



# GETTING BACK INTO THE FIGHT

*SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP*

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Joshua 8:1-29

Tenth Message

John Hanneman

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All of us have experienced the devastating results of disobedience to God: personal setbacks, broken relationships, ruined reputations. What should we do when our own sin has defeated us? How should we respond when we have been humbled by our own mistakes, when our own doing has undone us? Does God bench us for the season? Does he put us on the injured reserve list indefinitely? Should we move to another state and make a fresh start? Is life as we knew it over?

In our studies in the book of Joshua we have seen the terrible defeat suffered by Israel as a result of Achan's sin. The sin of this one man affected the entire nation, stopping the conquest of the land dead in its tracks. Following this setback, Israel accepted corporate responsibility and made corporate consecration. After a gut-wrenching process, Achan made a full confession of his sin, and he and all his family and their possessions were judged quickly and decisively. A memorial was even built to remind the nation of the consequences of failing to follow God. The way the leaders of Israel dealt with the sin in the camp was very different from how the White House is dealing with its current problems. For Israel, there were no spin doctors, no cover-ups, no denials, no drawn-out court battles, no talk shows. The nation responded with honesty, truth and unity. And the most powerful man in the world, Joshua, humbled himself before God.

But that did not bring an end to the story. What about Ai, the scene of Israel's first defeat? Would they be able to move past this fortress in their mission to take the land? Following confession, repentance, and consecration, remarkably, Israel is commanded by God to get back into the fight. This is where we pick up the account today, in chapter 8 of Joshua.

The chapter opens with Joshua receiving an encouraging word from the Lord. Verses 1-2:

**Now the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not fear or be dismayed. Take all the people of war with you and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. And you shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it" (Judg. 8:1-2, NASB).**

The rules of holy war would now be followed scrupulously. Previously, Joshua did not get God's word before his attempt at taking Ai. Now he hears God's commands, and he will obey, following the details exactly. This time the whole army is sent out. Normally a reduced force would be employed so that Israel would be sure to trust in God, not in her military might. In the first attack, reduced numbers represented false confidence; in this instance the whole army expresses faith by going up together.

The outcome of the battle is that the king of Ai will be

given into the hands of Israel. Victory is just as sure at the outset of the second attack as defeat was certain at the start of the first. This demonstrates what can be accomplished when God's people act in accordance with his will.

In this battle, the Lord's herem, those things devoted to God for destruction, includes only the city and the people, not the livestock and precious metals. At Jericho, everything was placed under the herem, but now Israel could share the plunder. This is the pattern from Deut. 2:34-35; 3:6-7. Perhaps Jericho was a test to see if Israel would fully obey the Lord. In the coming battle, however, the temptation that caused Achan's downfall would be removed. Or perhaps, in the first battle, all of Jericho was given to the Lord, while in subsequent battles some of God's spoil would be given to his people. Also, we have to remember that the provision of manna had ceased by this time and Israel was in need of food. Perhaps this means that in our battles we receive spoils sometimes, but not all the time. We must always remember that everything belongs to our conquering King.

The battle plan calls for a cunning ambush. There is no priestly procession here, as was the case at Jericho. Thus history repeats itself. The miracle of the parting of the Red Sea was followed by the battle against the Amalekites, where God entrusted the sword to Joshua. It is the same in the history of the church. At the time of the apostles, some miraculous things happened, but in the years since, miraculous occurrences are the exception, not the rule.

Notice God's word of encouragement to Joshua. The leader of Israel is fearful, having suffered a humiliating defeat. He even questions God as to whether he is on the right track. However, God tells Joshua to not fear or be dismayed. This is similar to what God told him in chapter 1: "Do not fear, do not tremble. No one can stand before you. I will be with you. I will not forsake you. Be strong and be bold." The command to "not fear" is repeated continually to Moses, to Joshua, and to the church. The word to "be not dismayed" is descriptive of leaders whose courage has been shattered. It speaks of accomplishing a great task that has been commanded by God.

Defeat makes us fearful. We get discouraged when we succumb to sin; we become paralyzed and lose hope. Our enemies seem more entrenched and more formidable. We are afraid of getting back into the fight. No matter how many victories we have had in the past, or how many acts of God we have witnessed, we lose the will to fight. Joshua had walked with God for many, many years and he had seen God do amazing things. Yet even he needed this word from the Lord. Joshua was human, just like us. Henri Nouwen writes: "We are fearful people. We are afraid of conflict, war, an uncertain future, illness, and, most of all, death. This fear takes away our freedom and gives our society the power to manipulate us with threats and promis-

es.”

At times our fear can be more debilitating than the enemy himself. The assumption is that the only way we can be prevented from taking possession of the land is by our own fear, unbelief, and lack of courage. The only way the enemy can gain the upper hand is if we remain paralyzed by our own fears.

However, God knows when we need a word from him. When we sin, when we face defeat, he is ready with a word of encouragement that promises his presence with us. He wants us to simply start obeying him again. We don't need to mope, regret or question. When we have confessed and purified our hearts, then it is time to get back on our feet and continue the struggle. No failure has to be final. God is a faithful lover. To each one of us he says the same thing he said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid. I am with you.”

Perhaps this is the word you need to hear this morning. Are you suffering defeat at the hands of an ugly and enslaving sin? Have you have given up hope? Then God is saying to you, “Do not fear. Do not be dismayed. I am with you.” Listen to these words from the book of Deuteronomy: “When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you. Now it shall come about that when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you’” (Deut. 20:1-4).

This brings us to the preparations for the battle. Notice that these details follow in the reverse order of what had been promised by God. First, there is the ambush; then the spoil is given; and finally, the king of Ai is dealt with. The account hinges on God's command to Joshua to stretch out his javelin (verse 18). Verses 3-8:

**So Joshua rose with all the people of war to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose 30,000 men, valiant warriors, and sent them out at night. And he 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. Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And it will come about when they come out to meet us as at the first, that we will flee before them. And they will come out after us until we have drawn them away from the city, for they will say, ‘They are fleeing before us as at the first.’ So we will flee before them. And you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the Lord your God will deliver it into your hand. Then it will be when you have seized the city, that you shall set the city on fire. You shall do it according to the word of the Lord. See, I have commanded you.”**

Remember that Ai was located above Gilgal and Jericho, about twelve miles inland; thus the men march “up.” Jericho and Ai were critical outposts to Israel's gaining entrance to the hill country, the heart of Canaan.

The plan calls for a deceptive ambush. Joshua chooses an army of 30,000 valiant warriors, five thousand of whom

will hide in the hilly terrain to the west of Ai; the rest of whom he will take north of Ai. He will approach the city as Israel had in chapter 7; and the king of Ai will observe this and come out of the city to meet them. The men of Ai will be “drawn away” from the city. The word, which means “lure,” is used in Jer. 12:3 of sheep that are lured to the slaughter. When the men of Ai come out, Israel will flee. The warriors in hiding will then charge to take possession of the city.

Next, the troops are deployed. Verses 9-13:

**So 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. Now Joshua rose early in the morning and mustered the people, and he went up with the elders of Israel before the people to Ai. Then all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near and arrived in front of the city, and camped on the north side of Ai. Now there was a valley between him and Ai. And he took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. So 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.**

These verses are a little confusing, because they are not chronological. This was also the case in the story of the spies in Jericho and the crossing of the Jordan. The main force and the ambush force are given separate attention. The troops make the difficult climb at night, up a steep slope. It is unclear whether they all went together or whether they proceeded on different nights. The main thing is that Joshua places his troops where he wants them. The ambush force is west of Ai; the main force north of the city. When the men of Ai awaken in the morning, the main force is in plain view of the fortress.

And now, the deception, verses 14-17:

**And it came about when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the city hurried and rose 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. And Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. And all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua, and were drawn away from the city. So not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who had not gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded and pursued Israel.**

The narrative accelerates to the dramatic description of the main action. The king of Ai “saw” what was happening (it must have looked like an instant replay), but he doesn't “see” the ambush. This is in contrast to the men of Israel, who are instructed by Joshua to “see” (verses 4, 8). Recklessly, the king and his troops pursue the Israelites, leaving their city unattended and defenseless. Thus they are lured away to pursue the Israelites, just as Joshua had planned. In contrast to Jericho, which was shut up, the gates of Ai are left open as the king summons all his troops from the city, even those from nearby Bethel.

At the critical point, the Lord intervenes and takes charge. Verse 18:

**Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” So Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.**

The Lord commands Joshua to raise his javelin, or better, a curved sword. When the sword is stretched out towards Ai, it symbolizes the Lord's sovereignty over the city. This act would be reminiscent of Moses, who stretched out his staff and the waters of the Red Sea parted. Appropriately, Joshua stretches out a sword, a weapon of battle. Once again, Joshua is linked with Moses; again, God provides salvation from an enemy through his servant; and again, God commands and Joshua obeys. It is clear that obedience is the key to victory.

Verses 19-23 give the account:

**And the men in ambush rose quickly from their place, and when he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it; and they quickly set the city on fire. When 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. When 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 slew the men of Ai. And the others came out from the city to encounter them, so that they were trapped in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side; and they slew them until no one was left of those who survived or escaped. But they took alive the king of Ai and brought him to Joshua.**

Suddenly the tables are turned. The men lying in ambush rush into the city, while the main force turns to face its attackers. The hapless pursuers look back and “see” what is really happening. When they see the smoke rising from their city, all their strength and courage is drained right out of them. The smoke ascending to heaven is a reminder of the language of the whole burnt offering. This implies a dedication of the fortress to God in a manner reminiscent of sacrifice. Every person is killed except the king, who is taken alive.

But not for long. Verses 24-29:

**Now it came about when Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the field in the wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them were 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. And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Israel took only the cattle and the spoil of that city as plunder for themselves, according to the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation until this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua gave command and they took his body down from the tree, and threw it at the entrance of the city gate, and raised over it a great heap of stones that stands to this day.**

The city and all its inhabitants are completely destroyed. Joshua stretches out the javelin until everything is

accomplished. The spoil is taken, as commanded by the Lord. The king is put to death by being hanged on a tree (perhaps impaled on a pole), to show that he was under the curse of God. According to Deut. 21:23, the body had to be taken down by nightfall. Both the city and the king's tomb were established as memorials to the acts of the Lord, even as Achan's judgment had been memorialized in chapter 7.

What can believers today learn from this ancient battle story? I will offer two points of application.

The first principle is this: A life of triumph can be ours once more when we turn from sin and walk in obedience.

Just because we were defeated at Ai yesterday does not mean we cannot take another city tomorrow. As we have already learned, God brings us into the land, into our life in Christ as a gift. But there are enemies inhabiting the land, and God commands us to put to death these enemies of sin and evil, to sever our dependence on the world and place our trust in him. He wants to use our mortal bodies as instruments of righteousness. And he promises to be with us in this battle; that some day we will be completely free from these things; that we will completely shed the shame and the guilt of the past and the need for anybody or anything other than God.

However, God knows that we will fail. But even then he reaches out to us. He promises to be with us, and encourages to get back in the fight. Our failure does not change his opinion of us, his love or his plan for us. He still wants us to be glorified with his Son. Victory will come if we turn from our sin and start obeying him. This is the conclusion to the Achan story. If we don't move from chapter 7 to chapter 8, we will miss the whole point. God is a God of redemption, a God of infinite chances who is committed to making us his holy possession.

For the past fifteen years I have had the privilege of working with single people in their college and post-college years. Many of them come here discouraged and defeated, having tasted the bitterness of sin and defeat. As they put a stake in the ground and start to obey God, however, amazing things happen. Their begin to triumph over their enemies of sin and evil. Some of them come out of a pattern of unhealthy worldly relationships and God establishes them in healthy ones. Actually, some of these very people are sitting here this morning as husbands and wives. The defeat of yesterday does not determine the outcome of today's battle.

At this point I want to talk a little about the kind of victories we can expect to have as Christians. We have to exercise caution here. In the book of Joshua, both the land and the enemies of Israel were physical entities; and the blessings of living in the land were physical also. But in the age of the Spirit, being victorious and taking on new territory does not necessarily result in physical success or prosperity. Just because we lost money on our investments last week doesn't mean we can expect to make money this week. Just because we plant a stake and obey God doesn't mean we will, say, meet a life's partner and live happily ever after.

Victory comes as our hearts are transformed, as we walk in the Spirit, becoming more godly men and women. Sometimes this happens through unpleasant circumstances. We have to die to ourselves. We may not get married, we may not get that job promotion, our children's behav-

ior may still cause us pain. Victory means that no matter the circumstances we can experience peace, rest and freedom, as God gives us the power to say no to our sinful desires. Victory means that when we confront an ethical dilemma at work, we don't have to be fearful. Victory means that when we share the gospel, we can do so boldly and confidently because God is with us. Victory means that whether we are single or married, we can be content. Victory means that we are becoming more and more like Christ; we move deeper and deeper into the heart of our Savior.

The key to all of this is a willingness to obey God. This is what was critical to the victory at Ai—Joshua's willingness to count the cost, to be courageous, to stretch out his hand and to follow God. What if he had not done this? What if he had said, "I'm no good. I'll never amount to anything. Sin has got the better of me"? But no. Joshua went back into battle. He stretched out his hand and obeyed God, trusting in God's promise. That is what we must do also. We are called to get up, brush ourselves off, confess our sin, and follow our Lord. And we must do the same thing tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, because he loves us. We are his people, and he will lead us in triumph. No matter how soundly and roundly we have been defeated by sin, we are only one moment away from entering into victory again.

The second point is this: In this story we see a vivid picture of God's judgment and salvation.

Oftentimes people comment on the ruthlessness of God in commanding Israel to destroy the nations living in the land. The Israelites were instructed to completely destroy these people and, in the case of Jericho and Ai, to burn these cities completely to the ground. What we have to remember is that God had been waiting for four hundred years to judge these tribes. God told Abraham in Gen. 15 that Israel would be strangers in a land that wasn't theirs, where they would be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But then he promised to bring them out of the land of Egypt and back to Canaan: "Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:16).

God had been very patient with the Canaanite tribes, but now their iniquity was complete. Their practices were an abomination. Child sacrifice and sexual immorality were just two of the terrible sins they engaged in. The cup of God's wrath was full, and Israel was God's chosen instrument of judgment. Everything in the land was under the herem, devoted to God for destruction.

God is patient, but his judgment against sin and iniquity is certain. Over the centuries, many nations have faced the judgment of God. No nation is exempt, not even the United States. There will come a day with the whole world will face a terrible judgment.

God's holy character requires him to be a God of judgment. But he is also a God of salvation. And in this account we have a sobering picture of the cost of our salvation. The king of Ai was hanged on a tree until evening; then his body was thrown by the city gate and a huge heap of stones was placed over it, a memorial which stands to this day. This man was under the curse and he faced the wrath

of an angry God.

We, too, were under the same curse; we were headed for the same judgment. But God provided for us a way of salvation. He sent his Son Jesus, the King of Israel, into the very spotlight that was shared by the king of Ai. Jesus "redeemed us...by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). He, too, was hanged on a tree, and he, too, was taken down at sunset (John 19:31). Just as the smoke of a burning Ai ascended as a sacrifice to satisfy God, so the sacrifice of Jesus became an "offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (Eph. 5:2). Jesus became a Canaanite king for us. He endured an excruciating, humiliating death that we might receive salvation. The wrath which God poured out on the king of Ai was poured out on his very own Son. This is what happened at the cross. Just like Moses and Joshua, Christ stretched out his hands, but he did not have in his grasp a staff or sword. No. What he had in his hand was a nail. And his hands were stretched out until everything necessary for salvation was accomplished for everyone who would believe. There is a way of dealing with all of our sin, shame, defeat and failure. It came at tremendous cost: a brutal, humiliating death for the One who was without spot or blemish. And we today experience this salvation when we come to the cross and follow Jesus.

Listen to these words by John Donne that marvel at this way of forgiveness and salvation:

Wilt thou forgive that sinne where I begunne,  
Which is my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive those sinnes through which I runne,  
And doe them still: though still I doe deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,  
For, I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I wonne  
Others to sinne? and, made my sinne their doore?  
Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I did shunne  
A yeare, or two: but wallowed in, a score?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,  
For, I have more.

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne  
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore;  
Swear by thy self, that at my death thy Sunne  
Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, Thou hast done,  
I have no more.

The New Testament says that sin will not have dominion over us. The shame of defeat need not be carved in our hearts. God has covered it all. He has poured out his stored-up wrath for our sin upon his beloved Son. All of us were under the curse, and devoted to destruction, but Jesus stood in our place. God's promise is that he will never leave us or forsake us. So he bids us to arise and not fear. He calls us to obey, to walk in the power of his Spirit, and experience the life of Christ in the land. As it was for Israel, may our own personal battles at Ai result in God-given victories, not in defeat.

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