

God is the God of New Beginnings

Joshua 8

Expensive hunting dogs had been mysteriously disappearing in Florida's Blackwater River State Forest. Dog owners who ventured into the forest northeast of the Pensacola area had suspected thieves were at work. After a \$5,000 fox-hunting hound disappeared, the owner used electronic tracking gear to zero on a transmitting device attached to the dog's collar. The State-contracted gator hunters were called in. They captured a 50-year-old, 11 foot, 500-pound monster. There was no doubt he was the thief. Inside his stomach were several dog collars, including one from a dog that had disappeared 14 years earlier.

Something far more serious and tragic is going on in our churches. One by one, people drop out of sight. What's the cause? They have been swallowed up in discouragement from spiritual defeat in their lives. As they consider how they have blown it, they seriously doubt if God could ever bless or use them again, and they give up.

Friends, no matter what mistakes we may have made, the worst mistake of all is to throw in the towel. God's Word to Joshua, after his mistake, shows us that He would not have us to dwell on, be overly discouraged by, or be paralyzed in fear by our past failures. Yes, God would have us to learn from our mistakes. Yes, God would have us to come to Him, confessing our sin, so as to experience His forgiveness. But, No, God would not have us to dwell on our past sin once it has been acknowledged and forgiven. He would not have us to continue living in discouragement and fear. Our defeat or failure does not necessarily signal the end of our usefulness to God. God is a God of new beginnings.

Last week, we considered Israel's disheartening, humiliating defeat against Ai. While the primary cause of this defeat was the sin of Achan in taking and hiding the spoils of Jericho which God had clearly forbidden, the secondary cause of the defeat was Israel's being overly self-confident and Joshua's failure to check with God, the Commander of God's army, before making and executing a plan of attack against Ai.

This defeat at Ai brought fear and discouragement. Joshua and the people of Israel are left to think, "We've blown it big time! How can God make anything useful out of this mess? What do we do now?" Joshua and the people need a word of encouragement.

Notice the new start that God gives to Israel after dealing with their sin. It is the same kind of fresh start He can give us as His children after we have confessed and dealt with sin:

Read Joshua 8:1-2

A new beginning for Joshua and Israel (Joshua 8:1-2)

A word of encouragement (1a)

Our failures are often times accompanied by discouragement and fear. We say, “Look what I have done!” and feel demoralized as we look back at our failure and then we say, “How can I do that?” feeling paralyzed by fear as we look ahead to future challenges. Once sin has been properly dealt with, God says, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Don’t let past failures demoralize you. Don’t let future challenges paralyze you. God hasn’t abandoned Joshua or Israel. Achan’s sin has been dealt with, and they can move forward once again and attack Ai.

The words “do not be afraid, do not be discouraged” no doubt served as great encouragement to Joshua giving him assurance that God was with him and had not forsaken him. These were the same words that Moses spoke to the 12 spies at Kadesh Barnea (Deut. 1:21) before spying out the Promised Land. These were the same words Moses spoke to Joshua 40 years later when he was turning over the reigns of leadership over to the younger man (Deut. 31:8). These were the words God spoke to Joshua after the death of Moses (Joshua 1:9). God was with Joshua and ready to lead him again into conquest if he was ready to trust Him and obey His plan.

A word of direction (1b, 2b)

“Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai.....Set an ambush behind the city.”

In his first attack of Ai, Joshua followed the advice of his spies and only sent 3,000 men to attack the city. In his second attack, Joshua is instructed by the LORD to use all of his fighting men. In his first attack, Joshua sent the men to attack the city straight on. In his second attack, Joshua is told by the LORD to form an ambush.

A word of promise (1c-2a)

“For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder.”

“I have delivered” was God’s promise to Joshua and guarantee of victory. Israel will obey God’s instruction this time, God will be with them, and they will win the battle.

In the attack of Jericho, Joshua and the men weren’t to take any of the plunder for themselves. God fought that battle, therefore God got all the spoils. In the attack of Ai, though God still is the One who delivers the city into Israel’s hands, the men fight the battle and are therefore allowed to claim the plunder as spoils for themselves.

Notice the irony here. The enrichment Achan pursued on his own in disobedience to God’s command is fulfilled for the rest of Israel. Had Achan only waited a few days, he could have claimed all of the wealth his heart desired. God always gives His best to those who trust and obey Him and wait on His timing. Those who run ahead of the Lord to grab things for their themselves, who take things that are not rightfully theirs, and who fail to wait on, trust, and obey God only rob themselves of His blessing and hurt others.

Joshua informs Israel's army of God's strategy for attacking Ai (Joshua 8:3-8)

Read Joshua 8:3-8

The outworking of God's plan involves three groups of soldiers:

Group #1- 30,000 of the best fighting men are sent out to set an ambush on the West side of Ai.

Group #2- The main army will eventually position itself in the valley North of the city and begin the attack from there.

Group #3- The third group is another ambush numbering 5,000 men which Joshua chooses from the main army and sets them in position on the West side between Bethel and Ai.

The attack plan is this. The 30,000 men will set their ambush behind and close to Ai on the West side of the city. Joshua and the main army will attack the front of the city. When the men of Ai respond, Joshua's army will retreat. This scenario will look to Ai just like the last battle. They will say, "They are running away from us as they did before." Whereas in the first battle, Israel's overconfidence led to their defeat, it would be Ai's overconfidence in the second battle that would lead to their defeat. Israel's main army will lure Ai's army out of town and then the ambush troops will move in to take the city. God will give them the city and they are responsible to destroy it by burning it.

God's battle plan which he gave to Joshua for conquering Ai is dramatically different from the plan for conquering Jericho.

The Jericho operation involved seven days of marching and was carried out in the open daylight. The plan of attack for Ai involved a covert night operation that prepared the way for the daylight assault.

The whole army was united at Jericho.
The army was divided in the attack on Ai.

God performed a mighty miracle in causing the walls of Jericho to fall down.
There was no such miracle at Ai.

It is important that we depend on God and seek His direction in each of our undertakings in spiritual matters as opposed to depending on past victories. The old WWII song, "We did it before, And we can do it again!" doesn't always apply to the work of the LORD. We dare not fall into the trap of always doing things the way we have always done them before. The principles that God would have us to carry out never change. The principles for which Joshua and Israel are responsible to God remain constant: Joshua and the people of Israel need to trust God to fulfill His promises, they need to depend on God's presence and power, and they need to meditate on and obey His Word. These principles will never change. The manner in which God would have us to accomplish the principles he has laid out for us often do change.

For example, in Israel's case the battle plan for attacking Ai was different than the plan for Jericho.

The Lord will change the methods He leads us to use lest we start depending on personal experience with various methods instead of depending on Him.

Donald Campbell writes, “God is not limited to any one method of working. He is not and will not be stereotyped in His operations.”

Joshua’s army sets up the ambush as Joshua commanded (8:9-13)

Read Joshua 8:9-13

Joshua, at the conclusion of communicating God’s plan of attack to Israel, said, “Do what the LORD has commanded. See to it; you have my orders.” Israel’s army obeys orders, setting up the attack of Ai just as the LORD directed for it to be set up.

Joshua’s army eliminates the people of Ai and destroys the city (Joshua 8:14-29)

The king of Ai attacks Joshua’s army with all of his forces leaving the city unprotected (8:14-17)

Read Joshua 8:14-17

Israel’s ambush moves into destroy Ai (8:18-19)

Read Joshua 8:18-19

God instructs Joshua to lift his javelin toward Ai, which he does. As soon as he does this, the men ready for ambush rise from their hiding positions and rush forward to capture Ai and set it on fire. It is God who told Joshua to lift the javelin as the signal for the troops to enter the city and burn it. God has Joshua give the signal at just the right time. Joshua holds up the javelin until all who lived in Ai are destroyed (8:26). Joshua’s use of the javelin reminds us of Moses lifting up his staff in Israel’s battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 17). His lifting up the javelin serves as an indication to us that it is God who is directing the army of Israel and delivering the city into Joshua’s hands. It is from the LORD that the victory came.

Ai’s army and people are eliminated (8:20-29a)

Read Joshua 8:20-29

When the men of Ai look back to see the smoke rising from the city, Joshua’s troops turn to fight them. The ambush troops also come out of the city against them. The men of Ai are caught in the middle and have nowhere to escape. Israel kills all of the army of Ai, leaving no fugitives or survivors except the king whom they later hang. Then they return to the city and kill everyone in it. 12,000 people fall that day. As God instructed them, the spoils go to the victors. The men of Israel get the livestock and possessions of the people of Ai.

This destruction was not the slaughter of innocent people, but the judgment of God on a people who had long resisted His truth and grace. It was the LORD who determined the necessity of this destruction and commanded Joshua to carry it out. It was the LORD who delivered Ai into the hands of the Israelites.

Joshua establishes another stone memorial (8:29b)

After Achan is stoned, a pile of rocks is heaped over his grave as a reminder of the need to obey and of the destructive consequences of sin. Here, a large pile of rocks is placed over the body of Ai's king as a memorial of what God did for them at Ai. These memorials communicate the importance of remembering and learning lessons both from our moments of defeat and victory. We don't want to dwell too long on either, but we do always want to be careful to remember the lessons they teach.

After the defeat of Ai, the second victory in central Canaan, many might have expected Joshua to hurry on and take the next city! Militarily, this would make sense. Instead, Joshua interrupts the military activities and marches about 30 miles to Mount Ebal. Why does he do this?

Joshua leads Israel on a pilgrimage for a special time of worship and to remind God's people of His Law (8:30-35)

Read Joshua 8:30-35

You will remember the following responsibility that God gave to Joshua at the beginning of his taking over for Moses as Israel's leader—"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:8).

In the Law, we read the following in Deuteronomy 27:1-8- "Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: 'Keep all these commands that I give you today. When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. Build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool upon them. Build the altar of the LORD your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.'"

In keeping with his responsibility as Israel's leader and in obedience to the Law, Joshua leads Israel to Mount Ebal to worship the LORD and to review His Law there.

The ceremonies here involve three things.

First, Joshua builds an altar of uncut stones on Mount Ebal. On this altar, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings are offered to God. This is a time of worship.

Second, Joshua copies the Law of Moses on stones in front of the Israelites who are standing on opposite sides of the ark of the covenant with half in front of Mount Ebal and the other half in front of Mount Gerizim.

Third, Joshua reads the entire Law to the people, not missing a word of it. The area where Joshua reads is between two mountains which creates a natural amphitheater that allows everyone to hear as he proclaims the blessings and the curses of the Law.

Apparently, from Deuteronomy 11:26-31, the curses were to be proclaimed on Mount Ebal in front of which half of Israel's population stood and the blessings on Mount Gerizim in front of which the other half of Israel's population stood. J. Hampton Keathley writes, "So, Mount Ebal stood for cursing and Gerizim stood for blessing. This event between the two mountains formed a huge object lesson. What happened to the Israelites in the land, the history of Israel, was going to depend on where they lived, as it were—on Mount Ebal, in disobedience and under the curses, or on Mount Gerizim, in obedience and under God's blessing."

Why does Joshua go to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim? The obvious answer is that God's Law commanded it. Another reason for this location is that these mountains are central to the Promised Land. From the peaks of these mountains, most of the land could be seen. They are also ideal for amplified sound as I mentioned earlier. I believe there is yet another reason for this location. If you look at a map from Joshua's time, you will find that the city Shechem lies between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Does Shechem ring a bell?

It was at Shechem that the LORD first appeared to Abraham and it was there that Abraham built his first altar to the LORD. Worship at this location reminded Israel of God's faithfulness to the original Abrahamic covenant. The reading of the Law here reminds Israel of the conditions God has established in order for them to experience the blessings promised in His covenant with Israel. The fulfillment of God's covenant is guaranteed, but the ability of this generation of Israel to experience those blessings themselves is conditioned upon their obedience to God's Law.

What lessons can we learn from this account?

Even when we fail God, He doesn't abandon us

He may allow us to experience difficult consequences that result from our failure; He may send discipline to correct us; However, He will never abandon His people.

Just because we have blown it doesn't mean God is through using us

Peter failed, denying Jesus three times, but the Lord used him to feed His sheep.

Mark failed, abandoning Paul and the others in the middle of their missionary work, but Paul later wrote in 2 Timothy 4:11b- "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

Joshua failed, taking charge of the army and giving orders before consulting first with God. Israel failed, marching ahead in self-confidence based on the spies report. However, God used Joshua again, commanding Israel's army through his leadership. God used Israel again, using them to judge and remove the inhabitants of Ai.

Like Joshua and Israel, we must not allow past failures to demoralize and paralyze us. When we make mistakes and fail, we need to confess our sins and then we need to move on. Do not be afraid! Do not be discouraged! March on, trusting God to lead you and to enable you to move forward in living your life for Him. Satan is going to try to throw you on a guilt trip. He is going to plant the idea in your head, "What's the use, I can never enjoy God's blessings and the joy of being used again of Him—I've blown it big time." Don't listen to him. Remember the lesson of this story, "God is a God of New Beginnings." He graciously gave Joshua and Israel the opportunity to be used of Him again. He can do the same with us.

God can turn the consequences of sin into a means of blessing

That is, of course, when we have confessed sin and been restored to fellowship with Him. Israel's fearful flight as the result of earlier failure was used by God as a means of drawing the army of Ai out of the city, as part of God's plan to defeat them and give His people the city. God specializes in bringing "glory out of the ashes" of turning tragedy into triumph. God is the God of new beginnings.