

HOW SHALL WE STUDY OUR OLD TESTAMENTS? - Part TWO

Sunday, March 15th, 2026 - 5:30 p.m.

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Last Sunday we studied two foundational lessons learned by Joshua. ***First, power comes from the Lord.*** And ***second, live all of life in God's promised presence.*** Now on to lesson number three:

3) NOTHING IS WORSE THAN TAKING GOD LIGHTLY - ABSOLUTELY NOTHING

Exodus 32:15-20 - "Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. [16] The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. [17] When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." [18] But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear. [19] And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. [20] He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it."

This is a difficult passage. Moses loses his temper. The people are made to drink and ingest the gold they had been carving. The whole account seems to spin out of control. It seems like God **overreacts** to Israel's foolishness.

As Moses and Joshua come down from the mountain, they hear singing from the camp below. Being a military man, the text says Joshua assumes these are the sounds of **war (17)**. And the really strange part of the account is **Moses** seems to know **in advance** what's going on at the foot of the mountain:

Exodus 32:7-8 - " And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. [8] They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

So the passage is set up - **designed** - to make us question why Moses doesn't just **tell** Joshua what's happening. He seems to allow young Joshua to spin out his theories about warfare and victory or defeat. We're meant to ponder Moses' response to Joshua's theories - **"No, Joshua. It's not the sound of war. This is something much worse than war. This is the sound of idolatry!"**(18).

Think about it. All Moses and Joshua **hear** is singing and shouting. The people aren't **suffering**. They're **happy**. No one is killing anyone. No one is hurting anyone. Everyone is content. But what's happening at the foot of the mountain is **worse** than warfare in the eyes of God. **Bloodshed** would be better than pursuing false gods.

This is the reason behind the problems people have with the Old Testament - especially all the violence and bloodshed. So many of the wars seem instigated by God Himself. And if you think of violence - as terrible as it truly is - as being the **ultimate** wickedness humans can commit, your value system will constantly collide with a God who views **self-will** as the ultimate evil in the universe. In fact, the Bible says that wars and violence are actually the **fruit** of the ultimate evil in the universe:

James 4:1-5 - "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? [2] You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. [4] You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. [5] Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?

Do you see it? God is jealous for our devotion and worship - that's in **verse 5** - precisely **because** He knows only devotion to Him can rid the world of the **self-rule** that **causes** hatred and greed and war and bloodshed. **Man-made** religion will only **cause** war and strife. When Jesus comes again swords, so the Word promises - will be turned into **plough-shares**. Back to our account:

Imagine Joshua's shock as he sees Moses, *his spiritual leader*, taking the precious law of God on those tablets of stone and *smashing them into pieces in a fit of rage!* And remember, Moses already *knew* what he was going to see at the foot of the mountain. Obviously he is *overcome* with anger and frustration. And Joshua gets his first peep into the kind of zeal for God a leader must possess.

I'm sure *two thoughts* are instantly embedded in Joshua's cranium:

- a) *Joshua sees how Moses punishes the people for this sin.* I wonder how many of us, if we had been there, might have been inclined to say, "*Listen Moses, sure they made a mistake, but don't you think you're making a big deal of this? I think they're sorry. Let's just move on and forget about it.*"

But it doesn't happen. In a flash, Joshua learns something is more terribly wrong here than he's ever seen before. Moses *prayed* in the face of battle. But this sin sent him into a *rage*.

There's no other way to say it but that our world - and much of the contemporary church - has come to *view sin lightly*. We *believe* in it. We kind of apologize for it and ask Jesus to *forgive* it. But we aren't overly *troubled* about it.

“Well, that’s because we believe in **grace** and **forgiveness**, Pastor Don.” Listen, **Moses** knew all about God’s grace and mercy. This wasn’t the first time he had seen the people turn their backs on God. Moses had gone - over and over - to God, pleading for divine mercy.

In fact, it was probably **because** the people had already **received** so much from God’s hand so **freely** that Moses can’t stand the idea they would abandon God just because he, Moses, was out of sight and mind for forty days! How can anyone who truly cherishes God’s past mercy not find it **incredulous** that people so quickly treat a merciful God so lightly!

This is what grasping God’s mercy **always** does to us. The cross doesn’t make me **more** tolerant of sin, but **less**. And there’s a **second** thought that comes to Joshua as Moses breaks the commandments and judges the people:

- b) **WHEN PEOPLE TURN FROM WORSHIPPING GOD THEY TURN TO WORSHIPPING SOMETHING ELSE THAT WILL CHOKE THEM**

Remember, it was God's own people who had done this. I don't think Joshua had ever seen anything like this in Israel. They had grumbled before. They had complained. They had told Moses God was playing a cruel trick and they wanted to go back to Egypt. They had killed each other. They had probably lied. They had tried to offer imperfect lambs as sacrifices. But there they were - ***dancing and singing around an idol.***

What does Joshua learn as he watches all the people - young children - old seniors - ***all*** of them gagging and coughing on shavings of metallic gold? And why did Moses make the people drink it all up? The text doesn't say. But could it be Moses wants the people - and especially wants ***Joshua*** - to see how worshipping anything but God ultimately makes us sick? Is it that we end up - always - choking on the things we form to take God's place in our lives?

Matthew 22:37-38 - "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. [38] This is the great and first commandment."

I now see nothing but **love** behind that stern warning. It's the command that keeps us from ingesting glass and stones and marbles. We should all **kneel** before the beauty and moral health of those verses.

So there are **three life lessons** for Joshua. They must be learned **before** the promised land can be entered. God forms people for His promises. He shapes them to be ready to inherit. The three lessons are **first, power comes from God, second, all of life must be lived in His presence, and third, nothing in all the universe is more evil than taking God lightly.**

Listen to these words from A.W.Tozer: "The Christian must deliberately narrow his interests. The jack-of-all-trades is the master of none. The Christian life requires that we be specialists. Too many projects use up time and energy without bringing us nearer to God. if you will narrow your interests, God will enlarge your heart. 'Jesus is Lord' seems to the unconverted to be the motto of death, but a great company of happy men and women can testify that it became to them a way into a world infinitely wider and richer than anything they had ever known before. Christ is the essence of all wisdom, beauty and virtue. To know Him in growing intimacy is to increase in appreciation of all things good and beautiful. The mansions of the heart will become large when their doors are thrown open to Christ, and closed against the world and sin."