

PLEASANT SPRINGS CHURCH • SERMON • THE CONQUERING KING,
PART FIVE

Altars of Worship

Truth must reach the heart, and the heart must respond in obedience

Altars of Worship

A Sermon on Joshua 8:30–35 — Truth, Heart, and Obedience

By A Disciple of Jesus Christ • Pleasant Springs Church • August 23, 2026

Key Texts: Joshua 8:30–35 • John 4:24 • Mark 7:6–9 • Matthew 22:37–40 • John 13:4–15 •
Romans 12:1

Israel has just come through judgment and then victory. The first thing Joshua does with the peace is build an altar, write the Law on stones, and read every word of it out loud to every person in the camp — men, women, children, and the foreigners living among them. Worship, it turns out, is not something we invent when we feel like it. It is a response — to a God who has spoken first.

THE BIG IDEA

True worship is a whole-life response to God that receives His Word, obeys His Word, and responds to Him with sacrifice and gratitude. It takes all three — truth, heart, and obedience. Truth must reach the heart, and the heart must respond in obedience.

THREE SACRIFICES TO SEE THIS MORNING

1

Joshua's altar

Stone, fire, and obedience on Mount Ebal.

2

Christ's cross

The sacrifice every altar before it was pointing toward.

3

Our lives

Living sacrifices — what Romans 12 calls our spiritual worship.

Joshua 8:30–35 (ESV)

“At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, ‘an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.’ And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, 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 words of the law, 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.”

RECAP

Israel had recently dealt with Achan’s sin in violating God’s command concerning the devoted things — a violation that brought covenant judgment upon Israel (Joshua 6–7). After judgment for Israel’s sin and victory at Ai, Joshua leads Israel in obeying the covenant instructions Moses had already given: building an altar, offering sacrifices, writing the Law on the stones, and reading the covenant blessings and curses before all the people.

TWO QUESTIONS

What does it mean to worship?

How are we to worship?

POINT

True worship is a whole-life response to God that receives His Word, obeys His Word, and responds to Him with sacrifice and gratitude.

THE FIRST SACRIFICE — JOSHUA’S ALTAR

Joshua 8:31 (ESV)

“...just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, ‘an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.’ And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings.”

Notice the phrase: “as it is written.” There was a prescribed method and there were instructions for building that altar — and the Word was read to all. Joshua was not improvising. He was obeying something already given.

Deuteronomy 27:5–6, 8 (ESV)

“And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones... And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly.”

IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

John 4:24 (ESV)

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

So what does it mean to worship in spirit and in truth? To worship **in spirit** means worship that is genuinely alive before God — not an external ritual. To worship **in truth** is worship that corresponds to who God really is, and to the truth He has revealed in Jesus Christ.

WHAT WORSHIP IS NOT

Mark 7:6–9 (ESV)

“And he said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.’ And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’”

It is not a checklist, and it is not lip service. Jesus is quoting Isaiah 29:13 — the same words He uses again in Matthew 15:8: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

TRUTH — HEART — OBEDIENCE

Biblical worship has three essential dimensions, and it takes all three.

Matthew 22:37 (ESV)

“And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

POINT

Truth must reach the heart, and the heart must respond in obedience.

WORSHIP AND EMOTION

An emotional experience isn't necessarily worship, and the absence of strong emotion doesn't mean worship isn't happening. Emotion can accompany genuine worship, but emotion does not define worship. Worship in the Spirit involves genuine inward devotion to God.

In Psalm 51, David asks God to create in him a clean heart and to renew a right spirit within him. David understood that God was not merely interested in an outward sacrifice — God wanted a broken and contrite heart.

Psalm 51:10, 17 (ESV · MT 51:12, 19 / LXX 50:12, 19)

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Worshipping in truth is worship that corresponds to reality as God has revealed it. And God has revealed it in a Person.

John 14:6 (ESV)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

He is the Truth. He perfectly obeyed the Father, He gave Himself as the sacrifice for sin, and He now calls us to follow Him in obedient worship.

POINT

Jesus is the King who fulfills the pattern Joshua could only anticipate.

It is important to know and to follow the Scriptures — but knowledge of the Scriptures is not enough. Look at what Jesus said to the Pharisees: this people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. Jesus isn't looking for truth without heart, and He isn't looking for heart without truth.

Matthew 22:37–40 (ESV)

“And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”

Jesus perfectly fulfilled those commandments — and He showed us what that self-giving love looks like on His hands and knees with a towel.

John 13:4–5 (ESV)

“Jesus rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

John 13:12–15 (ESV)

“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.’”

THE THIRD SACRIFICE — OUR LIVES

Romans 12:1 (ESV)

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Hebrews 13:15–16 (ESV)

“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

IN SUMMARY

As Joshua and Israel built the altar, they followed the instructions God had given through Moses. They offered sacrifices, wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, and gathered the entire covenant community to hear the blessings and the curses — the men, the women, the children, and the sojourners. Nobody was excluded from hearing the Word.

POINT

Worship is not something we invent. Worship begins with God, is governed by His truth, comes from the heart, and is expressed through obedience.

And when we come to Jesus, we see the fulfillment of worship. Jesus perfectly loved God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength. He perfectly obeyed the Father. He gave Himself as the sacrifice. And now Paul tells us that, because of the mercies of God, we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices.

So true worship is a grateful heart of obedience grounded in God's truth. Which means worship doesn't end when the service ends. We worship when we love God, when we obey His Word, when we serve one another, when we forgive, when we give, when we sacrifice, and when we surrender ourselves to the King.

IN CLOSING

SO WHAT?

So whether we are laying stones, preparing a sacrifice, loving our neighbor, serving one another, forgiving one another, or simply obeying God when nobody is watching — our lives become worship when they are offered to the King.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER THIS WEEK

1. Truth. Is my worship shaped by what God has actually revealed about Himself — or by what I happen to prefer?

2. Heart. Where am I honoring God with my lips while my heart is somewhere else entirely?

3. Obedience. What has God already said plainly that I have heard, agreed with, and still not done?

4. The living sacrifice. Where this week — at home, at work, with the person who is hard to love — will my ordinary obedience be the worship I actually offer Him?

AFTER THE SERMON — AUTHOR & AUDIENCE

Joshua 8:30–35 is one of the most carefully staged scenes in the Old Testament, and almost every detail in it is obedience to an instruction given decades earlier. The following background is offered for deeper study, with the Septuagint (LXX) and ESV set beside the preached text.

TWO MOUNTAINS, AND WHY ISRAEL STOOD BETWEEN THEM

Gerizim and Ebal stand about forty miles north of Jerusalem, facing each other across a narrow valley at Shechem — the very place where God first promised Abram this land (Genesis 12:6–7). Moses had commanded that when Israel entered, six tribes would stand on Gerizim for the blessing and six on Ebal for the curse (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:11–13).

So this is not a spontaneous worship service. It is a covenant ceremony, held at the exact spot God had named, with the whole nation arranged the exact way He had said. And the altar goes on **Ebal** — the mountain of the curse. The sacrifice is offered where the curse is pronounced, because that is precisely where a sacrifice is needed.

Everyone heard it. Verse 35 goes out of its way to list who was present: “all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.” The foreigner and the child heard the same words as the elder and the priest. Whatever else worship is in this passage, it is not a specialists’ activity.

The prohibition goes back to Sinai, and Exodus gives the reason outright.

Exodus 20:25 (ESV)

“If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it.”

Every other monument in the ancient world advertised the skill of the people who raised it — dressed stone, carved reliefs, the king’s name cut deep enough to last. This one was forbidden all of it. The moment a chisel touched the stone, the altar began to be about the mason. An altar of uncut stones can only testify to the God it was built for.

John 4:24 (Greek & ESV)

πνεῦμα ὁ θεός, καὶ τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας αὐτὸν ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ δεῖ
προσκυνεῖν.

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (ESV)

προσκυνέω (proskyneō) — “worship.” The word behind “worship” here is not a word about singing or about feeling. It is a body word: to bow down, to prostrate oneself, to come toward and kneel. And it is worth noticing that Greek puts “spirit” and “truth” under a *single* preposition — *en pneumati kai alētheia*, in one breath, not two separate requirements. They are not two boxes to tick. They are one posture.

ἀλήθεια (alētheia) — “truth.” Not merely accurate information. In John’s Gospel *alētheia* keeps turning out to be a Person: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6); “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). To worship in truth is finally to worship through Him — which is exactly where the sermon goes.

This is the fifth sermon in a series walking through Joshua. Keep growing:

THE CONQUERING KING • PART 4

Testimonies of Triumph

The week before — the Valley of Achor becomes a door of hope, and Joshua builds the altar this sermon begins at.

THE CONQUERING KING • PART 2

Hidden Things

Achan's sin — the covenant violation that had to be dealt with before any of this could happen.

WHAT WE CONFESS

The Apostles' Creed

Worship governed by truth — the ancient confession we recite together, phrase by phrase.

BECOMING A DISCIPLE

Spiritual Formation

Dallas Willard on the difference between making Christians and making disciples — vision, intention, and means.

“...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Romans 12:1 (ESV)