

Blessing or Curse? (Deut. 27:1-13; Josh. 8:30-35)

Over the last several months, we have heard much rhetoric promoting our fundamental unity and resolve as Michiganders. We have heard things like “We will get through this together” and “Michiganders are tough.” I am sure that if you crossed the border into Indiana or Ohio you would hear much the same kind of talk. Why do elected officials and aspiring leaders love to talk like this? The answer is rooted in anthropology. **You and I were made to belong, to understand ourselves as part of a people.** We want to be part of something bigger than our individual selves and inhabit a grander story. The appeal to unity is rooted in how God made Adam and Eve. He did not make them to be two individuals who would come together to create more individuals. He made them to have a fundamental unity that would grow as they multiplied and took dominion over the earth. They were to be the progenitors of a godly civilization. Likewise, in our redemption, Jesus did not die to save individuals but to save his people. The church of Jesus Christ was saved on Calvary two thousand years ago. For the Christian, then, by both the designs of creation and redemption, the appeal to unity touches us precisely because it echoes **these deep longings for community and connection.** The truth is that the modern, secularized state cannot truly offer us the connection that we desire. Something, consequently, will always fall flat in the rhetoric. It is too thin a construct, too watery a unity. Nonetheless, we are always moved by the call.

As the people of Israel stood on the edge of Canaan, Moses reminded them of their corporate identity. We see this identity affirmed at the end of chapter twenty-six. 26:17: “Today you have affirmed that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, keep his statutes, commands, and ordinances, and obey him.” The people have affirmed that they – as a people – will follow the Lord. 26:18-19: “And today the LORD has affirmed that you are his own possession...he will elevate you to praise, fame, and glory above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a holy people to the LORD your God.” **He will be their God, and they will be his people.**

In chapter twenty-seven, Moses then prepared the people for a ceremony of covenant ratification. We see that this ceremony was carried out after the entrance into the land under Joshua, and that it is recorded for us in Joshua 8:30-35. The ceremony was to have several parts.

- The people were to gather in the valley of Shechem. Two mountains stand at the mouth of the valley. Half of the people were to be before Mt. Gerizim. Half of the people were to be before Mt. Ebal.
- Large stones were to be covered in plaster, and the words of the law were to be written on the stones as a reminder to the terms of the covenant. This should remind you of the task of copying Deuteronomy, which was expected of the future king, as described in chapter seventeen.
- An altar was to be set up on Mt. Ebal. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were to be offered to God.
- The priests and leaders would read out the words of the law to the people. In Joshua 8, Joshua himself served as the principal reader of God's law.
- The Gerizim group would announce the blessings for obeying God's commands. The Ebal group would announce the curses for disobedience. These blessings and curses were spelled out in greater detail in chapter twenty-eight.

And in all of this, **God would deal with them not merely as individuals but as a people.** This is a national covenant. If the people depart from the ways of God, then the curses will come upon them. If the people keep the ways of God, then they will experience blessing and they will fulfill their vocation to be a blessing to the nations. What of the role of faithful individuals? The subsequent history of Israel will tell the story of faithful individuals even as it tells the story of a faithless nation. We will hear of Deborah, Elijah, Josiah, and so many more. But in the end, the people will go into exile. God calls each member of his people to have a deeply personal faith. This personal faith can be found in the Psalms. The individual Israelites had to exercise faith and were called to embrace the covenant from a renewed heart. Nonetheless, **it was in their identity as one people that God dealt with them at Ebal and Gerizim.**

Several hundred years later, the prophet Jeremiah will deliver a prophecy of a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Hear God's Word:

“Look, the days are coming” – this is the LORD's declaration – “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt – my covenant that they broke even though I am their master” – the LORD's declaration. “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days” – the LORD's declaration. “I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them” – this is the LORD's declaration. “For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin” (Jer. 31:31-34).

Do you hear in these words how there is **this dynamic between the corporate and the personal**? It is the people who will be renewed, not just individual persons, but this people will be full of individuals who personally know the Lord. These threads come together in the story of Jesus. He is at once a faithful man and at the same time a representative of the people. It is crucial to see that Jesus followed the story of Israel and brought their mission to completion – both as an individual and as a representative. The promises had been given to the people. The mission had been given to the people. The blessings and curses had been given to the people. The punishment had fallen on the people. But Jesus won the victory where they had fallen. He fulfilled the mission of Israel and sent the blessings of God out to the nations. And he claimed for himself a worldwide dominion comprising people of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

And so, this morning, I suggest to you that **Gerizim and Ebal still tower over us as a choice**. Will we go the way of faithfulness and blessing or the way of disobedience and curse? But let me be clear – I am not addressing this choice to you as individuals. Sometimes, I am called to do this. Over the last few months, I have been convicted to preach the gospel message with

simplicity and to specifically pray for that person who hears these messages and does not yet know the Lord personally. But that is not what I am doing this morning. I believe that this choice is open to us as a church, as a local expression of God's global people. God has plans for your lives as individuals, but **he also has plans for this church as a corporate body**. I sincerely believe that this church has a future, but a choice stands before us. Will this congregation follow God in the way of faithfulness or follow our own selfish desires in the path of faithlessness? Let me set out this choice to you in several ways.

- Will we choose to be more serious about Bible study or will we marginalize Scripture in favor of other authorities?
- Will we choose to spend more time in corporate prayer or will we fill up our agendas with so much talk that we don't have time to pray?
- Will we elect officers who feel the weight of spiritual responsibility or will we simply try to fill a hole?
- Will we give of our time and energy to serve the down-and-out or will we hole up with our money and cling to it until the bitter end?
- Will we engage in the work of evangelism or will we keep quiet about Jesus?
- Will we stand up against real injustice in our society or will we slip into the support of empty slogans?
- Will we seek to support and sharpen each other or will we settle for simple greetings and goodbyes?

In other words, will we embrace our identity as a church, and not just as a collective of individual Christians who happen to come together? The two ways are set before us, as the two mountains stood before Israel. **One way leads to growth**, numerically and spiritually, vitality, and a bright future. **The other way leads to decline**, irrelevance, and the eventual shutting of the doors. And it is the decisions we make now which matter most. But lest we end today with the weight of the world on our shoulders, remember the good news of Christ's work on our behalf – **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion** at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). Jesus is always faithful. Let us rest in his faithfulness and power today.