

Ultimate Loyalty: Worship *in a* War Zone



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Josh. 5:1–7; Exod. 12:6; 1 Cor. 5:7; Josh. 8:30–35; Deut. 8:11, 14; Heb. 9:11, 12.*

Memory Text: “‘But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you’” (*Matthew 6:33, ESV*).

This week we are going to look at some key moments during Israel's presence in the Promised Land, when the people rededicated themselves to the Lord, sometimes in the face of impending danger. Joshua made the seemingly irrational decision to circumcise the Israelites on enemy territory (*Josh. 5:1–9*); to celebrate the Passover in the face of imminent danger (*Josh. 5:10–12*); to build an altar and worship the Lord while the conquest was in full swing (*Josh. 8:30–35*); and to set up the tabernacle of the Lord when seven tribes in Israel had not yet received their inheritance (*Josh. 18:1, 2*).

In our busy lives, we tend to give attention to the urgencies that life throws at us. Very often we neglect to carve out quality time to renew our commitment to God and to pause and express our thankfulness for what He has done and daily continues to do for us. Morning and evening worship, as well as the family altar, seem to be so out of context in our overcharged, convenience-driven, and achievement-oriented life. Yet, deep in our hearts, we all know that the occasions spent together with God and our loved ones are the best investment of our limited time.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 15.

Covenant First

Read Joshua 5:1–7. Why did the Lord command Joshua to circumcise the second generation of Israelites at this particular time of the conquest?

After the exploration of the country, the encouraging report of the spies, and the miraculous crossing over the Jordan, we would expect an immediate engagement with the enemy. However, there is something more important than the military conquest: Israel's covenant with God.

Before the new generation could engage in taking the land, they needed to be fully aware of their special relationship with the Owner of the land. The renewal of the covenant sign comes as a response to God's gracious and miraculous act of bringing Israel safely across the Jordan.

Our covenant with God should always be an answer of gratitude for what He has already accomplished for us, never an act of trying to obtain some benefit by legalistic conformity to His requirements. (This same concept, no doubt, was crucial to Paul's struggles with those who insisted that Gentile male converts be circumcised, as seen most clearly in his letter to the Galatians.)

Israel was on the verge of the greatest military campaign of its history, and we would expect the whole camp to be busy with war preparations. It was, but not in the conventional sense. Instead of harnessing the horses and sharpening the swords, they engaged in a ritual that left most of the fighting force vulnerable for at least three days.

They did this in order to celebrate their relationship with their God, who delivered them from Egypt. Why? Because they recognized that the battle belongs to the Lord. He is the One who grants them victory and success. Jesus formulated the same principle in slightly different words: " 'But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you' " (*Matt. 6:33, NKJV*). Most of the time, everyday life seems to pressure us with the urgency of so many important things that we forget to give priority to the most important thing in our life: the daily renewal of our commitment to Christ.

Think about the times you have neglected time with God because of more "important" matters. Why is this so easy to do, and how can we fight against it?

Passover

Why is it significant that Joshua chose to celebrate Passover despite the pressing and immense task of taking the Promised Land? Read *Josh. 5:10; Exod. 12:6; Lev. 23:5; Num. 28:16; Deut. 16:4, 6.*

The second important activity that precedes the conquest is the celebration of Passover. This takes place in the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, in careful compliance with the instructions given by God. The symbolic significance of the Passover observance receives special emphasis: the events in Joshua mirror those of the Exodus. Passover evokes the night of the tenth plague (*Exodus 12*), when the angel of the Lord killed all the firstborn in Egypt and spared the Israelites. This is followed by the Exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the journey through the wilderness.

In contrast, the story of the second generation starts in the wilderness, continues with the crossing of the Jordan, involves circumcision and the celebration of Passover, and leads to the crucial moment when another miraculous intervention of the Lord is to be expected against the enemies of Israel, the inhabitants of Canaan. Together with all the preceding acts, the celebration of Passover marks the beginning of a new era in Israel's history.

Also, through the symbol of the sacrificial lamb, the Feast of Passover pointed back to the redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. But it also pointed forward to its antitypical fulfillment in the Lamb of God (*John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19*), who ransomed us from the bondage of sin. At the Lord's Supper, before offering Himself as the Ultimate Sacrifice, Jesus transformed Passover into a memorial of His death (*Matt. 26:26–29, 1 Cor. 11:23–26*).

However, Passover and the Lord's Supper signal an even more glorious reality: that of the redeemed multitude passing into the heavenly Canaan. John the revelator portrays this antitypical "crossing" event as the 144,000 walking on the sea of crystal, the antitypical Red Sea and river Jordan, before the throne of God (*Rev. 4:6; Rev. 7:9, 10*) and celebrating the antitypical Passover and Lord's Supper at the marriage supper of the Lamb (*Matt. 26:29, Rev. 19:9*).

What are ways that we can keep the reality of the Cross always before us, even when we are not celebrating the Lord's Supper?

Altars of Renewal

What was Joshua's motivation for building an altar to the Lord? Read Josh. 8:30, 31; compare with Deut. 11:26–30, Deut. 27:2–10.

In the time of the patriarchs, altars marked the path of their pilgrimage and became tangible representations of their claim to the land, which had been promised by God. Now, by erecting an altar, the Israelites bore witness to the fulfillment of the promises given to their forefathers. In this case, the erection of the altar is the direct fulfillment of the instructions given by Moses (*Deut. 11:26–30, Deut. 27:2–10*).

Joshua 8:30–35 plays a significant role in shaping the whole theological message of the book. By linking one of the most gruesome, violent stories (war) to something totally different—a scene of covenant reaffirmation (worship)—Joshua takes us back to one of the most important theological themes launched in the book at the outset: Joshua has the mandate of leading Israel to a life of covenantal obedience (*Josh. 1:7*). This is also the picture of Joshua at the end of the book (*Joshua 24*).

Notwithstanding the importance of warfare and the conquest, there is something even more vital: loyalty to the requirements of God's law. The conquest is only one step in the fulfillment of God's plan for Israel and the restoration of all humanity. Faithfulness to the precepts of the Torah constitutes the ultimate question in the destiny of humanity. Joshua writes the copy of the law on large, whitewashed stones, different from the stones of the altar (*compare with Deut. 27:2–8*). Thus, the stones, which probably contained the Ten Commandments, formed a separate monument in the vicinity of the altar, constantly reminding the Israelites of the privileges and duties implied in the covenant.

Joshua foreshadows the New Testament Jehoshua (Jesus), whose mission was, among other things, to lead humanity back to obedience to God. In order to accomplish this goal, He had to undertake a conflict with the powers of evil. His ultimate goal was to fulfill the covenant requirements on our behalf: "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (*2 Cor. 1:20, NKJV*).

What are some spiritual practices we can do now that can have the same functions as building an altar had in ancient times?

Written on Stones

Read Joshua 8:32–35. What is the meaning of the act described in these verses, and what should it say to us today?

Mount Ebal is mentioned only in Deuteronomy (*Deut. 11:29; Deut. 27:4, 13*) and in the book of Joshua (*Josh. 8:30, 33*). Along with Gerizim, it was the site where the blessings and curses of the covenant were to be recited. More specifically, according to Deuteronomy 11:29 and Deuteronomy 27:4, 13, it had to be the site of the curses. Here the Israelites were to stand on either side of the ark in the presence of the priests (*Josh. 8:33*). One group stood in front of Mount Ebal, the other in front of Mount Gerizim. Here they symbolically enacted the two possible ways of relating to the covenant. The sacrifices that were brought there pointed to Jesus, who took upon Himself all the curses of the covenant so that all who believe in Him might enjoy its blessings (*Gal. 3:13, 2 Cor. 5:21*).

Why was it necessary to write a copy of the covenant on a monument, visible to all? (See *Deut. 4:31; Deut. 6:12; Deut. 8:11, 14; 2 Kings 17:38; Ps. 78:7*.)

We humans tend to be forgetful. We crowd the increasingly bewildering demands of everyday life into shorter and shorter segments of time. We inevitably forget things that do not recur with the same frequency or intensity. At every Communion service, we have a special occasion to rededicate ourselves to the Lord and to renew our covenantal commitment. It would be good to perceive these opportunities not only as chances for individual reconsecration but also as occasions of corporate renewal of our allegiance to God. In an increasingly individualistic society, we must rediscover the power of belonging to a community that shares the same worldview, the same values and beliefs, and the same mission.

How easy do you find it, in the rush and hubbub of life, to forget the Lord and seek to do things in your own strength and power? Why is this so easy to do, especially when things are going well for you?

Longing for His Presence

Read Joshua 18:1, 2. What was the activity for which Joshua interrupted the process of allotting the land?

After the description of the territories allotted to the two greatest tribes on the west side of the Jordan and to the half-tribe of Manasseh, this passage portrays an assembly of the congregation at Shiloh, where the land is apportioned to the remaining seven smaller tribes.

The establishment of the sanctuary, “My Tabernacle,” represents the fulfillment of God’s promise to live among His people (*Exod. 25:8; Lev. 26:11, 12*) and reveals the central theme of the book: God’s presence in the middle of Israel has made possible the possession of the land and is going to be a continual source of blessing for Israel and, through it, to all the earth (*Gen. 12:3*). The worship of God takes center stage and preeminence, even over conquest and allotment of the land! The presence of the sanctuary, and later the temple, should have always helped the people realize the presence of God among them and their obligations to follow the covenant.

Read Hebrews 6:19, 20; Hebrews 9:11, 12; and Hebrews 10:19–23. What can we as Christians, who do not have an earthly sanctuary enshrining the physical presence of God among us, learn from Joshua?

The appearance of the sanctuary should not come as a sudden surprise, because the theme of the sanctuary has been present in the Joshua narrative through the ark of the covenant. This was the central piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place, and it marked the first two sections of the book: the crossing and the conquest. Now, by placing the erection of the tabernacle in the focal point of the land distribution, Joshua shows that all the life of Israel revolved around the sanctuary, the earthly headquarters of Yahweh.

It is even more important for us, as Christians living in the antitypical Day of Atonement, to focus our eyes on the heavenly sanctuary as we continue our struggle with the modern (or postmodern) giants that challenge our faith, hope, and spiritual inheritance. As we constantly rely on the work that Christ accomplished on the cross and in the heavenly sanctuary, we can look forward in faith to the time when God once again will dwell among His people, but this time it will be forever. (*Compare with Rev. 21:3.*)

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Blessings and the Curses,” pp. 499–503, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“According to the directions given by Moses, a monument of great stones was erected upon Mount Ebal. Upon these stones, previously prepared by a covering of plaster, the law was inscribed—not only the ten precepts spoken from Sinai and engraved on the tables of stone, but the laws communicated to Moses, and by him written in a book. Beside this monument was built an altar of unhewn stone, upon which sacrifices were offered unto the Lord. The fact that the altar was set up on Mount Ebal, the mountain upon which the curse was put, was significant, denoting that because of their transgressions of God’s law, Israel had justly incurred His wrath, and that it would be at once visited, but for the atonement of Christ, represented by the altar of sacrifice.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 500.

“But the Communion service was not to be a season of sorrowing. This was not its purpose. As the Lord’s disciples gather about His table, they are not to remember and lament their shortcomings. They are not to dwell upon their past religious experience, whether that experience has been elevating or depressing. They are not to recall the differences between them and their brethren. The preparatory service has embraced all this. The self-examination, the confession of sin, the reconciling of differences, has all been done. Now they come to meet with Christ. They are not to stand in the shadow of the cross, but in its saving light. They are to open the soul to the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 659.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean to you to seek first the kingdom of God? How does that principle shape your daily life?
- ❷ Look at your answer to Wednesday’s final question about how easy it is to forget the Lord amid the daily rush of life. In class, discuss why it is so easy to do. What are some solutions?
- ❸ As Adventists, we believe that Jesus is ministering on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary. How can this conviction be a constant source of hope and strength? Why should the knowledge that it is Jesus who is up there making “intercession” (*Heb. 7:25*) for us help us realize just what good news His work in the heavenly sanctuary is, especially now in the antitypical Day of Atonement?

Returning God's Things: Part 2

The store sent a delivery truck to collect the household items that Frank Mukube had bought on credit and wanted to return, even though he had paid for them. Frank, who had signed a paper that he didn't seek compensation, rode in the truck to his rented house in Namibia.

As the truck backed up to the house, Frank's landlord, who lived nearby, rushed over. "Why are you moving out without telling me?" she asked.

"I'm not moving," Frank said. "I'm returning these things that are not fully mine even though they have been fully paid for. I want to give tithe and offerings again."

"What are you saying about tithe and offerings?" she demanded.

Frank explained that the Bible teaches that people should give tithe and offerings and that he had not given either for two years in order to make monthly payments on everything that he had bought on credit.

The landlord laughed at Frank.

When the delivery truck and Frank returned to the store, the store manager watched as a bed, couch, stove, radio, television, rug, and even kitchen pots were unloaded. "What are you really trying to do here?" he asked.

"These things have been standing between me and my God because they were bought with my tithe and offerings," Frank said. "Now I feel relieved."

Frank did feel relieved. He knew that without a bed he would have to sleep on the floor. Without a stove, he would have to look for firewood and pots to cook supper on an open fire. But he was happy. He had felt "cursed with a curse" because he had robbed God (*Mal. 3:8, 9*). But with everything back in the store, he felt peace and right with God.

That night, Frank didn't need to sleep on the floor or look for firewood and pots for supper. A friend's heart was moved when he heard about Frank's decision, and he brought over a bed and an old stove with two pots.

"God provided a bed. God provided a stove," Frank said. "That made me believe that what God has promised is indeed the truth."

God promises to those who give tithe and offerings, " 'And try Me now in this,' says the Lord of hosts, 'If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it' " (*Mal. 3:10, NKJV*).



Since that day, Frank has been faithful with his tithe and offerings. Today, he serves as director of stewardship for the Adventist Church in southern Namibia. He said God is always faithful: "God says, 'If you take care of My business, I'll take care of Yours. When you return your tithe, I'll take care of your life.'"

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Matthew 6:33*

Study Focus: *Josh. 5:1–7; Exod. 12:6; 1 Cor. 5:7; Josh. 8:30–35; Deut. 8:11, 14; Heb. 9:11, 12.*

After 40 years of wandering through the desert, the Israelites finally set foot in the Promised Land. For sure, this was an exciting time as they crossed the Jordan River and saw the promise materializing in real life. However, they were in enemy territory from henceforth, and enormous challenges lay ahead in this war zone—far beyond their ability to overcome themselves. Therefore, it was time for preparation. Instead of focusing on weapons, strategies, and manpower, they needed to prepare their hearts through ceremonies that would sharpen their spiritual perception and calibrate their loyalty to the Lord. As the conquest progressed, these rituals of covenant renewal were again performed as an ongoing reminder of their need for spiritual preparedness.

This week, we review important events during the conquest when Joshua led the Israelites to recommit themselves to the Lord. These events are centered on rituals, which are a powerful way to convey tradition and values, create meaning, and express emotions. In the biblical ritual, another crucial element is the prophetic one, which points to Christ and the realities brought about by Him. Below, we delve deeper into the rituals of circumcision and Passover, performed by Israel right after the crossing of the Jordan River, and the building of altars in the context of the renewal of the covenant in the book of Joshua. As we review these ceremonies, we can reflect on their significance in the past and their relevance to those living on the brink of the heavenly Canaan.

Part II: Commentary

The Power of Rituals

Rituals play a significant role in marking important life events, even in modern times. They are present throughout a person's life, spanning family, school, work, and religious contexts. It is not a coincidence that God used the power of ritual to convey the essential aspects of His plan to humanity. These Old Testament rites, which often involved blood, sweat, and tears, engraved eternal truths in people's minds regarding God's character, human decay, and the divine plan to bridge the gap caused by sin.

Circumcision

In the context of Joshua, the circumcision ritual serves as a reminder to Israel of its true identity within the covenant community. The removal of the foreskin pointed in a graphic way to the removal of Israel's old status as slaves of Pharaoh ("the disgrace of Egypt"). Now, the Israelites have the choice to serve Yahweh, who calls them to a total commitment. Male circumcision, which involves the surgical removal of the foreskin, has been practiced since at least the third millennium by various societies. In these societies, the rite would mark an important transition, such as the beginning of adulthood or marriage, without a religious meaning per se. However, in God's covenant with Abraham, circumcision is designated as a sign of commitment and identity. Even non-Israelites could undergo circumcision to signal their new status as part of the seed of Abraham (*Gen. 34:15–24, Exod. 12:48*).

From the New Testament perspective, circumcision is a mark of separation linked to Jewish identity that is no longer binding for Christians in the new creation inaugurated by Jesus (*Gal. 6:15, Col. 2:11–13, Acts 15*). However, Paul's calling to circumcise the heart is not a Christian innovation. Already in the original context, the physical sign of circumcision should be only an external indication of an inner disposition (*Deut. 30:6*). This view also is reiterated by the prophets, such as Jeremiah, who appealed to the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts" (*Jer. 4:4, ESV; compare with Jer. 9:25, 26*). Thus, the Old Testament already envisioned the metaphorical and ethical dimensions of the ritual. When disassociated from the right attitude, the idea that "circumcision is nothing" (*1 Cor. 7:19*) is already true in the Old Testament.

Today, Seventh-day Adventists, like other Christians, "understand baptism as a symbol of (figuratively) partaking in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection and also a symbol of belonging to God's New Covenant people *instead of circumcision* (*Col. 2:11–12*)."—John C. Peckham, *God With Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, Biblical Research Institute, 2023), pp. 595, 596. However, one could question the reason for the change. The practice of circumcision was closely related to the coming of the promised Messiah, who would appear from the Seed of Abraham.

Passover

The ritual of Passover was instituted on the night Israel left Egypt. The blood of the lamb, killed before sunset, was used to mark the Israelites' doorposts to prevent the death of the firstborn (*Exod. 12:12, 13*). Thus, the Passover was inherently connected to the historical deliverance of

Israel from slavery. It also was connected to the agricultural celebration marking the beginning of the harvest season when people would bring the first fruits to the sanctuary (*Exod. 34:18–27*). Passover was not just a celebration of ordinary life but a celebration of new life to be lived abundantly and freely with the Lord. At the heart of the ritual was the sacrifice of the lamb.

This sacrifice was a symbolic act in two senses. First, it symbolized the deliverance of the firstborn. The lamb was slaughtered instead of the Israelite firstborn, serving as a substitutionary sacrifice. Second, the entire ritual was meant to recall the Exodus experience, the time when the Israelites were set free from slavery. Every detail in the ceremony pointed to the rush to get ready to leave: the meat was roasted instead of boiled, herbs were eaten instead of vegetables (*Exod. 12:8–10*), the clothes were worn in preparation to go at any moment, and the meal was eaten in haste (*Exod. 12:11*). Therefore, for the original participants, the first Passover was a declaration of faith in the miraculous deliverance that God was about to perform that very night.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during His last Passover on earth. The Lord's Supper replaced the Passover after His death. As such, the rite of the Lord's Supper also has a twofold, temporal dimension. While it calls our attention to what God has done for us in the past, it points to what God will accomplish in the future. In Joshua 5, God's people were in this same temporal juncture, between past and future, between deliverance and rest.

Altars

The altar is a crucial part of the ritual system in the Old Testament and played a significant role in worship life during patriarchal times. Although the first mention of an altar appears only in Genesis 8:20, the first sacrifice is implicit in the provision of skins for Adam and Eve (*Gen. 3:21*). Like circumcision, sacrifice is a practice not restricted to Israel. Indeed, sacrifice is the norm in ancient world religions. However, in Israel, sacrifice is not intended to feed, please, or appease an angry deity; rather, it is seen as God's merciful provision to humanity to atone for sin and bring His creation back to Him.

Alongside the expiratory aspect of sacrifices, altars played an important role in the religious experience of God's people in the past. As an act of worship, altars were built to mark new beginnings (*Gen. 8:20*) and places of pilgrimage (*Gen. 12:7, Gen. 13:18*). They also were used for intercessory prayer (*Job 1:5*) and thanksgiving (*Ps. 26:6, 7*). In addition to that, altars could become memorials of God's graceful acts. In Joshua, even an altar without sacrifice becomes a memorial of the religious identity of the tribes beyond the Jordan

River (*Josh. 22:26–28*). In Joshua 8:30–35, the altar built on Mount Ebal ratifies the covenant, renewing the people’s commitment to the Lord. All these aspects found in the patriarchal cult around altars were incorporated into the temple service, where the Israelites would come to worship, pray, make vows, remember God’s graceful acts, confess their sins, and seek forgiveness through their sacrifices, which were centralized in the sanctuary.

Calvary is the ultimate altar whereon the Lamb of God was offered once and for all (*Heb. 10:10*). As in the ritual system, His sacrifice is the pivotal point, bringing completion to the plan of salvation. Now He presents the blood as the new covenant before God, interceding on behalf of the penitent sinner (*Heb. 7:25*). Following Christ’s example, we are called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, pleasing to the Lord (*Rom. 12:1*). In Christ, the altar of death becomes the doorway to life.

Part III: Life Application

Church Rites Today

Rites continue to be an integral part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church community. Here is a brief list of some of the most significant ceremonies that are observed in your local church. Reflect on how each of these practices has personally influenced your spiritual journey.

1. Child Dedication _____
2. Baptism _____
3. Communion _____
4. Weddings _____
5. Funerals _____

Between Already and Not Yet

The religious experiences behind the rites studied this week point to a tension usually called “already and not yet,” which in Joshua is manifested in the hiatus between deliverance and rest. Israel’s salvation was a current, and undeniable,

reality, but the people were still looking ahead to its final consummation when they could finally enjoy God's rest. In the New Testament, this tension between the kingdom of God as a present and future reality is evident. In Ellen G. White's view, "the kingdom of God (i.e., the kingdom of grace) has already been established. Yet there remains an eschatological manifestation of the kingdom (i.e., the kingdom of glory), which 'is not to be set up until the second advent of Christ' (GC 347)."—Kwabena Donkor, "Kingdom of God," *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), p. 919.

1. How have you experienced the tension between the already and the not yet in your spiritual journey with God?

2. How can the fact that the Old Testament believers have already lived with this tension help you to understand your Christian experience as a continuous pilgrimage?
