

## **Joshua 8 (1984 NIV)** ***From Defeat to Victory***

### **Introduction**

#### Review:

- Chapter 6 - God commanded the people to march round the wall of Jericho 13 times (once for each of the 1<sup>st</sup> six days, and seven times on the 7<sup>th</sup> day). At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> march, they were to give a loud shout after a long trumpet blast. It worked—the wall of Jericho tumbled down. God commanded and they obeyed. When Israel stayed with God in obedience, they easily overcame the seemingly impregnable wall of Jericho.

Chapter 7 - Success has a dark side. After the great victory over Jericho, disobedience and over-confidence hit the people. Chapter 7:1 says that “the Israelites acted unfaithfully” as exemplified by the sin of Achan. In 7:3, the spies sent by Joshua reported concerning Ai, “Not all the people will have to go ... for only a few men are there.” The outcome? They suffered a humiliating defeat at Ai. After this humiliating defeat, Joshua and the leaders cried before God who then exposed the sin of Achan to them. They dealt with Achan accordingly.

When Israel attacked Ai without God in their disobedience and over-confidence, they were easily overcome by the weak city of Ai.

The beginning of Chapter 8 brings in light over the darkness in Chapter 7—God says to Joshua, “Do not be discouraged ... For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land” (8:1).

What God is saying to Joshua and the Israelites is this—“With repentance and restoration, you can move from defeat to victory.”

God is saying to His people today: “When you turn away from disobedience and back to me, you can progress and prosper in your Christian life.”

In the 1<sup>st</sup> attack of Ai by Israel, God’s name had been dishonoured, people lost their lives, and a family stoned to death for sin. The momentum Israel gained after the highs of crossing the Jordan and victory over Jericho was temporarily lost, and God’s people were filled with gloom and despair.

Defeats never have to be the end. They may in fact be the beginning if we will respond to the love and grace of God. Chapter 8 is Israel’s story of moving from defeat to victory with God.

## I. God's Way to Overcome Ai (vv. 1-29)

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.

2 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."

With the sin of Achan judged, God's favour towards the nation was restored. The next thing we read concerns God's words to Joshua to both encourage and give him instructions for victory. The first words Joshua heard were—"Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." Joshua had heard these words before.

- These were the words Joshua heard from Moses as he handed leadership over to Joshua (Deut. 31:8).
- Joshua heard the same words directly from the Lord as He commissioned him to lead the people into the land (Josh. 1:9).

As Joshua prepared to lead the people for a second attack on Ai, God reassured him with these same words—"Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." God is a God of comfort, especially when we are trying to pick ourselves up. And this we must also do to one another. God does not comfort us just to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters. God wants us to experience His comfort so that we can in turn comfort others.

God went on to give some instructions before spelling out His strategy to attack Ai.

- One, don't repeat the same mistake. 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 (covetousness), a secondary cause was underestimating the enemy and overestimating oneself (overconfidence). So they were now told to take all the fighting men and to go forth at God's command. God is a God of second chance. But that does not give us the liberty to make the same mistake a second time.
- Two, don't get stuck with a defeatist attitude. God told Joshua in v. 2: "You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king." These words remind us that victory at Ai would not only be as complete as that at Jericho, but it would also come by the power of God as with Jericho. God wants to turn our places of defeat into places of victory. We are not to live with a defeatist attitude or accept it as the norm for the Christian life. But as always, victory comes through faith in God's power.
- Three, don't ignore God's boundaries. In verse 2 Joshua was told that the spoils of Ai and its livestock could now be taken by Israel, unlike the case with Jericho. Achan took what God said must be destroyed. His greed cost him dearly—his life and that of his loved ones. If only he

had controlled his greed and obeyed God's word at Jericho, he would later have all that his heart desired and with God's blessing too.

After these three preliminary instructions, God then spelt out His strategy to attack and take Ai in vv. 3-13.

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  
 4 with these orders: "Listen carefully. You are to set an ambush behind the city. Don't go very far from it. All of you be on the alert.  
 5 I and all those with me will advance on the city, and when the men come out against us, as they did before, we will flee from them.  
 6 They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are running away from us as they did before.' So when we flee from them,  
 7 you are to rise up from ambush and take the city. The LORD your God will give it into your hand.  
 8 When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the LORD has commanded. See to it; you have my orders."  
 9 Then Joshua sent them off, and they went to the place of ambush and lay in wait between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai—but Joshua spent that night with the people.  
 10 Early the next morning Joshua mustered his men, and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai.  
 11 The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it. They set up camp north of Ai, with the valley between them and the city.  
 12 Joshua had taken about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city.  
 13 They had the soldiers take up their positions—all those in the camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley.

The strategy used at Ai differed entirely from that at Jericho. The strategy for the capture of Ai involved three detachments of soldiers. The first was a group of 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. This unit is said to number 30,000.

The second contingent was the main army which walked for miles from Gilgal and camped on the north side of Ai. Led by Joshua, this army was a diversionary force to decoy the defenders of Ai out of the city.

The third contingent was another ambush party numbering 5,000 men who were positioned between Bethel and Ai to cut off the possibility of reinforcements from Bethel.

Verses 14-29 describe for us how the battle actually took place.

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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 the 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 into 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, together with those who had come out of the city after burning it, all turned to fight the men of Ai. Humanly speaking, this is an ingenious military strategy, unlike the one commanded by God in the battle of Jericho.

Thus Israel, having been restored to God's favour, became victorious over the city of Ai. Out of their failure came not only a second chance, but also a great victory.

One truth we learn: We should not limit how God wants to work. We need to be open and sensitive to the various ways God may work. As the Sovereign God, He is never limited to one particular way to accomplish His purposes.

In American culture, Asians have been stereotyped as poor sportsmen because they are physically smaller and less robust in general. All this changed recently when a young 23-year-old Asian American of Taiwanese descent rocked the NBA scene with a string of stirring performances.

He had both studied and played basketball well in high school. However, no college offered him a sports scholarship. He got into Harvard and starred for the basketball team. Yet no NBA team drafted him. He was later picked by Golden State and Houston before landing on the New York Knicks' bench. Even then, he only got his shot when his team got desperate because the regular guard was injured.

In fact, Jeremy Lin had unwittingly started a sports craze—*Linsanity*—that swept the basketball game in the US, China, Taiwan and other parts of the world by storm.

Jeremy Lin also professed his Christian faith unashamedly in public. He took every opportunity to testify for God. He did not allow human stereotyping to limit what God could do in and through his life.

Throughout the 2011-12 NBA season Americans learnt to accept the reality that a relatively short 6' 3" Asian American could outplay taller and bigger opponents in the world of basketball.

We not only have a tendency to stereotype one another. We also have a tendency to stereotype God—limiting Him to what we think He can or cannot do. And this is what God is calling us to stop doing.

The strategy to take Jericho seemed humanly nonsensical (marched round 13 times and then gave a loud cry after a long trumpet blast). But it worked—because the people obeyed the command of God.

The strategy to take Ai the second time seemed humanly ingenious (combination of decoy, ambush, and pincer movement). It worked—because the people obeyed the command of God.

To obey God often means to let God be God. Don't box up God into a certain way of working. Let Him be the Lord. When He commands and we obey, He works and we win.

- How have you limited what God can do in and through your life?
- What can you do to allow God to work more in and through your life?

Though we should never seek to fail, failure can be the back door to success. And success is possible because God is willing to forgive and restore us if we will deal with our disobedience.

God is saying to His people today: "When you turn away from disobedience and back to me, you can progress and prosper in your Christian life."

After capturing Ai in God's way, Chapter 8 goes on to tell us ...

## **II. Israel's Pilgrimage after the Victory (vv. 30-35)**

30 Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel,

31 as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings.

32 There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua copied on stones the Law of Moses, which he had written.

33 All Israel, aliens and citizens alike, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the LORD, facing those who carried it—the priests, who were Levites. 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.

34 Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law.

35 There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.

After the victory at Ai, Joshua did what seemed to be foolish humanly and militarily speaking (vv. 30-31). To us it would seem best to immediately pursue the military campaign and move quickly with the momentum. But no, Joshua led the Israelites on a spiritual pilgrimage for a special time of worship. Why? Moses had commanded it in Deut. 27 because of what this event would stand for in the lives of the Israelites—a time of covenant renewal with their God.

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 and Gerizim at Shechem. This place had outstanding acoustical properties and one person standing on one mountain could be easily heard by someone standing on the other mountain.

The covenant renewal involved three things.

- First, an altar of uncut stones was erected on Mount Ebal and sacrifices (consisting of burnt offerings and fellowship offerings) were offered to the Lord. Jericho and Ai, where false gods of the Canaanites were worshipped, had fallen. Israel now publicly worshipped and proclaimed her faith in the one true God.
- Second, Joshua also set up some large stones on Mt Ebal and covered them with plaster. And on their surfaces, he wrote a copy of the Law of Moses.
- Third, Joshua read the Law to the people. Half of the people were positioned on the slopes of Mount Gerizim, the other half were on the slopes of Mount Ebal. The ark of the covenant was surrounded by priests who were in the valley between. As the curses of the Law were read on Mt Ebal, the tribes there responded “Amen!” As the blessings were likewise read on Mt Gerizim, the tribes there responded “Amen!” (Deut. 11:29; 27:12-26). The huge natural amphitheatre there made it possible for the people to hear every word. And Israel affirmed that the Law of the Lord was indeed to be the Law of the land.

The ceremony described here teaches us more than the principle that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings cursing.

What happened first in this ceremony before the writing and reading of the Law? An altar made of uncut stones was erected for the purpose of burnt offerings and fellowship [peace] offerings (8:31). Note two important truths:

- One, an altar is for sinners. Moses gave the command to build the altar on Mount Ebal, the place where the curses for disobedience were to be read. But why this place instead of the place that represented blessing for obedience? Because the altar was for sinners. It was for those who acknowledged their sin and who would come not as righteous people, but as sinners to the place of sacrifice.
- Two, salvation is not by human effort. The altar was constructed of uncut stones without any human workmanship. This was a complete

negation of salvation by human works. It shows that human beings can add nothing to the work of God for salvation. It is all by grace through the work of God.

With reference to Christ, this becomes a strong reminder that:

- We must recognize our sinfulness and come to God as sinners.
- We must come to the place of sacrifice (the Cross), acknowledging our need of another to die in our place (Christ).
- We must recognize there is nothing we can do or add to God's provision for the forgiveness and cleansing of sins—i.e. the person and work of Christ.

The covenant renewal on Mt Ebal and Mt Gerizim was Israel's declared commitment to worship and obey God as their God. But "commitment" is a scary word. When we commit to the Lord, we will face opposition. This is spiritual battle. The tendency then is to play safe and not commit so that no opposition will come our way. But the truth is this—when we so choose not to commit ourselves, we are already overcome by the opposition of the evil one. We will never really experience what a great God we have because our faith remains very much at the theoretical rather than practical level.

Life is filled with successes and failures. This up-and-down pattern in life can sway us off course in our journey with God. To stay with God in our pilgrimage, we need to boldly practice and not merely theorize our obedience to Him.

Not too long after I was baptized as a Christian, my pastor assigned me to follow-up new believers and to lead a home group. I was later asked to be the Sunday School Superintendent.

Then came a time when the Lord laid upon the leadership a burden to start an outreach point in Toa Payoh. We spent much time praying for people to feel led by the Lord and obey Him to be sent out for this work. I was living in Toa Payoh at that time and praying much with the leadership for people to come forward and obey the call.

It did not cross my mind that I might be one of them. After all, I was already heavily committed to some ministries in the church, and enjoying my service in these areas. It's like I was praying, "Lord, speak to someone and help him obey your call. But you can leave me out for good reasons."

One day, my pastor together with the identified leader of this outreach work (an American missionary) met up with me. They put it very directly to me, "John, we have prayed and agreed that you can contribute much to this new work. Will you consider?"

I was surprised yet felt privileged to be so affirmed. But I tried to talk my way out, "Well, I have prayed for people to obey the call but never

really see myself as one of them. What about these things I am doing in church right now?"

My pastor reassured, "Not to worry. We already have people who are ready and willing to take over from you should you decide to move over to this new work."

I asked for some time to pray over the matter. Eventually, I agreed and the church later commissioned seven of us to pioneer this outreach point in Toa Payoh.

In the midst of this involvement, I sensed God had a greater test in obedience for me. I felt His call to full-time ministry. It was not an easy test for me, but I eventually answered His call in 1986.

What then have I learnt about obedience? I have learnt that it is easy to theorize about obedience but difficult to practice obedience. It is easy to pray for others to obey than to get myself to obey.

How easy it is for us to believe in God's sufficiency in a church service or in a Bible study. However, in the real world where our livelihood is on the line, perhaps too many of us demonstrate that our belief is only theoretical. But to stay with God in our pilgrimage, we need to boldly practice and not merely theorize our obedience to Him.

- What are some areas God is calling you to obey Him?
- How can you boldly practice obedience to God in these areas?

## Conclusion

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 to turn and return to Him.

God is saying to us today: "When my people turn away from disobedience and back to me, they can be progress and prosper in their Christian life."

*We live in the presence of God's favour whenever we turn and return to Him; let us then so live our faith life so that we can be victorious Christians.*

Amen!