

Triumph and Testimony: Joshua 8

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We're back to our study of Joshua this morning. And since we've been away from this study for the past 3 weeks I want to begin with a brief recap of what we've seen so far in the book of Joshua.

This is certainly a very exciting portion of God's Word. And it's so applicable to our lives today, applicable to the lives of Christians as we struggle to trust in the Lord and wait on Him to provide what He has promised.

In the book of Joshua God is leading His people into the Promised Land. It's the good land, the land flowing with milk and honey, that He had promised to give them. Now, finally, He is bringing the Israelites into this great inheritance.

In chapter 1 the Lord appointed Joshua to be the new leader, in the place of Moses who has died. And what a weighty new role this is for Joshua. The Lord tells him to be strong and courageous. In chapter 2 there was the beautiful story of Rahab the prostitute, an inhabitant of Jericho, but someone who recognized the power of Israel's God and looked to Him in faith. And by her faith she was rescued from the destruction that soon came upon her city.

Chapters 3-5 tell the story of Israel crossing the Jordan and the things that happened immediately on the other side right before going on to Jericho. The new generation was circumcised and they celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land. Joshua also had his encounter with the commander of the Lord's army, just before he was to lead the people into their first battle.

The battle against Jericho was clearly fought and won by the Lord, Himself. The Israelites marched around the city, and the Lord miraculously brought the walls down.

At that point in this sermon series I devoted one whole sermon to the matter of holy war. If that's a question that intrigues you or troubles you, and if you weren't here for that, I'd encourage you to find that sermon on our church website and listen to it. It's definitely a question we need to give careful thought to as we're studying this book.

The Lord commands Israel to completely destroy Jericho, with the exception of Rahab and her family, who were spared. Everyone else was to be devoted to destruction.

And then chapter 7 tells of the consequences for disobeying that command. There was a man named Achan who took some of the devoted things for himself. He coveted a beautiful cloak and some silver and gold, and he took those things and hid them under his tent. Well, the repercussions were immediate and devastating, both for Achan's family and the entire nation.

Israel was defeated in their next battle. Israelite soldiers were killed in that battle. And then the Lord revealed the secret sin of Achan, and Achan was punished. Indeed, he was put to death for his rebellion against the Lord.

Our passage for this morning is chapter 8. The connection between chapter 7 and chapter 8 is the city of Ai. In chapter 7 Israel was defeated by Ai. Now in chapter 8, after Achan's sin has been dealt with, the Lord will give Israel triumph over Ai. There are two distinct parts of Joshua 8. The first section has to do with the battle against Ai. That's in verses 1-29. Then the end of the chapter recounts a very powerful time of worship that Israel experienced in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. It was a time of testimony, a profound experience of testifying to God's guidance and grace.

So we're going to look at chapter 8 now under these 2 big headings – Triumph and Testimony.

We'll start with the story of Israel's triumph over Ai.

Triumph over Ai

Be Encouraged

The chapter opens with the Lord speaking some wonderfully encouraging and reassuring words to Joshua. To set the stage for these words, first look back to chapter 6, the second verse.

“And the LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor.” (Joshua 6:2, ESV)

Triumph was for sure, because the Lord was promising victory. The thing was as good as done. And indeed, it did happen, as the rest of that chapter tells the amazing story. Moving

to chapter 7 we can only imagine Joshua's shock and dismay following that defeat at Ai. What's going on?! The victory over Jericho was absolute. The Lord fought for us. The Lord won the battle for us. We had zero casualties. But now this! We had to flee before the men of Ai, and 36 of our men were killed!

That defeat plunged Joshua into the depths of despair.
Joshua 7:7-9

The first response to that was the Lord's instruction to deal with Achan's sin. And now in chapter 8 we see that a new day is dawning for Joshua and the people. Disobedience and defeat may have been the words describing yesterday. But grace and triumph are the words for today.

Look in your Bibles at what the Lord says to Joshua at the beginning of chapter 8.

“And the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not fear and do not be dismayed. Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land. And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king.”” (Joshua 8:1–2, ESV)

How comforting that must have been for Joshua. Not all is lost. There have been severe consequences for sin, but the Lord is not deserting His people. He will lead them on . . . into a new day, and new victories.

Be encouraged by this, brothers and sisters. God's grace is big enough and powerful enough to move past the defeats of yesterday. There is grace for those who repent, for those who despise their sin and plead for mercy. Come before the Lord, honestly confessing your sin, naming those sins of covetousness and whatever else. Seek forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. And the Lord will say to you, Take heart my child. Those sins need not define you. They do not spell defeat for you. Your identity is not in those sinful actions or inclinations. You are mine now, and I will lead you into a new day where there will be triumph. There will still be struggles. There will still be some stumbling and some defeats. But there's grace for that too. And at the end of this age, which could be a day on the near horizon, the Lord will lead us into an inheritance where there will be absolutely no stumbling and no defeat.

Be Patient

Moving on to the next line in verse 2, we're reminded to be patient.

“And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. [In other words, the triumph is going to be just as absolute as it was over Jericho. But then the Lord spells out this surprising difference between the triumph over Jericho and the soon-to-happen triumph over Ai.] Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves.” (Joshua 8:2, ESV)

That’s different than Jericho. The Lord’s instruction concerning Jericho was to devote everything to destruction. Rahab and her family were to be spared. The precious metals were to go into the treasury of the Lord. And everything else was to be destroyed. The Israelites were not to take anything for themselves.

Now the Lord is telling them something different. He is making a gracious provision for the people. He’s telling them, You can take the plunder for yourselves. It’s yours.

Who does that make us think about? Achan. How impatient and foolish he was! If he had just waited a few days, he would have had whatever he wanted from Ai, and with the Lord’s blessing.

But no . . . he had to have it now. He lusted after those items. He was seduced by the pleasure, the comfort, the security of that money. So he took it for himself even though the Lord, at that time, had said no.

But God’s no is not always a permanent no. That’s what we’re seeing herein Joshua 8. Sometimes His no turns into a yes. A very clear application point that comes to mind here is sexual purity. For single men and women, whether you’re a teenager, a 20-something or older, you may feel like God’s commands regarding sexual intimacy is just a big NO looming over you in an oppressive way.

But that’s not necessarily a permanent no. It could be that the Lord is going to provide for you a godly spouse, and in the exclusive relationship of marriage you will enjoy God’s good gift of sex. He will say, Yes! Yes! Enjoy!

Marriage is not God’s will for everyone. To some He gives the gift of singleness and celibacy. And that is, indeed, a gift . . . to be used for God’s glory.

I simply want us to learn our lesson from Achan’s folly. He was impatient. He was covetous. He disobeyed the Lord’s clear command for that moment, not knowing what was just around the corner.

Let us be patient and trust God. Whether it's with your sexuality, or your desire to be financially prosperous, or with ambitions to be successful in work or ministry. Even in the intensity of those desires, don't give in to the temptation to justify disobedience.

Wait on the Lord. Maybe He will open up an unexpected door in the near future. Even if He doesn't, we still have abundant reason to trust and obey.

Be Attentive

Notice next the final piece of instruction in verse 2. "Lay an ambush against the city, behind it." I take from this the application point that we should be attentive. We need to be attentive to God's guidance because the details of what He instructs us to do may vary from situation to situation.

Do you remember the instructions for taking Jericho? They were to march around the city once each day for 6 days. On the 7th day they were to march around the city 7 times and then blow the trumpets and shout. And then the walls of the city fell down flat.

As we are tracking along with the story we might think this is how every battle is going to be. They'll march around Ai, and God will destroy the city. And then the Israelites will have their cookie-cutter program for the Conquest. Every obstacle we encounter, we'll just apply the march-around-the-city technique, and we'll have success every time.

Well, God had a different strategy for them in the battle against Ai. It wasn't the same as Jericho. And we'll find, too, that there is variety in the specifics of how God guides us, from person to person, and situation to situation. I'm not saying there's any variance in God's character. I'm not saying there's any ambiguity about right and wrong, truth and error. But we can observe here, in the particular methods God commands of His people, that it's not always the same method in every battle, in every trial. So we should each be attentive to how God might be leading *me* in *this* particular trial, in how to resist *this* particular temptation, in how to pursue *this* particular ministry opportunity. It might not always be the same as the last time. It might not be the same as someone else's experience. Let's be attentive. Let's ask, What is God doing in *this* moment?

Be in Awe of God's Gracious Providence

Now let's consider the battle itself, the triumph itself, before moving on to the testimony experience at the end of the chapter.

It leaves quite an impression on me to meditate on this different strategy for defeating Ai. It causes me to be in awe of God's gracious providence. Because the success of this ambush strategy is connected with the previous battle in which Ai defeated Israel. God's discipline in the prior battle now plays into the success He is giving them in this battle.

Let me show you the connection. In chapter 7, where 3,000 men from Israel went up to attack Ai, the Israelites fled before the soldiers of Ai and 36 Israelites were killed. Now, in chapter 8, the way this ambush is going to work is by replicating that previous scenario, by making Ai think that the same thing is happening again.

Here's how it worked. Joshua set up some of his soldiers behind the city, who would lie in wait, in hiding. And then Joshua and another group of soldiers approached the city from the front.

Look at what Joshua says to his soldiers in verses 5-6.

“And I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out against us just as before, we shall 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 from us, just as before.’ So we will flee before them.” (Joshua 8:5–6, ESV)

Those are Joshua's instructions. And that's just what happened. By the way, another difference between the situation at Jericho and the situation now at Ai is that the people of Ai are no longer afraid of Israel in the way Jericho was afraid of them. Jericho was terrified. They had heard of the Lord parting the Red Sea for Israel to pass through. They surely knew about the Jordan River being stopped for Israel to cross over and come right to their doorstep. So the people of Jericho stayed shut up inside their walls. That was their only hope.

But Ai has now experienced a victory over Israel. Ai came out against that small contingent of Israel's army, and ran them off, even killed some of them. Now Ai is emboldened. They have tasted victory. They have confidence that if Israel shows up again, they can run them off again.

So when Joshua shows up in front of their city, what do they do? Let's read it in verses 14-22.

What a dramatic scene! What an exciting victory! This triumph, in fulfillment of the Lord's promises at the beginning of the chapter, would have been so reassuring to Joshua. Yes, truly, this is a new day. God has given us triumph yet again, in spite of the disobedience. And to think that God's creative plan for this triumph incorporated elements of that previous discipline for disobedience! That should cause us to stand in awe of His gracious providence.

Have you seen that in your own life? Can you look back on times of disobedience and discipline and also see how God somehow used that for good later on? A few years ago Stacy and I went on a marriage retreat hosted by a ministry in Michigan. It was several pastors and their wives, and we enjoyed a few days of fellowship there together. The couple who hosted and facilitated our time together had a tremendous testimony of God's faithfulness in their marriage. They hadn't necessarily planned on sharing all the ugly details of their past, but one evening at dinner they felt led to do that. Through tears they shared how each of them had committed adultery, had been unfaithful, many years earlier in their marriage. They shared some of the details of how those adulterous relationships developed, and how they ended, and how God rescued their marriage from the brink of destruction. It was a painful story to tell, and to hear. There was nothing good about the disobedience, nothing pleasant about the discipline. But what was very evident in this couple was the fruit of brokenness and repentance and humility and a desire to serve others, for the good of marriages and for the glory of God.

Maybe you have a similar story. If you're a believer, I'm pretty certain you do have a similar story. You have sinned. You have disobeyed. And yet God is using even that as part of His beautiful story of redemption. So be in awe of God's gracious providence. Repent of sin. Humbly receive whatever discipline may come. And then look with hope to God's grace for a new day.

A Testimony of God's Guidance and Grace

For our last few minutes, let's turn our attention to the section at the end of the chapter.

Read Joshua 8:30-35

This is a really interesting time of corporate worship, corporate remembrance, corporate testimony to God's guidance

and grace. What happens here is very specifically in obedience to things Moses had instructed in Deuteronomy.

Moses, himself, was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, but he gave instructions to the people concerning things they should do when they entered. It's at this point in the story that Joshua and the people fulfill these particular instructions. They traveled about 20 miles north to get to this point, to these mountains.

Map

They crossed the Jordan. Then they defeated Jericho, which was like the entrance point into the Land. Then they ascended up to the hill country and now have defeated Ai, which gives them access to move on north and south through the rest of the hill country.

Back in Deuteronomy 27 Moses gave detailed commands to set up large stones with plaster and write the words of the law on them, to do this at Mount Ebal and to build an altar of uncut stones, and have half of the tribes stand on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Ebal and recite the blessings and the curses. Mount Ebal, where the altar was to be built, was associated with the curses, and Mount Gerizim was associated with the blessings.

Picture

Here is a picture of the two mountains, with Mount Ebal on the right (to the north) and Mount Gerizim on the left (to the south). Both mountains are around 3,000 feet above sea level at their highest points. Already being in the hill country, they rise about 1,000 feet higher than the valley that separates them.¹ In between them was the city of Shechem. Today in that area is the Palestinian West Bank city of Nablus.

There's an interesting feature of this valley. At a certain point it forms a natural amphitheater. The acoustics are so good that a person can stand on the side of one mountain and be clearly heard on the side of the other mountain.²

So here's the scene. The ark is there in the middle of the valley. Half of the tribes are arranged on the slopes of Mount Ebal, and the other half on Mount Gerizim. And you have to remember, we're talking about possibly 2 million people involved in this. So picture these mountainsides covered in people, with the

¹ Boice, Joshua, 89.

² Ibid.

blessings and curses thundering back and forth across that valley. It certainly would have been a memorable experience.

A Testimony to God's Guidance

And what is it they were to remember from that experience? What is it that we should remember? The reciting of those blessings and curses should be a testimony to God's clear guidance, first of all. God is very clear in communicating to His people . . . If you disobey, there will be negative consequences. Israel had just experienced this in ordeal with Achan. His hidden sin brought harm and defeat. On the other hand, obedience will result in blessing. There are warnings for disobedience, warning of the curses that will come upon those who rebel. There are also promises for obedience, holding out rewards for those who submit to God and obey Him.

A NT verse that comes to mind, summarizing both a warning and promise, is Romans 8:13, which says, "*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*" (Romans 8:13, ESV)

Just to give us a little taste of what this experience would have been like for the Israelites, I want to have us read this antiphonally, meaning one group will read the first part, and the other group will the second part. So picture yourself on the slopes of Mount Ebal and Gerizim, reciting God's Word to one another. We'll imagine that the center aisle is the valley.

Left: For if you live according to the flesh you will die

Right: But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

This is God's clear guidance to us, giving us strong warnings against rebellion and also promising great blessing for Spirit-empowered obedience. Let us remember these curses and blessings, these warnings and promises. May we remind ourselves and remind one another of these things as we journey together through the trials and temptations of this life. And we can thank God for His clear guidance, for revealing His will to us that we might seek the blessings of obedience.

A Testimony of God's Grace

The other thing that is so vivid and memorable in this scene at Mount Ebal and Gerizim is the testimony of God's grace. Because we not only have the ark of the covenant in the center of this, representing God's presence, and the law of God being read

out loud in such a powerful way, but we also have an altar that Joshua built there on Mount Ebal, where sacrifices were being made, burnt offerings and peace offerings (verse 31). Burnt offerings represented atonement for sin. It was a picture of judgment falling on a substitute, indicating forgiveness to the sinner. In the burnt offerings, the entire animal was to be burned.

But the peace offerings were slightly different. Portions of these offerings were eaten by the people. It was part of a meal of celebration. It represented not only atonement for sin but also the fact that there is no longer enmity but peace between God and His people due to His forgiveness of sin.

In the Deuteronomy 27 passage, the instructions regarding the altar say this:

“And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God.” (Deuteronomy 27:6–7, ESV)

Think about this as a testimony of God’s grace to His people. This experience at Ebal emblazoned in their minds the blessings for obedience, the curses for disobedience, and the sacrifice needed to atone for sin and bring peace between us and God.

And remember, the altar was to be built on Ebal, which was the mountain associated with the curses. It was from Ebal that the curses were recited. And it was from Ebal that the sacrifices were made.

What a beautiful and powerful Gospel portrait this is for us! You, today, can confess your own personal sins to the Lord, sins that deserve a curse, sins that deserve complete and eternal separation from God. But then you can think of the altar. You can think of the sacrifice. You can think of Jesus Christ, the ultimate sacrifice, who laid Himself down on the altar to be the perfect atonement for sin.

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13, ESV)

Jesus hung on that tree, bearing the curse for us. And what does that mean for us, once the curse is removed? It means we receive the blessing . . . the blessing that Christ’s obedience deserves. Christ lived a perfect life on our behalf, died a sacrificial death in our place, and He rose from the grave on the third day.

So when you think of Mount Ebal and Gerizim, think of the Gospel. Think of the blessings and curses, and the sacrifice that atones for sin. What a great testimony of God's grace to us.