

Journey Through The Cities of Refuge

Lesson #11

Shechem: Valley of Commitment & Decision

April 1, 2026

Shechem's significance did not end with Abraham, Jacob, or Joseph. Centuries later, it would become a place of Covenant Renewal and a Valley of Decision.

Scene I: Deut. 11: Moses' Speech To The 2nd Generation About To Enter The Promised Land
Historical Setting: Plains of Moab, ca. 1406 BC

- The end of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness; Ready to enter their inheritance

Reminder: The Israelites entering and learning to live in the Promised Land is a picture of us learning to live an abundant life in Jesus Christ.

Abundant Life in Christ [John 10:10] is a spiritual quality of life, not material wealth, characterized by peace, purpose, and eternal joy through an intimate relationship with God. It involves victory over sin, living with purpose and security, and the transformation of the mind and heart, often experienced amidst, rather than in the absence of, life's struggles. It is not a "trouble-free" life, but rather a "different kind of life" that holds firm even when things are shaking.

Set The Stage: What event had recently taken place on the plains of Moab?
The Apostasy at Peor.

Balaam devises a devious plan that seeks to "use" God's faithfulness to His Word for his own personal gain.

Since Balaam could not CURSE them, he sought to CORRUPT them!

- All Balaam had to do was to tempt the Israelites to sin in such a way that they would fall under the curse of God as laid out in the law.

The Plan: Fastest way to destroy Israel: Seduce Them Into Unbridled, Sensual Living
By Dangling The Prostitutes Of Moab Before Men Of Israel

If he can succeed in seducing the Israelites and cause them to engage in sexual and religious adultery, then he knows God must keep His own Word and bring judgment and punishment upon this people. It was perfect! He would use:

- Israel's weaknesses: stiff-necked and prone to wander
- God's strength: He does not change, keeping His Word.

Allen: We come to the ultimate rebellion of Israel in the desert. The time is the end of the forty-year period of their desert experience. The place is the staging area for the conquest of the land of Canaan. They are encamped by tribes in the Valley of Shittim and awaiting the instructions to cross the Jordan River and enter The Promised Land, their inheritance.

J. Ligon Duncan: When they come to your feast, bring some of your prominent, attractive daughters, and have those daughters seduce them and invite them to worship your god. By doing this you will assimilate them into your culture rather than experience them conquering you.

- They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods.

Baal of Peor was the local, heathen god Baal that was worshiped at Peor.

- Prostitution was part of that worship.

This feast, involving idolatry and abominable immorality,

would be a flagrant violation of Israel's covenant with God.

Num. 25:3 So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor,

and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.

Num. 25:4 And the LORD said to Moses, "Arrest all the leaders of the people, and hang them up before the LORD in sun [in broad daylight] that the fierce anger of the LORD may be turned away from Israel."

The body count of 24,000, an average of 2,000 from each of the twelve tribes, is the highest ever suffered by the Israelites during their long and painful passage from Egypt to Canaan.

Scene I: Deut. 11: Moses' Speech To The 2nd Generation About To Enter The Promised Land

Historical Setting: Plains of Moab, ca. 1406 BC

The Call to Obedience: You must love the Lord your God and always obey His requirements, decrees, regulations, and commands. [Deut. 11:1]

Moses is speaking to the new generation of Israelites on the plains of Moab, specifically those who were children or young adults during the Exodus and had now survived the 40-year wilderness wandering. He emphasizes that he is speaking to those who witnessed God's works firsthand, rather than their children.

Remember God's Works: REMEMBER THE MIRACLES OF THE LORD

Moses wanted the Israelites to meditate on the greatness of God and His mighty works which they had been privileged to observe.

- He wanted them to remember the 10 plagues on Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and how He caused the earth to break open and swallow Dathan and Abiram when they rebelled against Him in the wilderness [Numbers 16].
- Meditating on these things would ensure the Israelites remained faithful to God's commands and had confidence in God's power to help them conquer Canaan.

The Land's Reward: Unlike the flat, irrigated land of Egypt, Canaan is a land of hills and valleys that requires rain from heaven, maintaining a constant dependency on God.

- **CANAAN, A LAND CULTIVATED BY GOD** [Deut. 11:10-17]
 - Canaan was "a land that the Lord your God cares for."
 - So long as the Israelites were faithful to God, He would continue to make Canaan a place where it was easy for crops and livestock to flourish.
 - If they disobeyed God, He would stop up the rain clouds and withdraw His blessing from the land.

Blessings and Curses: Obedience will bring plentiful rain, harvest, and victory over enemies; disobedience will result in drought and removal from the land.

Deut. 11:16-17 But be careful. Don't let your heart be deceived so that you turn away from the Lord and serve and worship other gods. ¹⁷ If you do, the Lord's anger will burn against you. He will shut up the sky and hold back the rain, and the ground will fail to produce its harvests. Then you will quickly die in that good land the Lord is giving you.

Consider: The land ahead was filled with entrenched Canaanite city-states whose religious life was saturated with fertility cults. Deut. 11:16 is therefore a pre-conquest warning delivered within a covenant-renewal sermon that re-affirmed the first two commandments and anticipated the lure of those very cults.

Beware: Satan knows what flavor of sin to bait his hook with.

Deut. 11:18-20 "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates..."

- This is to ensure the next generation remembers the covenant.

Deut. 11:29 When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are to possess, you must pronounce the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal are profoundly significant in the Bible as the designated sites for proclaiming blessings (Gerizim) and curses (Ebal) upon entering the Promised Land. Mount Gerizim was lush and fertile while Mount Ebal was rocky and barren, Located opposite each other in the valley of Shechem, they functioned as a, set-apart, visual, and ceremonial "object lesson" of the covenant, Emphasizing Obedience To God's Law.

Scene II: Deut. 27:1-26

Outlines God's instructions for a Covenant RENEWAL Ceremony upon entering Canaan.

Recall: Where was the Original Covenant Ceremony?

- Mt. Sinai > 1st Generation who were delivered from bondage of Egypt
- Crossed Red Sea on dry ground; saw the drowning of the Egyptian army
- Covenant with God at Mt. Sinai: We Will & We Do

The ceremony symbolizes the renewal of Israel's covenant commitment to the LORD.

They are reminded their success in the Promised Land depends on their faithfulness to God.

Note: This chapter serves as a solemn reminder of the consequences of disobedience, setting up a formal ceremony for the Israelites to pledge obedience to God.

Stephen Covey: While we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose the consequences of our actions.

Deut. 27:1 Then Moses and the leaders of Israel gave this charge to the people:

"Obey all these commands that I am giving you today.

1. The Stone Monuments [Deut. 27:1-8] When they cross the Jordan and enter the land, they are to set up large stones on Mt. Ebal and plaster them. They were to write the words of God's law on the stones.
2. The Altar at Mount Ebal Beside the plastered stones, they were to set up an altar of uncut stone—requiring no iron tools—and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord, promoting worship and celebration.

Question: Why was altar at Mt. Ebal, the mountain of curses?

Placing the altar on Ebal (the mountain of curses) highlighted God's provision of mercy, allowing for sacrifice and reconciliation in the very place where disobedience was condemned.

Burnt Offering: Served as a voluntary act of worship, representing complete consecration and surrender of the offerer to God. Unlike other sacrifices where parts were eaten by priests or worshippers, the entire animal (male bull, sheep, goat, or bird without blemish) was burned on the altar, symbolizing 100% devotion and giving one's best to God.

- Atonement and Propitiation: The sacrifice acted as a substitute, with the worshipper laying hands on the animal to transfer sin, thereby covering (atoning for) their sin nature and placating divine wrath.
- Relationship and Access: It was a means for sinful people to safely approach a holy God, maintaining the covenant relationship and renewing devotion.
- Daily Devotion: Burnt offerings were mandated twice daily (morning and evening) in the Tabernacle/Temple to maintain constant communion and atonement.

In a Biblical context, it foreshadowed the ultimate, perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ and represents, for believers, the spiritual offering of their own lives to God.

Peace Offering: Communion and Fellowship: The peace offering was shared, acting as a "communal meal" where God (via the altar), the priests, and the worshiper all received a portion.

- Freewill Offering: It was a voluntary act of worship motivated by love or dedication.
- Fulfilling Vows: Used to mark the completion of a vow or promise made to God.

Key: Worshiping the Lord and obeying God's Word

were to be essentials for Israel's existence in the Promised Land.

Deut. 27:9-10 Then Moses and the Levitical priests addressed all Israel as follows: "O Israel, be quiet and listen! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God.¹⁰ So you must obey the Lord your God by keeping all these commands and decrees that I am giving you today."

- A Pivotal Moment: Moses and the Levites formally declare the new generation of Israelites as God's special people, established in a covenant relationship as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. It commands focused attention to this solemn reality.

Recall: God just had a purifying purge of 24,000 before entering the Promised Land.

I Pet. 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him
who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

Key: Focus on this solemn reality.

3. The Division of Tribes [11-13] To witness the renewal, six tribes stand on Mount Gerizim (Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin) to proclaim a blessing over the people, & six stand on Mount Ebal (Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali) to proclaim the curse.

Six tribes descended from Rachel and Leah gathered before Mount Gerizim, while the remaining tribes—those descended from the handmaidens, along with Leah's youngest son Zebulun and Reuben, who had defiled his father's bed—assembled before Mount Ebal.

4. The Twelve Curses [v. 14-26] The curses reinforce the consequences of their actions. The tribes gathered on opposing hillsides, while the Levites stood in the valley between them to read the blessings and curses.

Note: The stone monuments are in place with God's laws written on them.

The altar of the LORD at Mt. Ebal is set to offer burnt and peace offerings to the LORD.
The Ark of the Covenant is in place.

The Levites recite specific curses against actions like idolatry, disobeying parents, perverting justice, and sexual immorality, to which all people must respond with "Amen".

Deut. 27:15 'Cursed is anyone who carves or casts an idol and secretly sets it up. These idols, the work of craftsmen, are detestable to the LORD.' And ALL the people will reply, Amen.'

Deut. 27:26 Cursed is anyone who does not affirm and obey the terms of these instructions.'
And ALL the people will reply, 'Amen.'

Purpose: The ceremony acts as a physical reminder of God's covenant, designed to make a lasting impression on the nation regarding the necessity of faithfulness in their new land.

Instructions: Go to Shechem between 2 mountains, covenant renewal ceremony, white-washed stones, write the words of the law, altar of uncut stone, burnt and peace offerings, division of tribes, ark of covenant between mountains, Levites read the blessings/curses, people say AMEN, oak tree

Scene 3: Deut. 28:1-68 Blessings & Curses: Information BEFORE Entering Promised Land

- The Blessings Of Obedience [28:1-14]:
 - If the Israelites respected God's law,
He promised to elevate them above the surrounding nations.
 - He promised to bless their cities, fields, fertility, and livestock.
 - He told them they would have victories over their enemies, and a treasury full of gold.

The Curses Of Disobedience [28:15-68]:

- If the Israelites failed to respect God's law, God told them their cities, fields, fertility, and livestock would be cursed.
- He would introduce confusion and frustration into everything they undertook.
- Disease would be permitted to run rampant in their land.
- Israel's enemies would defeat them in battle, they would be oppressed continually, and foreign kings would rule over them.
- If Israel would not serve the Lord, the Lord would make them serve wicked men.
- Their children would be taken captive.
- Rather than being known as God's honored people, the Israelites would be shamed, and they would become a "horror, a proverb, and a byword" among the nations.
- If Israel got wicked enough, God would send armies to besiege their cities.
The sieges would be so bad, the Israelites would abandon civility and resort cannibalism.
- Continued rebellion would result in "extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting" (28:59).
- If the people persisted in evil, God would take the Promised Land away from them and scatter them throughout the nations.

Be careful before you try to apply promises given to other people to yourself.

- Some preachers will read verses like Deuteronomy 28:1-14 and tell their audience
God will make them rich and prosperous if they follow His commands.
- But those verses and those promises weren't meant for the modern disciples of Jesus.
They were exclusively given to the Israelite nation during a unique period of history.
- The reward of following Jesus is fellowship with God, future rewards and Heaven.
We aren't guaranteed earthly prosperity.
- It would be one thing if Jesus repeated similar promises to His followers, but we don't see Jesus promising prestige and riches in the New Testament.

[Note: Summary above taken from 2BeLikeChrist.com]

- Jesus' preaching about God's grace and God's judgement was equally balanced.
- When we consider our approach to telling people about God (individually and as churches), we need to make sure our approach balances a communication of the kindness of God with the severity of God [Rom 11:22].

Scene 4: Joshua 8:30-35 Fulfill Moses' Command To Renew Their Covenant In The Land

Background: Joshua 7: Achan confessed to coveting and taking forbidden items, specifically a beautiful robe, silver, and gold. He hid these items in the ground inside his tent. Achan's actions constituted a breach of covenant with God, causing the entire nation of Israel to incur guilt and experience defeat at the city of Ai. As a result of this violation, Achan, his family, and his belongings were destroyed in the Valley of Achor,

Joshua 8: God gave Israel victory at Ai by directing a strategic ambush after they repented for their previous defeat caused by Achan's sin

The Words Of God Are Read At Mount Ebal & Mount Gerizim

Joshua 8:30-35 After the battles of Jericho and Ai, Joshua, successor to Moses, led the people to Shechem to affirm their commitment to Yahweh.

Emphasize obedience to the Torah now that they have inherited the land.

Joshua faithfully and precisely carried out the instructions from Moses.

This covenant renewal came at a time when Israel was entering a land filled with idols.

It also had a positive sense of confessing Israel's faith to Yahweh in a land filled with idols.

The Altar: Joshua built an altar of uncut stones on Mount Ebal, following Moses' instructions, and offered burnt and peace offerings, symbolizing dedication to the Lord.

Mount Ebal stood as a warning that God takes sin seriously and that harsh consequences follow the breaking of His laws.

The Law Inscribed: A copy of the Law of Moses was written on stones in the presence of the Israelites to ensure it was visible and lasting.

The Assembly: The entire nation—including elders, officers, judges, and foreigners—stood around the Ark of the Covenant, divided with half toward Mount Gerizim and half toward Mount Ebal.

The Reading: Joshua read All The Words Of The Law, including blessings and curses, ensuring every command of Moses was read.

This covenant ceremony inverted the imagery of the covenant ceremony at Mt. Sinai.

Instead of standing at the base of Mount Sinai looking upward toward God's revelation, the tribes of Israel were divided between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, gazing down at the Ark of the Covenant positioned in Shechem's plain below. This arrangement accentuated the nation's unity and shared obligations as they stood over the Ark and the ancient city of Shechem—a place steeped in divine promise.

This ceremony completed the circle Abraham began, connecting the nation's origins to its new role in the Promised Land.

Did we find everything we were to look for?

Go to Shechem between 2 mountains, covenant renewal ceremony, white-washed stones, write the words of the law, altar of uncut stone, burnt and peace offerings, division of tribes, ark of covenant between mountains, Levites read the blessings/curses, people say AMEN, oak tree.

Scene 5: Joshua 24: Joshua's Farewell Speech and Challenge

Scholars Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch noted the magnitude of this meeting:

"For this solemn act he [Joshua] did not choose Shiloh, the site of the national sanctuary, but Shechem, a place which was sanctified as no other was for such a purpose as this by the most sacred reminiscences from the times of the patriarchs."

Joshua and the same group came to Shechem at the beginning of the conquest to shout the blessings and curses. Joshua brought them back to the very spot where God had warned them to obey or be chastened.

Joshua took Israel back to its roots, physically as well as historically, in a powerful object lesson to reinforce the nation's ties to generations past and all God had done.

Joshua 24:1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, & for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

The Covenant History Remembered

Joshua 24:2-3 Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River, and they worshiped other gods.

³Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac.

- Joshua elevated the grace of God in calling them out of a pagan past.

Joshua's History Review: Joshua 24:3-13

- Divine Intervention: Joshua highlights God's grace. God guided Abraham, multiplied his descendants and delivered them from Egypt through Moses and Aaron.
- Conquest and Settlement: Joshua highlights God's Protection. God brought them through the wilderness, gave them victory over the Amorites and Balak of Moab, and allowed them to take land they did not work for and cities they did not build.

The Choice: Valley of Decision Joshua 24:14-15

Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him [present tense] in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! And if it seems undesirable to you to serve the Lord, Choose For Yourselves This Day Whom You Will Serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But As For Me and My House, We Will Serve The Lord."

Serve = Covenant worship vs. idolatry; distinguishes covenant faithfulness from apostasy

Israel's Response: ¹⁶ So the people answered and said:

"Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;

- Far be it from us = the idea of abandoning God was abhorrent to them. It is morally impossible, unthinkable, or repugnant.
- It becomes a verbal fence that guards the holiness of God, safeguards covenant loyalty, and rallies righteous indignation against sin.

¹⁷ They acknowledge God as the one who brought them out of Egypt, performed great miracles, preserved them and drove out their enemies.

¹⁸ We Also Will Serve The Lord, For He Is Our God."

- This verse highlights the people's intention to remain faithful. Joshua warns them that this is a difficult, long-term commitment.

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good."

²¹ And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the Lord!"

²² So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves, to serve Him."

And they said, "We are witnesses!"

²³ "Now therefore," he said, "put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel."

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!"

Joshua formally renews the covenant between Israel and God at Shechem, establishing binding statutes and laws.

²⁶ Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

²⁷ And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God." ²⁸ So Joshua let the people depart, each to his own inheritance.

A New Beginning: While it concludes the era of Joshua, it marks the start of the people

living under God's covenant on their own, bearing the weight of their choices in his absence.

The people are sent to their inheritances to apply their faith in their daily lives, turning a public commitment into everyday obedience.

The devil, who tried to uproot God's people from the land of Canaan, is the one who will try to dissuade us and evict us from the life of victory that we ought to have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- To lose our wealth is sad. To lose our health is worse.
- But to lose our walk with God, after we have once known Him, is tragic.

When people lose their blessing and are evicted from the land of Canaan, one of the things that caused this is that they became careless about their relationship with God.

Heb. 2:1 So we must listen very carefully to the TRUTH we have heard,
or we may drift away from it.

The Danger of Drifting: The Greek term used for drifting suggests a ship bypassing a harbor, indicating a passive, often unnoticed loss of direction rather than a deliberate rejection of faith.

Heb. 6:1 Therefore, having left [once and for all] the elementary *principles* [ABC'S]
of the teaching of Christ, Let Us Go On To Perfection.

Press on = #5342 = phero = be borne along like a ship by the wind

The use of the passive voice:

- Emphasizes the exertion of power on the individual from an outside source.
- Conveys the thought of the need of the recipient to willingly surrender to this outside influence

The present tense emphasizes the continual need for this activity.

- The writer lumps himself in this group needing to be continually borne along.
- The idea is "Let us be carried along by God's Spirit."

Discipleship means learning to be carried along by God's Spirit.

The Holy Spirit empowers believers to live an abundant life (John 10:10) by providing divine strength, spiritual fruit, and guidance, enabling a life filled with purpose, joy, and peace. This empowerment allows individuals to overcome personal limitations, resist temptation, and reflect Christlike character through daily reliance on His presence.

He who calls you is faithful. The One who calls you to a life of righteousness is
the One who will live that life of righteousness in you & through you by your consent.
Submit to the Holy Spirit whose transforming power will complete the work in you.