

## A Study of the Book of Joshua

### Sermon # 7

#### “Recovering From Defeat”

#### Joshua 8: 1-29

As we saw last week there is no failure or mistake that cannot be remedied through the grace of God. Even Achor the valley of trouble can be turned into a door of hope.

F.W. Robertson, the nineteenth-century British Bible teacher, pastor, and scholar (the author of *Robertson's New Testament Word Studies*), taught for several years at Wake Forest University in North Carolina just before and during the American Civil War. He preached a series of messages in the chapel at Wake Forest just before the Civil War broke out, using the book of Joshua. The central theme of the series was that the issue is not whose side the Lord is on, but whether we are on the Lord's side, as we saw when Joshua met the Lord face-to-face before the battle of Jericho. In a sermon he preached on August 12, 1849, he made this amazing statement, which ties in beautifully with what we'll be looking at in chapter 8: *"Life, like war, is a series of mistakes, and he is not the best Christian nor the best general who make 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."* Joshua would have agreed, because in chapter 8 he allows the Lord to organize the victory out of his mistakes and failures. [As quoted by Doug Goins. *Turning Defeat Into Victory. Joshua 8:1-35. Sermon Central.*]

When we have made a mistake and suffered a defeat what we do is now up to us, we can live in that defeat or we can by God's grace learn from it and go on. Though we should never seek to fail, failure can be a backdoor to success if we are willing to seek the forgiveness of God and deal with our sin in the way that God has prescribed. Five Secrets for Getting Back on Track After A Defeat.

1. To Get Back On Track We Need To Remember That God Never Forsakes His Children No Matter How They Fail Him

*"Now the LORD said to Joshua: "Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed;..." (v. 1a)*

After we have sinned, the Devil loves to whisper in our ear, *"You messed up big time and God can never use you again."* It is at just such a moment in Joshua's life, following the humiliating defeat, God specifically reminded Joshua of his promise. I am sure that morale in the camp was at an all time low, and I am that Joshua was never more insecure of himself as a leader. It is reassuring to understand that God does not permanently withdraw His blessings when we fail Him.

2. To Get Back On Track We Need To Learn Not to Repeat the Same Mistakes

*"...take all the people of war with you,..." (v. 1b)*

God's word to Joshua was to use all of the fighting men of Israel, in other words this time take the whole army. Though the primary cause of defeat at Ai was Achan's sin, a contributing factor was underestimating the enemy, overestimating themselves and presuming upon the power of the Lord.

How often do we get in trouble because we make the same mistake twice? To get on track we need to be willing to listen to God and obey fully.

### 3. To Get Back On Track We May Be Required To Return To The Scene Of An Earlier Defeat (vv. 1c-2)

"... and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. (2) And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves. Lay an ambush for the city behind it."

Joshua is told to again go up and attack Ai. He is to return to the place of defeat and now because they were in a right position with the Lord, God promises to turn the place of defeat into a place of victory.

One thing that Israel had come to understand is that they must have God's power even for taking the smaller city of Ai. With the power of God even Jericho could be taken and without his power even the seemingly insignificant Ai could not be taken. How utterly dependent God's people are on God's power for any success!

Not only would there be victory in the place of defeat, but here would be additional reward. Unlike at Jericho, the Lord gave the Israelites permission to take the spoils of Ai for themselves. How ironic to realize that had Achan waited and not allowed himself to be guided by greed and selfishness, he would have been able to take all he wanted and needed when they captured Ai.

### 4. To Get Back On Track We Need To Remember That The Recovery Of Lost Ground Is Always Painful And Costly

There is no erasing the fact that thirty-six men had lost their lives (7:5) in the humiliating defeat at Ai. But I think that it is neat that God uses the previous defeat as a springboard to victory. Verse three reveals, *"So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night. (4) He commanded them, saying: "Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind the city. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. (5) Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city; and it will come about, when they come out against us as at the first, that we shall flee before them. (6) For they will come out after us till we have drawn them from the city, for they will say, 'They are fleeing before us as at the first.' Therefore we will flee before them. (7) Then you shall rise from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand. (8) And it will be, when you have taken the city, that you shall set the city on fire. According to the commandment of the LORD you shall do. See, I have commanded you."*

In verses five and six they are told, *"... when they come out against us as at the first, that we shall flee before them. (6) For they will come out after us till we have drawn them from the city, for they will say, 'They are fleeing before us as at the first.'* The plan as set out by the Lord utilizes the Israelites previous defeat to their advantage. God is able to turn even the humiliating mistakes in my life to my

good. Paul assures us in Romans 8:28, that can cause even our mistakes to “... *work together for good.*” That does not mean that we will not experience the negative effects of our failures, just as Israel did. Thirty-six choice warriors lost their lives because Israel walked outside of the will of God. Furthermore, fear and anxiety gripped the hearts of God’s people. Morale was a low ebb. But God changed all of that for Israel and He can do it for us too. He can turn our blunders into blessings.

But now God used the same strategy that originally brought defeat to Israel to deceive and trap the men of Ai.

Verse nine continues the story, “Joshua therefore sent them out; and they went to lie in ambush, and stayed between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua lodged that night among the people. (10) Then Joshua rose up early in the morning and mustered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. (11) And all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near; and they came before the city and camped on the north side of Ai. Now a valley lay between them and Ai. (12) So he took about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. (13) And when they had set the people, all the army that was on the north of the city, and its rear guard on the west of the city, Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley.”

It is never easy to recover lost ground. To win back the lost territory the Israelites are going to have to go all out in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy.

According to verses fourteen through twenty-two the plan worked just like clockwork. When the king of Ai saw Israel’s army he took the bait and pursued the Israelites who pretended to retreat in fear as they had done before. This left city of Ai unguarded. At the Lord’s command, Joshua stretched out the javelin in his hand and, with this as a signal, the troops hidden in ambush on the west side ran to the city and set it on fire. This left the men of Ai surrounded with no place to flee for now Joshua and his men with the 5,000 hidden in ambush all turned to fight the men of Ai. The troops of Ai were completely demoralized, when they turn and see their homes burning they suffered two psychological blows; they would realize they had no avenue of escape and that they had little to fight for. In a matter of minutes they went from the euphoria of thinking the enemy was fleeing in terror to the despair of realizing that their loved ones were perishing and that they themselves had no way of escaping, much doing anything to help.

After killing all Ai’s soldiers, Israel’s army reentered the city and killed all its inhabitants (vv. 23-29). The dead soldiers and citizens totaled 12,000. Plunder was taken from the city as God had said they could do (vs. 2). The city was made a heap of ruins. The victory for Israel was total and complete.

##### 5. To Get Back On Track We Need To Remember The Source Of Blessings (vv. 30-35)

“Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, (31) as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: “an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. (32) And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. (33) Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as he who was born among them. Half of them were in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had

commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel. (34) And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.

(35) There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them.”

Joshua did not celebrate with a victory march or a dazzling banquet. Instead he did a most unusual thing. In obedience to the command of Moses (Deut 27) Joshua had the people travel some 30 miles to the valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim where he built an altar and carried out a renewal service in recognition that their success was entirely dependant on being obedient to God. It must have been an impressive and moving experience. Curses upon curses if you do not obey God’s law! Blessing upon blessing if you do!

James Boice writes: *The Mountains, which are about three thousand feet above sea level or one thousand feet above the valley between them, are quite barren. The valley is often green, and at one place where the mountains come close together there is a natural amphitheater. F. B. Meyer describes it as a place where the mountains are hollowed out “and the limestone stratum is broken into a succession of ledges ‘so as to present the appearance of a series of regular benches.’” It is “a natural amphitheatre ... capable of containing a vast audience of people.” This amphitheater was the people’s destination, and it was here that they camped out for the ceremony. [James Montgomery Boice, Joshua: We Will Serve the Lord, (Revell, New Jersey, 1989), p. 89.]*

Notice three things with me.

1. At the same time that the law was read revealing the sin the altar was constructed as a solution to the problem of those who hear the law but do not keep it. It was God’s solution to the sin problem.

2. The altar is not built in the valley between the two mountains, and not on Mt. Gerizim, but on Mt. Ebal from which the curses are read. In other words the altar was for sinners.

3. The altar is built with natural stones without human workmanship. *“an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool”* (v. 31) It is a denial that human being can add anything at all to salvation.

Conclusion

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4. To Get Back On Track We Need To Remember That The Recovery Of Lost Ground Is Always Painful And Costly.

5. To Get Back On Track We Need To Remember The Source Of Blessings.