Seeing text. With eyes. I just. Just chalk it up to the fact that I'm of the older generation. There's a story of Whitfield when he was preaching in the 18th century.

And he had walked into a guy's church by the name of Erskine. And he says. Erskine had a large meeting house. And he received me lovingly.

I preached to a thronged assembly. And after I had done prayer. And named my text. The rustling. Made by the opening of the Bibles.

All at once. Quite surprised me. A scene I never was witnessed to before. Now you're not more spiritual because you brought your Bible today.

[18:17] But there's something. There's something about this that. The people of the book. I'm going to hear God's word today.

I need to be taught today. I need to be corrected today. I need to be. I need to learn today. I need to be humbled today. Whatever. Whatever comes out of here today. Is what our church needs today.

The rustling of the pages of scripture. The sign of a revitalized church. Our Heavenly Father.

We commemorate the place of promise. Which is the cross. Where sacrificial offering is made.

And we rejoice in that. Help us ever to return to the cross. May it encourage us.

[19:17] May it strengthen us. May it humble us. May it enliven us again. Take me back. Take me back. To where I first believed.

Take us there Lord. And as we commemorate your place of promise. We celebrate. Your word.

Through its publication. Its proclamation. And its propagation. May we be people. Who are triumphant.

Come what may. In Christ's name. Amen. them.