**Victory in the Place of Defeat**

November 3, 2019

Joshua 8:1-35

Key verse 8:1 “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land.’”

The victory at Jericho and the defeat at Ai were recorded side by side in order to teach us a lesson: Obedience and trust in God lead to victory. No challenge is too great to overcome. On the other hand, disobedience leads to defeat. This lesson is reinforced when the Israelites renewed the covenant at Mount Ebal after the victory later in this chapter. In the previous chapter, we learned that because of sin, God’s name had been dishonored, people lost their lives, and God’s people were filled with gloom and despair. The story of Ai is a message of warning. It reminds us that sin cannot be tolerated in the Christian life. Sin cut the relationship between God and man, and between man and man. The story of Ai is also a proclamation of hope. It reminds us that blessing will flow again when sin is confessed and dealt with. Today we will learn about God who encourages like a father. Our God has power to keep his promises without failure and power to achieve what he says. His encouragement becomes our strength. He gives instructions of ingenious strategy of winning the battle. God’s instructions are always a winning strategy in our spiritual battles. May God’s encouragement be filled in your heart by hearing today’s words!

Look at verse 1. “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land.’” God knew what was going on in Joshua’s mind. God said, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” God didn’t want Joshua to dwell in negative thoughts and bitter feelings. God didn’t want Joshua to suffer long due to the failure. God wanted Joshua to rise, stand up, and lead his people to fight a good fight to take Ai. God assured him by saying, “For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land.” Victory was already a done deal by God. All Joshua had to do was obeying him only. Verse 2 introduces God’s instruction that Joshua should follow. It reads, “You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city.” This time God allowed the Israelites to take the plunder and livestock for themselves. If only Achan had suppressed his greedy and selfish desires for a few days and obeyed God’s word at Jericho, he would later have had all his heart desired and God’s blessing too.

With God’s blessing assured through the words of comfort, a few specific directions are given. First, don’t make the same mistake twice: God’s word to Joshua was to use all the fighting men of Israel. Though the primary cause of the defeat at Ai was Achan’s sin, a secondary cause was underestimating the enemy, overestimating themselves, and without seeking guidance from God. So they are now told to take all the fighting men and to go at God’s command trusting in the fact that it was God who would give them victory.

Second, turn the place of defeat into the place of victory: Notice what happens here. Joshua is told to again go up and attack Ai. He is to return to the place of defeat, and now, because Joshua and the people trust in God, God promised that they could turn the place of defeat into a place of victory. When Sai failed a course twice in his 2nd of a university, he had to go back to retake it to pass. He was fearful, but he took courage, depending on God.

Third, the basis of victory is always the same: The words, “as you did to Jericho” reminds us that victory at Ai would not only be as complete as that at Jericho, but that as with Jericho, it would come by the power of God regardless of the strategy used. God wants our places of defeat turned into places of victory. We are not to live with defeat or accept it as the norm for the Christian life. God doesn’t want that Ai of sin in your life to remain unchallenged simply because the last time you tried to deal with it you were not successful. He doesn’t want us to avoid difficult problems simply because we were not able to overcome them in the past. He doesn’t want his churches to withdraw from proactively evangelizing their community simply because they didn’t make any major inroads as a result of earlier campaigns. He doesn’t want us to give up inviting students to Bible study simply because they refused in the past. He wants us to go back to the place of defeat in order to fight again until we get the victory.

Fourth, a change in strategies: The strategy used at Ai differed entirely from that employed at Jericho. This is highly instructive for us in ministry, in spiritual battles, or in the way God leads us. The Israelites did not march around the walls of Ai seven times, nor did the walls fall miraculously. Israel was now directed to conquer the city through normal combat. We should not expect God to work the same way or lead us always the same way. We need to be open and sensitive to the various ways God may lead. As the Sovereign God of the universe, He is never limited to one particular method to accomplish his purposes. What are the differences between God’s strategies for the two battles: Ai and Jericho? The operation at Jericho did not even look like a battle. The Israelites just had to circle the city many times for seven days. And after the wall tumbled down on the seventh day, they charged into the city and took it. But attacking Ai was going to be a real battle on a battlefield. The whole army had to engage in it. In addition, God told them to set an ambush. These battle strategies for conquering the two cities were quite different. But what was common between them was that they resulted in winning the battles. When we help someone spiritually to lead him to Jesus, we have to seek God’s guidance and wisdom. Each person is unique and the situation of the person may also be very unique. In addition, Satan’s soldiers work hard to snatch away the words of God sown into his heart. We need spiritual insight to discern and intercessory prayers to support the person. It is a spiritual battle.

Look at verse 3. “So Joshua and the whole army moved out to attack Ai. He chose thirty thousand of his best fighting men and sent them out at night.” Let’s look at a map for Bethel and Ai. Verse 17 give us an implication that by this battle the Israeli army conquered both Ai and Bethel. But the author mainly focuses on the city of Ai throughout this chapter. The strategy for the capture of Ai was ingenious (3-9). It involved placing an ambush behind (west of) the city. God Himself told Joshua to do this (2,8). It was an ingenious plan. Instead of costly siege, God used previous defeat to make the king of Ai proud and lured him away from the city. For example, in AD 70, the Roman army laid siege of Jerusalem with 70,000 soldiers. Israel had only 10,000 soldiers. But the Roman army laid siege for 4 months. They did not attack directly, but rather starved the Israelites to death.

The outworking of this plan involved three detachments of soldiers. The first was a group of commando-type warriors who were sent by night to hide on the west side of the city. Their mission was to rush into Ai and burn it after its defenders had deserted it to pursue Joshua and his army as they had previously done. The second group was the main army which walked the 15 miles from Gilgal early the next morning and camped in plain view on the north side of Ai. Led by Joshua, this army was a diversionary force to lure the defenders of Ai out of the city. The third group was another ambush numbering 5,000 men who were positioned between Bethel and Ai to cut off the possibility of reinforcements from Bethel to help the men of Ai.

The plan worked like clockwork (14-22). 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. After killing all Ai’s soldiers, Israel’s army reentered the city and killed all its inhabitants (23-29). The dead soldiers and citizens totaled 12,000. Plunder was taken from the city as God had said they could do (2). The city was made a heap of ruins. The king of Ai, who had been previously spared, was hanged on a tree until evening and then buried beneath a pile of stones. Thus Israel, having been restored to God’s favor, became victorious over the city of Ai. Out of their failure came not only a second chance but a great victory along with some much needed lessons. Though we should never seek to fail, failure can be the back door to success for God is willing to forgive and restore us if we will deal with our sin as prescribed in the Bible.

Look at verses 18-19. “Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city. So Joshua held out toward the city the javelin that was in his hand. As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.” Look at verse 26 also. “For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai.” In these verses we find General Joshua as a spirit-filled leader fully trusting God alone. In the previous chapter, General Joshua listened to the recommendation of some spies who were sent out to Ai. He depended on human wisdom. Then his army failed. This time General Joshua was with God and followed his instructions. He received a voice message from the LORD in verse 18. “Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.” Joshua obeyed God’s command by holding out his javelin toward the city of Ai. And it became a signal for the ambushed soldiers to take an immediate action to take the city of Ai. He didn’t draw back his hand holding the javelin until their operation was over.

Look at verse 30. “Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel.” After the victory at Ai, Joshua led all his people to go to Mount Ebal. It was a risky thing to do because Mount Ebal was located deep inside the Promised Land. And the large number of all the Israelites including women and children had to make a long journey in the middle of warfare. It was more reasonable to wait until knocking down more cities using the momentum. But he didn’t do so. He and his people were willing to go to Mount Ebal and worship the LORD as Moses commanded. Deuteronomy 27:4,12-13 says, “When you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today. Build there an altar to the Lord your God…these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.”

Again this illustrates the principle of first priorities: seek God first. Many Christians continually face defeat in their walk with God because they fail to take time to be alone with God and reflect on him and to put on their spiritual armor. Therefore, without delay Joshua led the entire nation—men, women, children, and cattle—from their camp at Gilgal northward up the Jordan Valley to the place specified by Moses, the mountains of Ebal (30) and Gerizim (33) which are at Shechem. This place was where Jesus met a Samaritan woman many years later. You can see Shechem, Sychar and Jacob’s Well under these two mountains. In the Old Testament, Abraham built his first alter at Shechem when he arrived at the land God promised first time. Jacob arrived and settled down here when he left his uncle Laban. Indeed, this was a historic place to the Israelites.

Look at verse 33. “All the Israelites, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the Lord, facing the Levitical priests who carried it. Both the foreigners living among them and the native-born were there. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.” Six tribes stood on Mount Gerizim to respond by happy and loud “Amens” when the law of the blessings was recited verse by verse. The other six tribes stood on Mount Ebal to respond by solemn and heavy “Amens” when the law of the curses was recited verse by verse.

Our God doesn’t want us to dwell in our past. Satan works hard to drag us down to bitterness and negative thoughts using our past failures. But our God is like a loving father who encourages his children by saying, “do not be afraid,” “do not be discouraged,” and “stand up.” He wants us to stand up and fight a good spiritual fight. He wants us to depend on his words rather than our own wisdom. By trusting in the Lord, obeying him, we can experience victory in the place of defeat.