

Joshua 8:1-35
A Second Chance

Review and Introduction

"¹Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short

That it cannot save;

Neither is His ear so dull

That it cannot hear.

²But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,

And your sins have hid His face from you, so that He does not hear"

(Isaiah 59:1-2).

Each of us would agree that there are times when we sin. That is, there are times when we, through our own selfish desires, break the relationship to which God, in His loving mercy, has called us. The question, of course, is what then? What happens when we inevitably go against the expressed sovereign will of God? Sometimes, the answer is that God allows our sin, and its consequences, to run its course.

In our recent look at the book of Joshua, we have seen the extraordinary demonstration of this truth. The Israelites had miraculously crossed the Jordan River. They had purified themselves before battle and, with the power of God, the great Canaanite stronghold of Jericho had been taken without the loss of a single Israelite. They celebrated. They rejoiced. They praised God. But they did not know that there was one among them who had sinned. There was one who had chosen to disobey the explicit commands of God.

So God removed His hand. Without the help of God, even the small town of Ai routed the Israelite army. Men were killed. Despair overwhelmed the leaders of the people of Israel. All seemed lost. Fortunately, that is not where the narrative ended. God revealed to Joshua the cause of His displeasure, instructed Joshua on how to deal with it, and watched from heaven as Joshua did exactly as commanded. The evil was removed. It was removed violently and certainly. No trace was left.

Now, the Israelites regrouped. They again prepared for battle. The small town of Ai lay before them, and it must be taken. And that is where our narrative begins this morning.

God Reassures Joshua

"¹Now the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not fear or be dismayed. Take all the people of war with you. Arise, go up to Ai; see, I have handed over to you the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land.

²You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoils and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it" (v. 1-2).

God often has occasion to tell His people to not be afraid. We can think of divine visitations (the angel Gabriel to Mary, for example), and it is also used by God when He commanded His people to go into battle (Numbers 21:34). In this case, however, it seems that the command to not be afraid was a reference to, and a reminder of, the command to be strong and courageous that serves as the theme of the book. Once again, the Israelites were commanded by God to obey Him and not fall prey to the temptations that would lay before them.

The command to not be dismayed, though, is different. It is used sparingly in the Old Testament. It is found only here, in Deuteronomy 1:21 (where Moses recalls the Lord's exhortation to take the Promised Land), and in 1 Chronicles 22:13 and 28:20 (where David is charging Solomon with building the temple). In each case, it seems to relate to not being discouraged with what seems an overwhelming task. To once again go up against the city of Ai must have seemed just such a daunting task. Their recent defeat could not so soon have been forgotten. So, taken together, these commands to not fear or be dismayed simply meant that the Israelites should be faithful to obey the commands of the Lord, no matter how difficult that might appear on the surface, and trust that He would do the rest.

Notice that in this second attack on the city of Ai, all the people were to be involved. Joshua was to "take all the people with you" (v. 1). That does not mean that, like the procession around Jericho, every person would be involved in the battle, but that this was something all Israel was to do together. And, unlike the first battle at Ai, Joshua himself was to lead the men. He was to be personally involved in the battle, as he had been at Jericho.

God assured Joshua that the battle was already won. God had "given into your hand" (v. 1), a common phrase to signify total victory, the king, the people, the city, and the surrounding land. And further, as an encouragement to Joshua and the people, the Israelites would be permitted to keep the spoils of their victory. The cattle and plunder was theirs for the taking. Achan's sin was unnecessary. Had he been patient, he, too, could have enjoyed the spoils of war. Another reminder to trust in the Lord and in His perfect timing.

As at Jericho, the victory was to be won using a particular strategy, in this case not a ceremonial procession, but an ambush. As we see the details explained later in the narrative, the point would be to draw out the warriors of Ai and, taking advantage of their haste to destroy the fleeing Israelites, to attack them from behind when their lines were unformed. The ambush was a common tactic in the warfare of ancient times. Indeed it has enjoyed a long and successful history.

Most importantly, though, this overwhelming victory was to be achieved because divine guidance had been renewed. God reassures Joshua that what was missing in the first attack, what had been the key to success at Jericho, had been restored.

The Battle Plan

"³So Joshua rose up with all the people of war to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand men, valiant warriors, and sent them out at night. ⁴He commanded them, saying, 'See, you are going to ambush the city from behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. ⁵Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out to meet us as they did the first time, we will flee before them. ⁶They will come out after us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, "They are fleeing before us just as they did the first time." So we will flee before them. ⁷Then you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the LORD your God will hand it over to you. ⁸Then it will be when you have seized the city, that you shall set the city on fire. You shall do it in accordance with the word of the LORD. See, I have commanded you.' ⁹So Joshua sent them away, and they went to the place of ambush and remained between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua spent that night among the people" (v. 3-9).

Here we are given further details about the plan of attack. Joshua and the whole army moved toward Ai. From his army he chose thirty thousand men, the "valiant warriors" (v. 3), which implies that these were among his best. They moved at night. This was not for the purpose of engaging the enemy since night warfare was uncommon in the ancient world, but so that their movements might not be noticed. After all, there were thirty thousand soldiers in the advanced guard.

We will see in verse 12 that from this group of thirty thousand men, five thousand had another purpose. They were to "ambush the city from behind it." They were reminded to "not go very far from the city" and for "all of you be ready" (v. 4). This attack on the city was predicated on the assumption that if the Israelites acted as they had done before, the soldiers of Ai would do the same. It might seem as if the leaders in Ai would expect such a ruse, but the additional force brought by

Joshua was designed to convince them that the Israelites believed that it had been a lack of numbers, not a flaw in strategy, that had led to their previous defeat.

Joshua was to lead the frontal assault with the main portion of the army. "When they come out to meet us as they did the first time, we will flee before them" (v. 5). In other words, when the defenders of the city went out to meet the invaders they would be lured far from the city walls and its defenses by a feigned retreat. The plan was that those in Ai would assume that the Israelites were again retreating and, full of lust for another easy victory, would pursue them recklessly.

At that point, those involved in the ambush would come forward and enter the undefended city. They were assured that the smallness of their numbers would be of no consequence, for "the Lord will deliver it into your hand" (v. 7). We will see that there were twelve thousand people in the city, so an attack of only five thousand men might seem inadequate. But it was expected that the majority of the army of Ai would already be outside the city walls pursuing the retreating Israelites.

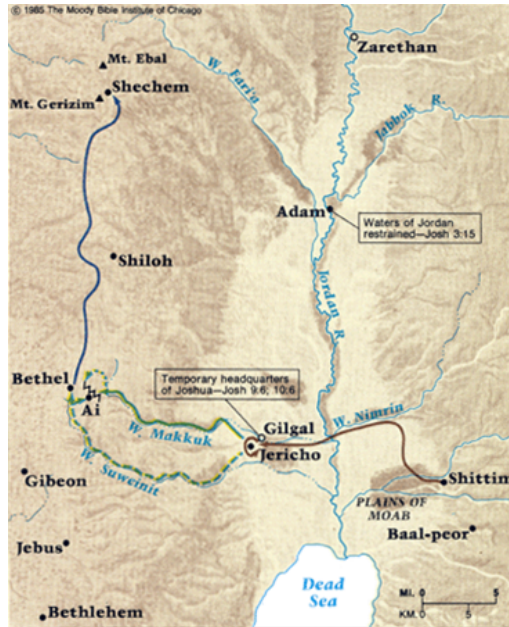
Once within the city walls, the Israelites would set the town ablaze. This would not only begin the destruction of the city, but also serve as a sign to Joshua that the ambush had been successful. Joshua concluded by reminding the Israelites that all of this was done "according to the word of the Lord" (v. 8). So Joshua concluded his instructions. The smaller contingent of Israelite forces then took up their positions west of Ai, between that city and Bethel, and Joshua returned to the main encampment.

The Trap Set

¹⁰Now Joshua got up early in the morning and mustered the people, and he went up with the elders of Israel before the people to Ai. ¹¹Then all the people of war who were with him went up and approached, and arrived in front of the city; and they camped on the north side of Ai. And there was a valley between him and Ai. ¹²Then he took about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. ¹³So they stationed the people, all the army that was on the north side of the city, and its rear guard on the west side of the city, and Joshua spent that night in the midst of the valley. ¹⁴And it came about, when the king of Ai saw them, that the men of the city hurried and got up early, and went out to meet Israel in battle, he and all his people at the appointed place before the desert plain. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. ¹⁵Then Joshua and all Israel pretended to be defeated before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. ¹⁶And all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city. ¹⁷So

not a man was left in Ai or Bethel, but they had all gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded and pursued Israel" (v. 10-17).

As we have seen in the book of Joshua, the events are not usually presented with a precise chronological structure, but rather with a back-and-forth narrative. And that, again, is the case here.



We begin this section with the start of a new day. Joshua had spent the night with the people, and those in the army had, no doubt, spent a far more restless night in anticipation of the coming battle. Now, Joshua gathered the people and, accompanied by the elders, led the army forward.

They moved from the main Israelite encampment to the north of the city. Joshua did not take all the people, but only the twenty-five thousand soldiers that were part of the attack. Remember that the other five thousand men (out of the 30,000) had been assigned to the west side of Ai from where they would lead the ambush.

The tension of our narrative builds. With everyone in position, Joshua and the main Israelite army spent the second night in the valley to the north of Ai. To be sure, those in Ai must have been aware of the imminent attack. Thirty thousand soldiers, not to mention the rest of the Israelite people had moved to within a few miles of their city. But Joshua wanted to be certain that, when the morning dawned, he and his men would be easily seen by men on the watchtowers of the city of Ai.

And seen they were. The men of Ai saw the Israelite army and informed their king, who immediately ordered his army into battle. There was no deliberation it seemed. There was no counsel taken among the leaders of Ai. Scripture states plainly that "when the king of Ai saw them, that the men of the city hurried and got up early, and went out to meet Israel in battle, he and all his people at the appointed place before the desert plain" (v. 14).

The king took his entire army, indeed it seems every able-bodied man was involved in the attack, no doubt hoping to gather spoils from the fleeing Israelites. There was no thought to defending the

city. There was no hint of a concern of a counter-attack or ambush. The king of Ai simply believed that these foolish and overconfident Israelites had once again taken it upon themselves to attack him, and he was determined to teach them a lesson. I would point out that our author takes a bit of fun here. Notice the play on words in the Hebrew. The king sees the Israelites in the valley, but he does not see the ambush lying in wait to the west of the city.

Joshua and his part of the army played their role perfectly. They resisted at first, no doubt to be convincing, but then fled in retreat. To make things even more convincing, they fled in the same direction as they had done in the previous encounter with Ai. They headed into the wilderness, that is straight back the way they had come.

And the army of Ai pursued them. In fact, Scripture points out that "all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them" (v. 16). It seems the city was practically emptied of defenders as the people of Ai determined to join in the defeat of the people of Israel and gather whatever spoils they could.

Scripture sums up the situation succinctly at this stage of the battle, "not a man was left in Ai or Bethel, but they had all gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded and pursued Israel" (v. 17). Notice that forces from Bethel joined in the battle. This suggests that perhaps Ai was a strategic outpost of that city. But it is more important because, if the soldiers in Bethel had remained at their post, they could have mounted their own attack on the ambushing Israelites from behind, thus thwarting the plan. But they did not. God's plan, had worked to perfection.

The Trap Sprung

¹⁸Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Reach out with the sword that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will hand it over to you.' So Joshua reached out with the sword that was in his hand toward the city. ¹⁹Then the men in ambush rose quickly from their place, and when he had reached out with his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it, and they quickly set the city on fire.

²⁰When the men of Ai turned back and looked, behold, the smoke of the city ascended to the sky, and they had no place to flee this way or that, for the people who had been fleeing to the wilderness turned against the pursuers. ²¹When Joshua and all Israel saw that the men in ambush had captured the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and killed the men of Ai. ²²The others came out from the city to confront them, so that they were trapped in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side; and they killed them until there was not one left who escaped or survived. ²³But they captured the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua" (v. 18-23).

Scripture, at this point in the narrative, offers us another detail. The Lord had told Joshua to give a particular sign to the men lying in ambush, so that they would know when to begin their counterattack. That sign was a raised sword, in this case the word means a short sword, such as that worn by the commander of an army. When the army was retreating from Ai, Joshua paused, faced the city, and raised his sword. Apparently some men were on lookout on the west side of the city for such a sign and relayed the message to whomever was leading the ambush. With the sign given, the men rose and attacked the undefended city.

It was not the magic of the sword that won the battle, of course, but the plan of God. The sword was merely a sign to those lying in ambush. They had no difficulties. Scripture tells us that "they ran and entered the city and captured it, and they quickly set the city on fire" (v. 19). The city was easily taken and the fires lit. A city made mainly of wood and bricks made of straw would burst into flames without much effort. Within moments, the city was ablaze.

Now, the men in the army of Ai, and no doubt the citizenry who had joined the attack as well, turned in horror to see the flames. Joshua, with the main Israelites army, ended their feigned retreat, regrouped, and renewed the attack. The people of Ai were caught between the advancing Israelite forces under Joshua's leadership and their burning city. Scripture says "they had no place to flee" (v. 20).

Joshua and his men were relentless. The smell of the smoke from the city, the sound of the flames, and the cries of the wounded all mingled together as the battle raged. And, with the fires set within the city, those in the ambush also joined in the attack of the people of Ai. Caught between the two forces, there was no way to fight and no way to escape. The people of Ai were surrounded, and there was to be no mercy shown. Those in Ai were, as Scripture informs us, "trapped in the midst of Israel" (v.22). Indeed it must have seemed so, as if the entire nation of Israel was surrounding them. All were killed.

All, that is, except the king. He was taken prisoner. He must have been identifiable from either his armor or some other insignia. He was brought to Joshua, a prisoner, and the sole survivor of the battle from the people of Ai.

The Destruction of Ai

²⁴Now when Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the field in the wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them had fallen by the edge of the sword until they were destroyed, then all Israel returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword. ²⁵So all who fell that day,

both men and women, were twelve thousand - all the people of Ai. ²⁶For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he reached out with the sword until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. ²⁷Israel took only the cattle and the spoils of that city as plunder for themselves, in accordance with the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua. ²⁸So Joshua burned Ai and made it a refuse heap forever, a desolation until this day. ²⁹And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; but at sunset Joshua gave the command and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the city gate, and erected over it a large heap of stones that stands to this day" (v. 24-29).

The battle must have continued for some time as those people from Ai who had come out of the city to join their army were chased, caught, and killed. But, eventually, the sounds of the battle began to grow quiet. Contingents of the Israelite army returned from the chase with the welcome news that none were left of the enemy. At that point Joshua led the army into the city, to kill those who remained there.

Scripture gives the total as 12,000 killed, but the fact that it was "all the people of Ai" (v. 25) was more to the point. God had been thorough in His destruction. With the victory complete, the city burning, and news that there were none left to kill (except the king, of course), finally Joshua called off the attack. The city, and all its inhabitants had been "utterly destroyed" (v. 26).

This time, there was plunder. Cattle and other beasts of burden were taken. There were other spoils of war as well. Without restriction, without guilt, the people enjoyed resupplying themselves with what they could rescue from the flames. It was probably much needed. The Israelites were now living off the land. The manna had ceased for some time. They had not yet had either time or opportunity to plant crops. Beasts of burden, and whatever grain stores could be rescued from the flames were, no doubt, appreciated.

But the city itself was totally destroyed, "a desolation until this day" (v. 28) is how the writer puts it. The heap of ruins was yet another reminder to the Israelites of the power of their God. Indeed the land of promise was becoming filled with such memorials. The stones from the crossing of the Jordan. The pile of stones covering the remains of Achan and his family, and now this. Indeed, so thorough was its destruction that even today, though scholars have made certain informed proposals, there is no certainty as to its precise location.

And there was yet to be one more such memorial. The king of Ai was hanged. His body remained as a sign for the remainder of the day, and was then taken down, placed among the smouldering ruins of the city gate, and covered with stones. This, too, as in accordance with the Law.

"²²Now if a person has committed a sin carrying a sentence of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³his body is not to be left overnight on the tree, but you shall certainly bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is cursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance" (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

The King was probably hung after he had been killed, (Joshua 10:26-27). It was to serve as a sign for the Israelites, a reminder that all of Canaan was accursed.

"²⁴Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these things the nations which I am driving out from you have become defiled. ²⁵For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:24-25).

And also, it was made clear that this was a sovereign act of God, not a reward to the Israelites for their good behavior.

"⁴Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them away from you, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to take possession of this land.' Rather, it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. ⁵It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to take possession of their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 9:4-5).

In spite of their frequent faithlessness, the Israelites were now strategically placed. They had moved from the plains of Jericho to the center of the hill country and were poised to continue to conquer the land of promise.

The Covenant Renewed

"³⁰Then Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, ³¹just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no one had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. ³²And he wrote there on the stones a

copy of the Law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. ³³And all Israel with their elders, officers, and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at first to bless the people of Israel. ³⁴Then afterward he read all the words of the Law, the blessing and the curse, according to everything that is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵There 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" (v. 30-35).

The scene shifts in our narrative from battle to worship. The location shifts as well, as the Israelites were now some twenty miles north of Ai. The people had gathered in the small valley between the mountains of Gerizim and Ebal. Between these two mountains was the settlement of Shechem. This site was of special importance to the people of Israel. Even the smallest child knew its significance.

Shechem is where the Lord had made His promise to Abram, and Abram had responded in worship centuries before.

"⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanites were in the land at that time. ⁷And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him" (Genesis 12:6-7).

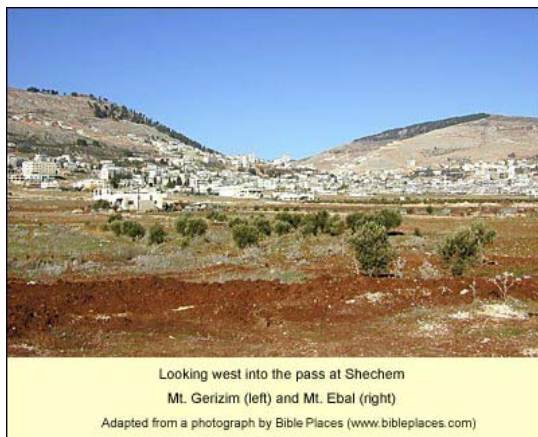
That covenant had been renewed with each of the patriarchs, down to Jacob, who also worshipped there.

"¹⁸Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. ¹⁹He bought the plot of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money. ²⁰Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel" (Genesis 33:18-20).

At his sacred site, now Joshua built an altar, and he had built it according to certain, specific instructions Moses had given in the wilderness.

"¹Then Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, 'Keep all the commandments which I am commanding you today. ²So it shall be on the day when you cross the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, that you shall set up

for yourself large stones and coat them with lime ³ and write on them all the words of this Law, when you cross over, so that you may enter the land which 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. ⁴ So it shall be when you cross the Jordan, you shall set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I am commanding you today, and you shall coat them with lime. ⁵ Moreover, you shall build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not wield an iron tool on them. ⁶ You shall build the altar of the LORD your God of uncut stones, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings to the LORD your God; ⁷ and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God. ⁸ You shall write on the stones all the words of this Law very clearly” (Deuteronomy 27:1-8).



To set the scene, Mount Gerizim is to the south of Shechem and Mount Ebal is to the north. The village itself formed a natural amphitheater. It was a perfect place for a worship service.

This altar was not designed to serve as a memorial, but as a place for sacrifice. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were made to mark the occasion.

We can also see that there was a formality to this event. There was a seriousness. All of Israel waited quietly as Joshua recopied the Law of Moses (probably the ten commandments). All the people, with Joshua and the elders before them, with the Levitical priests carrying the ark of the covenant then stood before the two mountains and heard the reading of the entire Law.

There is an emphasis on nothing being omitted. There is a sense of completeness. Notice that all of the Law was read. Notice, too, that all of Israel was there. Women and children, weary soldiers, leaders, priests, and shepherds. All of Israel had been given a second chance, and they had passed the test. Now, again, the command was before them - to be strong and courageous in obeying this Law as the conquest of the land of promise continued. God was with them again.

Takeaways

As we said at the beginning, each of us would agree that there are times when we sin, when we, through our own selfish desires, break the relationship to which God, in His loving mercy, has called us. The question, of course, is what then? What happens when we inevitably go against the

expressed sovereign will of God? God may allow our sin to have its consequences. He may, for a time, permit events to unfold that demonstrate to us the foolishness of our choices. But, as long as we draw breath, there is always the second chance.

God is always ready to forgive. He is always ready to offer us the opportunity to show Him that we can grow in our obedience. The variable in the equation is never God, it is always us. Like the Israelites, we, too, have those second chances. We, too, have those opportunities to make the right choice, to think well of another instead of critically, to honor God with our words, to pursue righteousness, to have the mind of Christ.

Our days are filled with moment after moment of second chances, or opportunities to do what God would have us to do. May He give us the grace to walk filled with His Spirit, bowed before Him, and committed to a life of obedience.