

The Lord Your God Goes Before You

God's Work in the Book of Joshua

Turning Defeat to Victory

8:1-35

Focus Attention:

We have journeyed with Israel through a marvelous victory over Jericho. We have also mourned with her over the catastrophic defeat at Ai.

Looking back over your own experience as a Christian, can you identify your own personal Jericho's and Ai's? As you take possession of your inheritance in Jesus Christ ...

An inheritance in the Kingdom of Light. That participates in every spiritual blessing in Christ. That sets us apart for holy purposes. That produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. That brings a peace that passes all understanding. That rescues us from the power of the Evil One and shelters us in the Life of the Son of God. That gives us an abundant life, beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

That places us in intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

What are those times you have experienced tremendous victories: those times when you have known God's power at work in you and around you? What are those times when you have gone down in defeat, when you have allowed a love for the world and the things of the world to get in the way of your walk with Christ?

A more important question for this session is this: What do you do with your defeats?

“The following quotation runs contrary to what most people today think about life, including people in the church. It was said in a sermon preached on August 12, 1849, by the famous British preacher F.W. Robertson.

Life, like war, is a series of mistakes, and he is not the best Christian nore the best general who makes the fewest false steps. Poor mediocrity may secure that; but he is the best who wins the most splendid victories by the retrieval of mistakes. Forget mistakes; organize victories out of mistakes.

“Henry Ford would have agreed with Robertson, because Ford defined a mistake as ‘an opportunity to begin again, more intelligently.’ Joshua would also have agreed, because he is about to ‘begin again, more intelligently’ and organize a victory out of his mistakes.”

<Weirsbe, p 95>

You see, when it comes to our walk with God, *what is important is not, perhaps, what we do, but what we do after what we have done.* Our God is the God of second chances. Just look at virtually *all* of the great men and women of faith in Scripture. But do we truly believe this for ourselves? What do I do when I fail God? What do I do when I allow myself to be defeated by temptation and sin? Do I dwell in self-pity, shame and doubt? Or do I live the redeemed life in the Son of God?

Focus on the Word:

*If the Lord delights in a man's way,
he makes his steps firm;
though he stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.*

Psalm 37:23-24

How can we turn defeats into victory?

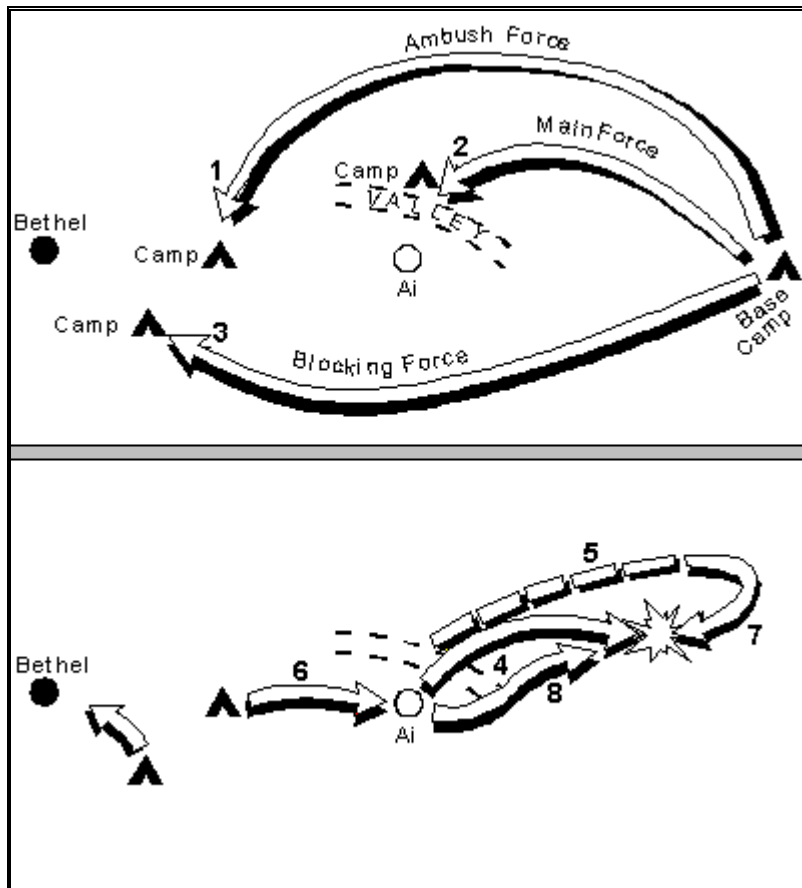
A. Be strong and courageous. (v 1)

1. It is almost as if God is willing to start all over again with Joshua and the people of Israel. God speaks to Joshua the refrain He first used as Joshua became the leader of God's holy nation.
2. Why did Joshua need to hear this? Because of Israel's unfaithfulness under Moses' leadership, God had rejected that generation of people. Joshua had evidently identified with that rejection (as his prayer in 7:7 indicates). It would have been an easy thing for Joshua to dwell on failure, questioning God's covenant faithfulness. Even worse, it would have been natural for Joshua to wonder if there was a future for a people who had failed so foolishly.
3. Now, however, the sin had been dealt with. Repentance had been complete. The guilt had been purged. When forgiveness takes place, the child of God can move forward in full confidence of faith and relationship in God. There is no reason to fear or shrink back.

B. Be active in accepting again the promises of God. (vv 1-2)

1. The last time Israel faced Ai, it had resulted in defeat. Perhaps it would be better to attempt a different city or region and come back to Ai later.
2. Instead, God sends them back to the place of defeat. He restates the promise of Jericho, but this time with Ai as the object: "I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land."
3. What will make the difference this time? The difference, of course, is that they will rely on God this time around. Previously they had become over-confident in themselves and their own strength to fight the battle. This time God's presence would allow them to experience the fulfillment of His promises.
4. An additional blessing from God accompanies this promise: "You may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves." How foolish Achan had been, and how utterly pointless his unfaithfulness had been. The firstfruits of the plunder of Canaan had been dedicated to God at Jericho. Now the people are given the opportunity to reap the rewards of conquest. If Achan had only trusted God. If Achan had only been faithful and allowed God to work things according to His timing and wisdom. Achan would have been given the desires of his heart with God's blessing.
5. To trust and obey is always the best path to take, and leave the consequences to God.

C. Be ready to fight the next battle God's way. (vv 1-8)



Attack on Ai

The first attack on Ai had ended in defeat for Israel because of one man's sin. But now, because of their obedience, God had promised victory...(1) Joshua sends out an ambush force at night to hide on the far side of Ai. (2) Next morning Joshua leads the main force to camp opposite the gate of Ai. (3) A third force is sent out to hide between Ai and Bethel, to block any intervention (Joshua 8:12). (4) The king of Ai leads his men out. (5) Joshua's main force pretends to retreat, the men of Ai pursue, as in the previous battle. (6) The ambush force enters unprotected Ai and sets it on fire. (7) Joshua's force turns to attack the men of Ai. (8) The ambush force joins the battle and overcomes the enemy.

1. The battle plan for Ai does not look too much different from the first, with a few significant exceptions.
 - a. The *whole* army of Israel was to be involved in the attack this time. The responsibility of conquest for the inheritance was to be undertaken by all of Israel, not just a few. The rewards (spoils) of victory were also to be enjoyed by all. (The unity of God's people is a recurring theme through this book.)
 - b. Different parts of the army were assigned different roles in the battle. Yet they were to coordinate the battle in support of one another.

- c. The most significant difference this time, of course, is that God is giving the marching orders. “Do what the Lord has commanded.”
2. Interestingly, even as God gives the battle plan for Ai, it is a very different plan than battle for Jericho.
 - a. At Jericho, the victory took a week of silent marching and waiting for the mighty work of God. At Jericho the people stood as God won the victory. At Jericho the city was destroyed as God brought the walls to ground level.
 - b. At Ai, the victory will be accomplished in a day. At Ai, the people will fight the battle and win the victory. At Ai, the city will be destroyed as the ambush party break into the unprotected city.
 - c. Our God is the God of “*infinite variety*.” <Weirsbe, p 97> God promises victory in the conquest for the inheritance, but He brings about the victory in a number of ways. At times He brings about a victory that we suddenly look up and recognize. At others, victory is achieved because of hard work on our part following Him in faith. God will not be limited to one battle plan. God “changes His methods lest we start depending on our personal experience instead of on His divine promises.” <Weirsbe, p 98>
- ☞ It is important that we seek God’s will for each undertaking so that we don’t depend on past victories as we plan for the future. How do we discover God’s marching orders for the battles in our lives? It comes by careful discernment of the mind of God (1 Cor 2:12-16). We begin with regularly staying in God’s word (2 Tim 3:16-17). We continue through a prayerful life seeking wisdom from God (James 1:5). We must search for God’s will with the trust that God will provide the answers we seek (James 1:6). We also rely on the counsel of godly persons in our lives who are also growing in discernment of the mind of God (Heb 13:7). Too many times we give up on knowing the marching orders of God before we spend the time and go to the right sources for those marching orders. Instead, we presume to know the mind of God without seeking the mind of God.

D. Be careful about over-estimating the enemy. (vv 5-7ff)

1. The battle plan for this encounter with Ai is not dissimilar to what the previous raiding party had tried. The army of Ai had come out to meet the Israelite army then just as Joshua says they will do this time. What would make Israel believe the results will be any different?
2. The difference is found in the confidence. Before, Israel had placed her confidence in herself. The Israelite army had assumed its strength could win the battle. It had been a misplaced confidence. When the confidence is placed in God’s strength and promises, however, the victory is assured.
3. When the army from Ai went out for certain victory again over Israel, God used their foolishness against them. He turned Ai’s strategy around to their own defeat. It is not unlike what God does with our enemy: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, *he made a public spectacle of them*, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15, italics mine).

- ☞ “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). We must take our enemy seriously and avoid treating him trivially. But by the same token, we must place greater faith in the power of Christ than we do the power of the Evil One. We can face our enemy with confidence because we have the greater power.

E. Be persistent. (vv 18-27)

1. “It is very probable that Joshua had a flag or ensign at the end of his spear, which might be easily seen at a considerable distance; and that the unfurling or waving of this was the sign agreed on between him and the ambush ... and on seeing this flag or ensign unfurled, the men who lay in ambush arose and entered the city.” <Adam Clarke>
2. The scene in this battle is reminiscent of Moses’ battle against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8ff). As long as Moses’ hands were lifted high above the battle, the Israelites had the upper hand in the battle. Perhaps this was one way Joshua used to keep the fervor and spirit alive in the army of Israel as they fought the battle against Ai. It was a reminder of God’s presence and God’s promise of victory.
3. “For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai.” The battles ordered by God are to be carried out to completion. There were several parts of the strategy God had given Joshua. Victory was not complete until every piece of the battle had been won.

F. Be celebratory by focusing on covenant. (vv 30-35)

1. “After the victory of Ai, Joshua did a strange and militarily foolish thing. Instead of securing the central sector of the land with further victories (see map) he led the Israelites [about 30 miles northward] on a spiritual pilgrimage. Why? Simply because Moses had commanded it (Deut 27).”

“An article on bibleplaces.com refers to an experiment conducted in the 19th century by J.W. McGarvey, during his tour of the Holy Land . He describes how these two mountains face each other with their slopes being about one mile apart, with the Biblical city of Shechem lying between them. On the side of both mountains there is a deep semicircular recess, which form two natural amphitheatres, where voices can carry for considerable distances. For his experiment, McGarvey stood between the two mountains, in the place where the Levites and the people of Israel would have stood. He said that there would have been enough space for 600,000 Israelites and their families. One of his two companions climbed halfway up Mt. Ebal , and another climbed halfway up Mt. Gerizim . Each evidently stood within the two natural amphitheatres, where they could each represent six tribes for the blessing and the curse.

“The author read the blessings and the curses, and his two companions responded with, “Amen”, as Moses had instructed. The companion on Mt. Gerizim could hear the author clearly, and his response could also be heard clearly. The companion on Mt. Ebal could hear the voice of the author, but had difficulty distinguishing the words because of trees and terracing on the mountainside, which affected the acoustics. McGarvey suggested that if Joshua had a loud voice, he could have easily been heard by the whole the whole people of Israel , even without the Levites repeating his words.”
<As reported at <http://mudpreacher.wordpress.com/2009/06/22/turning-fathers-into-men-of-god/>>

2. At Gilgal, God had renewed His covenant relationship with Israel. Here, Joshua provides Israel “the opportunity to make a new commitment to the authority of Jehovah as expressed in His law.” <Weirsbe, p 102>
 3. This seems to be such a different reaction from the celebration that took place after Jericho, at least as it is recorded. After Jericho, the people were confidently ready to flex their muscle again. After Ai, Joshua leads the people in worship.
 - a. They thanked God through burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.
 - b. They honored God by acknowledging His presence in their midst.
 - c. They listened to God as the words of the law were read to the whole assembly of men, women and children. (Notice, according to the instructions in Deuteronomy, that it was *active* listening. As each of the blessings and curses were read, the people responded with “Amen!”
- ☞ When failure in my life is turned into victory, what is my most natural reaction? Do I rejoice over the great accomplishment I have had? Do I sit back, prop my feet up, and rest in my accomplishment? Do I hide from the victory hoping I will never have “to face anything like that again”? Or do I give thanks and honor to God for what He has accomplished in my life? What difference does it make?

Focus on Tomorrow

Some say, “The only failure is the failure to learn.” Others say, “The only thing you can learn from losing is how to lose.” What would Joshua say in this regard? What do *you* have to say?

What defeat have you suffered for which you are having a hard time recovering? Is there a lesson that needs to be learned in that defeat? Is God asking you to try again, only this time *His* way?

Two more memorials have been set up on this occasion.

- ✦ One is at the gate of Ai (v 29) as a reminder of battles that are won with careful obedience to God’s instructions.
- ✦ Another is between Ebal and Gerizim where pillars of plaster bear the guiding words of God. It is a testament to the commitment God’s people made in their covenant relationship with God.

Which reminder do you need most this week? What memorials do you have of God’s faithfulness in keeping His promises? Of your fidelity to His covenant with your through the blood of Christ?

How will you fight your battles differently this week and experience in more profound ways the inheritance that is yours in Jesus Christ?