

## Prayer

God of all hope and joy, open up our lives to welcome Jesus Christ our Lord. Then, whenever He comes, may the Saviour find within us a dwelling place ready to receive Him, and a heart ready to worship and adore. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You come into our lives with love, and You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Scriptures

*Pray this week about the Bible. Within our churches, some value it, and others find it very hard to understand and use. Pray that the Lord will speak to His people through His Word.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who enforce the law throughout your country*
- *Pray for the oceans, and those who work to protect them*
- *Give thanks to God for the clothes you wear*

## Meditation

Lord God, You care for us each moment of the day ...

In the midst of the night Your watchful Spirit  
Holds us, body, mind and spirit 'til we awake:

As we eat, Your creative power works within,  
To make deeds, thoughts and feelings out of food:

Whilst talking, the heart gives rise to what we say,  
But Your Spirit gives it meaning to those who hear us:

In our work, Your guiding hand is close to ours,  
Seeking to build the Kingdom of God in all we do:

Whilst at rest, we take to ourselves Your blessed gifts  
Of peace, healing and renewal, in body, mind and spirit:

In spending time with those we love and cherish,  
You guide our sharing in faithfulness and care.

We praise You, Lord God! We see the proof of Your care!

## Bible Study - Joshua 8:30-35

<sup>30</sup> Then Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel on Mount Ebal, <sup>31</sup> as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites, according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, 'an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool has been used'. On the altar they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings; <sup>32</sup> and there, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. <sup>33</sup> All Israel, aliens as well as citizens, with their elders, officials and judges, stood on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the LORD, in front of those who carried it, the Levitical priests. 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 first commanded so that they would bless the people of Israel.* <sup>34</sup> *Afterwards, Joshua read all the words of the law, the blessings and the curses, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.* <sup>35</sup> *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 aliens who lived among them.*

## Review

The passage today concludes the lengthy stories of Joshua's first battles upon entry into the Promised Land. The battles for Jericho and Ai had been a lesson in the art of following the Lord, and today, each has had much to teach those who want to know more about following the Lord and spiritual warfare. However, now that Israel had a stronghold in the Promised Land, thoughts turned towards fulfilling the commission for entry given to Moses. These are recorded in Deuteronomy 27, and in our passage, the instructions given in this text are fulfilled. It would not be true to say that the record in Joshua fulfils every requirement laid down by Moses, but the key elements are there.

**The altar on Mount Ebal** Joshua summoned the people to a form of religious devotion unlike any other feature of Israelite life. Uniquely, it celebrated entry into the Promised Land, just as the famous Covenant celebration at the end of the book of Joshua celebrated the completion of the occupation (Joshua 24). With great solemnity, an altar was built on Mount Ebal (see also Deuteronomy 27:1-4), one of a pair of mountains in the central highlands of Israel, the other being Mount Gerizim. The altar on Mount Ebal was used firstly for two principal forms of sacrificial offering used in Israel, firstly the 'whole burnt offering' in which a complete sacrifice was offered in praise of God. The second offering was a 'fellowship offering', in which an animal was slaughtered; part of it was burnt on the altar but the rest was shared amongst priests and people for food. Nevertheless, the altar had one other far more novel purpose. It was to have the words of the 'Book of the Law of Moses' (8:31) written on it!

**Writing the Law on the altar** It is not certain what exactly was written on the altar or what was meant by this; there is nothing similar in the rest of the Old Testament. Some reckon that the Ten Commandments were written on it, symbolising the entire Law. Other possibilities include 'all the words of this law' read by Moses to the elders of Israel after receiving the Law (Ex 24:3f.), words written in a 'book of the Covenant' (Ex 24:7); in addition, this could also be 'the Book of the Law of Moses', a term referring, somewhat loosely, to the whole book of Deuteronomy (2 Chronicles 34:14f.)! Whatever was written, it was done with great solemnity, with all Israel gathered according to Moses' instruction, and with the 'Ark of the Covenant' in attendance. Of course, the Ark contained the original 'Book of the Covenant' containing the Ten Commandments.

**Blessings and curses** The formal gathering of the people here includes every class of people included in Israel, from leaders, to aliens, officials and judges (8:33), to those who were not normally included in lists of the people, the 'women and children' (8:35). Significantly, half the people being stood on one mountain (Ebal) and the other half on the other (Mount Gerizim) as Moses commanded (8:33), and then 'Joshua read all the words of the law, the blessing and curses ...' (8:34). To understand this, we have to go back to the original instructions in Deuteronomy 27 and 28. There, Moses instructed that the people should be placed under the blessing of the Lord, announced from Mount Gerizim, if they were obedient to Him, fulfilled His call, and faithfully witnessed to God before the rest of the world (Deut 28:1-14). However, if they were not obedient and forsook their duty to witness, they were placed under curses announced from Mount Ebal (Deut 27:15-26, and 28:15-68). It does not take too much to work out that with the altar placed only on Mount Ebal (for the

curses), and the far greater length of the warnings and curses in Deuteronomy than the blessing, the greater concern was that God's people would prove unfaithful; as proved to be the case. The altar was needed on Mount Ebal so that sacrifices could be made for the atonement of the sins before the people had begun to live in the land!

**The Choice** This may seem to us to be rather a strange ritual. However, we cannot but be struck by the solemnity of the gathering. If we read Deuteronomy 27 and 28 as well, then the weight of the occasion feels awesome. By the drama of their celebration and ritual, God's people were faced with the reality of their circumstances and God's call. They were indeed God's people, but they had to choose whether to be obedient, or to do what they wanted. Indeed, the battles of Jericho and Ai demonstrated the consequences of this choice. Today, we are God's people and our Saviour Jesus has won for us a salvation that can liberate us from the consequences of our sin; but we still face the same choice about whether to be obedient to Him or not. We cannot pretend to live as if the choice was not constantly before us. Perhaps this is why, from time to time, we need solemn occasions to remember the basic truths of our faith, and recommit ourselves to the Lord. This is what the Lord wanted Joshua and the people of Israel to do on Mount Gerizim and Ebal.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss how your own church gives you an opportunity to seriously consider your faith and rededicate yourself to the Lord.
2. Look at a map of Israel from those times (as found in the back of many Bibles) and familiarise yourselves with the places mentioned in this passage.
3. What do the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy signify for the people of Israel, and for us today?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*The formal gathering of the people of Israel for dedication is an impressive event. The mountains Ebal and Gerizim are separated by a wide valley, but the meaning of the gathering would have been obvious to those who took part even if not everyone could hear all that was said on each site! It is difficult for us to appreciate the dynamics of what such a solemn occasion demanded; people had to move from one mountain to another, and the whole setting grandly displayed the central lands of Israel in all their glory, making the covenant promise to inhabit the land very real. The inside of a church does not always have the same sense of drama, and yet this is where we tend to do everything today!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Take time to reflect on your own commitment to the Lord. Read some of the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy, and ask yourself where you stand with some of them (not all are relevant to us today). Let the Lord guide you as you consider these challenges to our faith.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to make a firm commitment to anything because they have been hurt by commitment in the past, perhaps even hurt through their commitment to the church.*

## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus; You saw all manner of sin and strife within the world, and You stood above it and fulfilled Your ministry in love and in power. May we follow Your example and give