

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ 12-31-17

December 31 we will study Joshua 8. Discussion questions are:

1. What is your favorite comeback story from the world of sports?
2. What was God teaching Israel at the battle of Ai?
3. Why did Israel have such a roller coaster ride at Jericho and Ai?
4. According to vs. 1, what is the cure for fear and discouragement?
5. The military strategy in chapter 8 makes more sense than that at Jericho. Is it harder to see the hand of God today when he works miraculously or when he works through natural means?
6. Agree/disagree: *“Don’t assume that just because God did something one way one time that He will do it the same way next time.”*
 - a. Can you think of examples of this principle at work in Bible times or today?
7. Why was it important for Israel to go on a spiritual retreat after the battle at Ai?
 - a. Do we need to have some kind of spiritual retreat as a church?
 - i. What kind?
 - ii. For whom?
8. What Biblical examples can you think of where God turned a defeat into a victory?
 - a. What should that teach us about our own personal spiritual defeats?
9. In what context does Satan tell this lie: *“God has no use for failures.”*
10. In what context does Satan tell this lie: *“God doesn’t want what is best for you.”*
11. Why was it significant to build the altar in chap. 8 with “unhewn” rocks?

Sermon: *WHAT’S WORSHIP GOT TO DO WITH IT?*

There is no greater thrill in athletics than watching a great comeback from an apparent loss. In April, 2016 this comeback video went viral. University College Cork runner Phil Healy was in 5th place on the final lap of the 4X400m relay at the Irish Universities Athletics Association Track and Field Championships. Keep an eye on how far behind she is when the leaders take off and then see where she finished. She is the girl in red, the one in 5th place.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRa7mQg73Eg>

As we look at the text today we see God leading the people of Israel in a great military comeback. God’s ideal will for Israel and for us is that we experience perpetual victory but God’s ideal will rarely happens on this side of eternity. Two weeks ago we saw Israel suffer the agony of defeat at the hands of tiny little Ai. Today we are going to look at what the people of God do after they have suffered defeat. Here is the great principle taught in Joshua 8 – COMEBACKS ALWAYS WORK IF GOD IS CALLING THE PLAYS!

If you've been tracking with us in our study of Joshua you will remember Israel has been on a roller coaster ride as they enter the land of Canaan. They experience the thrill of victory at Jericho and the agony of defeat at Ai. After the defeat at Ai they begin to feel maybe they should go back to the other side of Jordan and forget about entering the Promised Land. But God doesn't want them to go back. He wants them to come back. He wants them to acknowledge their sin and come back to Him.

Joshua 8:1-8 - 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."

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."

God gives very specific instructions about how to take the city of Ai. The Israelites followed God's directions precisely. The results are described in vs.18-22:

¹⁸ Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city." So Joshua held out his javelin toward Ai. ¹⁹ As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.

²⁰ The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising against the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction, for the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the desert had turned back against their pursuers. ²¹ For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from the city, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. ²² The men of the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives.

Ai fell by conventional military strategy. Most of the battles in Joshua don't involve miracles but just basic conventional military strategy. If those facts teach us anything they teach us to not be presumptuous with God. You don't want to assume that just because God did something one way one time that He will do it the same way next time. There was only one city in all the Promised Land taken by marching around it and blowing horns and shouting. Ai was taken by conventional military strategy but that does not mean God was any less involved or any in control of the outcome of that battle than

he was at the battle at Jericho. God said of the battle at Ai, “...*I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city, and his land.*” (Joshua 8:1)

Again I say don't assume that just because God did something one way one time that He will do it the same way next time. Do you remember the method Jesus used for healing blindness? One time he spoke a word and sight was restored. Another time he touched the eyes of the blind and restored sight. Another time he used spit and another time he used mud. So how does Jesus heal blindness? Any way he wants to! If Jesus did those 4 miracles today we'd start 4 different churches – the speakites, the touchites, the spitites, and the mudites. We would have debates over how God heals blindness and how only our group really understands how blindness is cured. Rather than debating how God works our time would be better spent learning to recognize the hand of God when it intervenes miraculously in our lives and when it works through natural means in our lives.

You might think that after the victory at Ai, Israel needs to press on while people are motivated. But what Joshua does is to march the entire nation 20 miles into a valley between 2 mountains and there they have a spiritual retreat. The text says in vs. 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.

Does that seem like wasted time to you? They have routed the Canaanites. The enemy is terrified. Is it not time to march on to the next city? Is it not time to strike while the iron is hot? Why in the world would Joshua choose this moment for a spiritual retreat? Couldn't all that spiritual stuff wait until they had finished the war? There are few texts that speak more directly to our busy, soccer mom, dad works 2 jobs lives than this one. Nothing in our busy lives is important enough to make us neglect time with God. Wise is the parent who says to his or her family, “We always take time out for spiritual renewal. We will be in church every Sunday.” Wise is the church leader who says, “We will not let the busyness of our ministries keep us from regular spiritual renewal. We will not put our faith in the successful ministries of this church but in the God who owns this church.”

Israel has a decision to make. Already in the Promised Land they have experienced what Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 27-28, blessings and curses. Listen to the ultimatum Moses gives Israel in Deuteronomy 30:15-20:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In response to those words Israel had said, “*We choose life.*”, crossed the Jordan, won a victory at Jericho, then sinned and, as a result, suffered a humiliating defeat at Ai. In Joshua 8 Israel is being told, “*Choose again.*” The good news of this text is that we get to choose again after we blow it the first time. DEFEAT NEVER HAS TO BE THE LAST CHAPTER FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

Some of you have suffered terrible defeats in 2017. Maybe you lost a marriage. Maybe you are trying to rebuild a relationship with your children and its not going well. Maybe you have lost lots of wrestling matches with Satan and you feel like you just can't win in that one area of your life where you are so weak. The same God was on the throne when Israel defeated Ai who was on the throne earlier when Ai defeated Israel. When we suffer defeat in our spiritual journey we dare not resign ourselves to perpetual defeat. When Israel suffered defeat at the hands of Ai, God's will was for them to attack Ai again. Do you think God expects any less of us? If you are here today having suffered a major spiritual setback or perhaps even feeling totally defeated, God wants you to come back and let Him lead you to victory.

The great worship event at the end of Joshua 8 is about reaffirming timeless truths about God. Like Israel, if we are to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat we must know the truth about God.

There are areas of our lives where we are lied to with great effectiveness. For instance are you aware that you have been lied to about food experts? How many of you ladies own a Betty Crocker cookbook? Did you know Betty never existed? The people at Gold Medal Flour invented Betty during a contest promotion 80 years ago. Did you know there is no Aunt Jemima? Did you know Duncan Hines was not a baker? He was a restaurant critic in the 30's. And did you know Colonel Sanders was not a Colonel? I

suppose little harm has been done when we have believed falsehoods about food experts but if we believe lies about God great harm is done. Satan lies about God all the time. Let me share with you a couple of Satan's most common lies about God:

GOD HAS NO USE FOR FAILURES.

God doesn't forsake you no matter how much you have forsaken him. If you have ever failed in a spiritual endeavor you need to hear the great words of Ps. 103:8-13:

⁸ The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him

Remember that fellow who denied Jesus. He later became an apostle and preached the first gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Remember that young missionary who quit right in the middle of a missionary journey and went home? He later wrote the gospel of Mark. God not only uses people who fail, He rarely uses any other kind.

Another of Satan's favorite lies about God is...

GOD DOESN'T WANT WHAT IS BEST FOR US

Some of the best advice I was ever given came from an old retired preacher who was a member here when I first started preaching for Central. He told me, "There is nothing good for you that God won't let you do." Satan says just the opposite. He says God doesn't want what is best for us. That was the lie Satan told Eve when he said, "God just doesn't want you to be like him." Achan believed the lie that God doesn't want what is best for us when he made his own plan for getting riches. How sad that Achan couldn't be patient and trusting enough to wait a few days to be there when God said, "The riches of Ai belong to you." God has always wanted the firstfruits but he has never wanted **all** the fruit. If Achan had waited on God he could have had everything he wanted. He could have experienced a blessing instead of a curse.

If we want to know and cherish the truth about God, the method is worship. At a time when many a General would have told Israel to build a fort and start training the warriors, Joshua took them 20 miles down the road to worship. God's people run on the fuel that comes through worship. Do you remember that statement in the book of James that says,

"Come near to God and he will come near to you."? That's a pretty good definition of the value of worship. It is coming near to God so that God will come near to you.

There is an element of worship that you need to see in vs. 31. It says, Joshua built "...*an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used...*" Why were the stones to not have been struck by any man-made instrument? Because when we worship God no human effort belongs there. We bring no accomplishment to worship of which we can boast. We do not hold up a handful of money and say, "Look how much I am giving to God." We do not come to worship and say to God, "Did you notice how beautiful my voice is? Did you notice how eloquently I prayed?" We do not come to worship and say, "God, were you impressed with my words today?" We come to worship, in the words of the old hymn, "*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. Vile, I to the fountain fly. Wash me savior or I die.*" God doesn't want us to think that anything we do so impresses Him that it gains us His forgiveness. The only thing that impresses God about any altar we build is the blood that is on it. The key to living a Christian life is not in never failing but when you do fail, bringing that failure to the foot of the cross and washing it in the blood.

Joshua had the entire nation assemble in that valley while he read to them the great words of Deuteronomy 27-28. They were told that day, "*If you are faithful God will give you blessings. If you are unfaithful God will give you curses.*" Some of you are experiencing today the cursing that comes when you disobey God - the broken relationships, the guilt, the pain, the remorse, the spiritual depression that comes when you go against God. What should you do if you are in that shape this morning? You should stage a comeback. Jesus' most famous story is about a comeback. A boy took his father's money and ran off to a distant country and lived an extremely sinful life. When he came home broke and guilt ridden, the father ran to meet him and welcomed him home. That boy did not do one thing to deserve his father's forgiveness. Grace is that way you know. It finds a way to love and forgive us even when we can no longer love or forgive ourselves. My favorite phrase in that parable of the Prodigal Son occurs in the pigpen when the destitute boy looks at his miserable situation and the Bible says, "*He came to himself*". Is that where you are today? Do you need to come to yourself, remember what your heavenly father is like, remember that he asks only that you repent and come home?

Has 2017 not been a year of spiritual victory for you? Don't be defeated by that. Come back! Come back to the God who waits for you with open arms. Come back to the God who like the father figure in the Prodigal Son parable runs to welcome home the returning prodigal who is clothed in defeat and failure and guilt. Come back to the God who will put the robe on your shoulders and the ring on your finger; the God who is ready to shout so all of Heaven can hear, "*This my son was lost and is found!*" God is saying to some of you today, "Come back. Come back to me." God will supply the grace but you have to make a choice.

1500 years after the events of Joshua 8, Jesus would stand at this very spot and talk to a woman who had been married 5 times and offer to her the forgiving grace of God. With arms wide open he waits for you. Come back! Come back to God today!