

Faithfulness after Failure

Last week if you were here, we got one of those hellfire and brimstone messages. The results of what happened to Israel and then to the family of a man named Achan were terribly ugly. The whole episode stands as a testimony for all time to the holiness of God and the ugliness of the infection of sin.

Now this week. Place yourself again in the position of the Israelites who have crossed into Canaan under Joshua and they are beginning the process of actually possessing the land that God has promised them for centuries and centuries. After watching God miraculously destroy the mighty city of Jericho, we would have thought that the smaller city of Ai would be a piece of cake.

We are at point in the college football season where all the big schools that you guys like they circle other big time opponents on the calendar all the while they schedule what are essentially scrimmages against cupcake teams. Tennessee likes to play UT Martin and Austin Peay and teams like that.

But this time the cupcake won. Not only did they win, but they routed the army of Israel and cost 36 warriors their lives. This led to a reckoning of the entire nation where they had to remove Achan and his family from the nation and kill and burn and bury them and the things that they had taken as if Achan were another one of the Canaanites.

This was a horrible national spectacle, but there were some important lessons that had to be learned about God and how he intended to bless to Israel. God will not be mocked. When he says if you do this, then this will happen, he can be depended upon to keep his word.

This sets up the second battle of Ai in Joshua 8. After sin has been dealt with, God intends to return to his promised blessing of Israel. He's going to start with the city just dealt Joshua his worst defeat.

In Joshua 8 we see 3 ways that God demonstrates his faithfulness to fulfill his plan even after the failure of the Israelites. (to do something)

The first demonstration of faithfulness is in God again calling Joshua to action.

Joshua 8:1a

And the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not fear and do not be dismayed."

Notice the phrase that God begins. "Do not fear and do not be dismayed." This is the second of three times that God gives this command to Joshua. But the command to not fear or be dismayed was not first given to Joshua. Moses opens and closes the book of Deuteronomy with this command.

Deuteronomy 1:21

See, the LORD your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed.'

The beginning of Deuteronomy is particularly applicable to where Joshua finds himself here. Before Moses' death he was recounting to Israel how they had failed to trust God and take the promised land 40 years earlier. Moses had told Israel then "do not fear or be dismayed." But they did the exact opposite. They listened to 10 unfaithful spies who told them that they could not defeat the Canaanites and that they would just be killed.

Ironically, Joshua was one of two spies who agreed with Moses and believed God. He told the people then "we have nothing to fear. God promised to fight for us, we should go take the land." But they were outvoted by fear, and the price was the death in the wilderness of every adult who refused to believe and obey God.

But isn't it interesting that the one person in Israel who throughout his life has demonstrated the least problem with fear still needs to be reminded of who God is and that he should trust him. At the end of Deuteronomy calls specifically calls Joshua in front of Israel and gives him the same command again.

Deuteronomy 31:7-8

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. ⁸ It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

So it makes sense that Joshua needs to hear those words again after the worst defeat under his leadership. It's not that he didn't know God's requirements and he didn't know that he could trust God. But Yahweh is a relational God. He loves Joshua like a son. He's not telling Joshua "I told you once, and that should be enough." But he speaks to him gently and reminds him that he is with him.

The second demonstration of God's faithfulness is that God gives Joshua very explicit instructions about how he is going to win.

Many of us have the right ideas about God's big picture of our life, but we don't actually believe that God cares enough to make a plan and carry out the plan to get us to where he wants us to go.

There's an old saying that we should remember "God doesn't plan the ends without the planning the means."

Yet the Bible is a testimony of people who say they have faith in God that he has an intended destination but he leaves it completely up to them to figure out how to get there.

- 1) We've often spoken about Abram knowing that God intended to give him an heir, but he thought he would have to take matters into his own hands with Hagar to help bring God's plan into fruition.
- 2) We see plenty of evidence of this in the greatest plan of God-when Jesus' destination in all four Gospels was that he HAD to go die on a cross in Jerusalem at Passover. He tells his disciples this over and over and over again, but they don't believe him. They knew that Jesus was Lord and savior, but they figured that He needed them to figure out how that was going to happen.

We are not told much about the thought process of Judas when he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. We are simply told that he loved money and that Satan entered into him. But think about it. Judas did not spend years of his life following Jesus because he wanted to betray him. He likely thought that Jesus would be the savior of Israel and he wanted to be associated with the winning team when that happened. Think of the power and prestige and wealth that would come with being associated with the Christ! But when Jesus kept insisting on this talk that the road to be the savior meant death on a cross, that didn't correspond with how Judas thought Israel ought to be saved. Judas may have even thought he was going to force Jesus' hand and make him start the revolution that Judas wanted. He became disillusioned with God's way of accomplishing God's plan and ended up as the most cursed man in human history.

When Jesus mentioned his way of salvation on the road one day to Peter, Peter flat out told him "over my dead body." Peter was teetering precariously close to following in the way of Judas. At Jesus' arrest, Peter even pulled out a sword to fight, even though he knew that wasn't Jesus' plan. When Jesus rebuked Peter and healed the man who Peter had attacked, Peter responded a few hours later by denying that he had ever even known Jesus.

I hope you see that it is a serious matter that we believe both the final destination of where God is taking us but also that he is a God who has actively engaged in the intermediate plans as well. When we don't trust God to take the steps necessary to accomplish his plan we end up as legalists, rebels, fools, betrayers, or WORSE!

But what God does for Joshua is that he gives him a very detailed step-by-step plan for how Israel is going to defeat Ai. And then God carries it out. Listen to how this battle goes down.

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. ² And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves. Lay an ambush against the city, behind it."

³ So Joshua and all the fighting men arose to go up to Ai. And Joshua chose 30,000 mighty men of valor and sent them out by night. ⁴ And he commanded them, "Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you remain

ready.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ Then you shall rise up from the ambush and seize the city, for the Lord your God will give it into your hand.⁸ And as soon as you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire. You shall do according to the word of the Lord. See, I have commanded you."⁹ So Joshua sent them out. And they went to the place of ambush and lay between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai, but Joshua spent that night among the people.¹⁰ Joshua arose early in the morning and mustered the people and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai.¹¹ And all the fighting men who were with him went up and drew near before the city and encamped on the north side of Ai, with a ravine between them and Ai.¹² He took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city.¹³ So they stationed the forces, the main encampment that was north of the city and its rear guard west of the city. But Joshua spent that night in the valley.¹⁴ And as soon as the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the men of the city, hurried and went out early to the appointed place toward the Arabah to meet Israel in battle. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city.¹⁵ And Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them and fled in the direction of the wilderness.¹⁶ So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were drawn away from the city.¹⁷ Not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open and pursued Israel.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." And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.¹⁹ And the men in the ambush rose quickly out of their place, and as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it. And they hurried to set the city on fire.²⁰ So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that, for the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers.²¹ And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.²² And the others came out from the city against them, so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side. And Israel struck them down, until there was left none that survived or escaped.²³ But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him near to Joshua.²⁴ When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword.²⁵ And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai.²⁶ But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction.²⁷ Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the Lord that he commanded Joshua.²⁸ So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day.²⁹ And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.

In the first disaster at Ai, the plan was to send a small fraction of the army to go clean up and be back shortly. This time, the plan will go back to the value that has brought them success thus far.... EVERYBODY participates. Now it's important to know that everyone doesn't have the same job and everybody isn't equally involved in the fighting. But everybody is going to battle.

The forces would be divided up. 30,000 men are in the army and prepared for battle. 5,000 of those men will go and hide between Bethel and Ai while the rest of the army will go to the north of Ai and pretend to attack straight on. The distance between Bethel and Ai was about 2 miles. Bethel was probably a small satellite city to Ai where they had an agreement that they would defend each other. What is interesting about Bethel is that this was a prominent place in the life of Jacob, who is the ancestor of the Israelites. He had a vision of a ladder to heaven and made an altar at Bethel as a sign of God's promise to bring him back and give him this land.

Remember that Ai is a walled city. Austin spoke two weeks ago about how walled cities are difficult, if not impossible to defeat straight on in battle. The army has to do one of two things- 1) breach the wall at a tremendous cost or 2) convince/starve the army to come out of the city to battle on the open field.

The strategy is for the main army to draw Ai out of the city to pretend that they are scared and defeated again, allowing the ambush party to enter the undefended city and burn it to the ground. At this point, the entire army of Ai will be caught between the 5,000 Israelites who are destroying their city and the 25,000 army with Joshua who will turn around and destroy them.

What is interesting about this plan that God gives Joshua is that it relies on the previous failure of Israel to be the very thing that convinces the men of Ai to leave their city. They remember how pitiful and weak the previous assault on Ai had been. What they don't know is that the reason the Israel failed the first time was because the hand of God was against them. Ai has every reason to assume that the army that is coming up a second time will be just easily defeated as they were the first time.

How many of you remember blockbuster video? There was a time when people watched these things called DVDs and video cassettes. If you wanted to watch a movie you had to either buy one or more likely go to the video store to rent it. I remember in high school and college I would hang out with friends and if it was after dark we would either fish or watch a movie or build these flaming hot air balloons out of dry cleaner bags. That's about all there is to do at night in East TN, it's not like there are places to go.

Where my friends lived in the country all we had was the movie gallery. I think my group of friends actually took pride that someone in the group had literally rented every movie in the entire place. As an aside, our favorite movie was called Southern Comfort. There is no reason that we would've ever watched it except that the movie gallery had it. But it turned out to be a cool movie about the National Guard very foolishly making a bunch of Louisiana cajuns mad while they are in the swamp, and nobody who ain't from the swamp leaves the swamp alive. I

think mountain people are about the same way. Nicest people in the world, just don't go up in the mountains and pick a fight with mountain people on their home turf.

Anyways, Blockbuster was a video store that existed in big cities like Bristol and Gastonia once upon a time. They had way more movies than any one person or small group of people could watch. They controlled the movie at home business. In the late 90s this small business started up called Netflix. They had this model where you could use the world wide web to sign up for their service and request movies and they would mail the DVD to you, then you would watch it and mail it back for your next one. No stores involved. In the year 2,000 blockbuster was near its peak with like 9,000 stores and worth 6 billion dollars. Netflix was having a cash crunch and presented Blockbuster with the opportunity to buy Netflix. The price the CEO of Netflix quoted was \$50 million. Blockbuster declined because they figured Netflix would go out of business and Blockbuster would just crush them. For the record Netflix is now worth \$200 billion.

Because Ai had previously defeated Israel, they are feeling a bit like Blockbuster. They don't need to make peace. When Israel shows up again, Ai isn't going to just kill 36, they are going to wipe out the entire army. When the sun comes up in the morning and they see Israel and Joshua camped nearby, they can't wait to leave the city and go to work.

Joshua follows the plan. When Ai comes out to fight, he leads the big army to begin fleeing as if they are scared and headed for defeat once again. They draw the army of Ai many miles out of the city. But it is a ruse. Once he has drawn the men of Ai sufficiently away from the city, he gives the signal to the smaller ambush group to go into the undefended city and begin wiping out the inhabitants. When they get enough fire going to burn the city down that the smoke is visible to Joshua, the main army turns and faces the men of Ai and commences the slaughter of the army.

Not a man remains alive from Ai or Bethel. The king of Ai is taken alive, but Joshua obeys God and kills him as well. This is significant because in ancient warfare taking a king as a prisoner was seen as a valuable thing to possess. You could use him later to bargain for something you wanted or you could just keep him as a trophy to show everyone that you are the more powerful king. But Joshua wasn't leading Israel to make a great name for himself. The covenant that God had with Israel was to make the name of YHWH great. The destruction of the city and the pile of stones left behind would be testament to might not of Israel, but of Israel's God.

So just as the stones heaped on top of Achan would testify that YHWH should be obeyed, so the stones piled up on top of the King of Ai would testify that YHWH gives victory to an obedient people.

This leads us to the third demonstration of God's faithfulness following Israel's failure.

God demonstrates his faithfulness to Israel by making all of his covenant known to every person in the new generation.

Joshua 8:30-35

³⁰ At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, ³¹ just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, “an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. ³² And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. ³³ And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them 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 the first, to bless the people of Israel. ³⁴ And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

Verses 30-35 represent a break in the action of Israel going through and conquering the land of Canaan. The first movement is over, but the concert is not completed. The location of Mount Ebal is significant because it is north of Ai, Bethel, and Jericho closer to where Israel crossed the Jordan River. This is next to the city of Shechem where Abram built his first altar to God in Genesis 12. God had appeared to Abram when he, by faith, picked up from the land of his family in Haran and moved everything he had to Canaan. When Abram arrived there God told him “to your offspring I will give this land.” In essence Joshua is moving backwards along the original path that Abram took when he got to the land of Canaan.

It is significant that this is the first time in the entire Bible that the phrase “The Law of Moses” is used. The reason this is specifically called the law of Moses is because Moses gave strict instructions in Deuteronomy 27 that the people should come to this spot and some tribes were to stand on one mountain and other tribes on the other mountain and they were to receive for the first time in the Promised the blessings and the curses of the law. Joshua was faithfully fulfilling all that Moses had commanded him to do, even to the point of building an altar of uncut stones and writing the law on the stones (Moses had told him to use plaster to write in.)

The whole point of these verses is that the very same God who promised this very land to Abram hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years before was now fulfilling his promise in the sight of the very offspring that God had promised to Abram all those years before. God had singled out this one family from all of the earth to demonstrate for all of humanity his power, his character, and his worth.

God demonstrated this through both blessings and curses. The Law of Moses was quite conditional. If you obey, you will receive these blessings. If you disobey, you will receive these curses. There is a saying of lawyers that ignorance is no defense of breaking the law. That is usually true, even though we live in a country where we have a whole class of people who do

nothing but spend their lives inventing rules and regulations, so there is no way to know every law that exists. That's why you need to hire lawyers. But with God's law that was absolutely true. Nobody in Israel, even the foreigner who had not grown up in Israel, would be ignorant of the promises of God. This was true of both the blessings and the curses.

Do we view God's words to us in the same way? Do we truly believe that the great demonstration of God's personal affection for us is that he has bothered to speak to us and make it known to us? Now by the fact that you are here, I would say that you have some sense of the gift of God's Word in your life. After all, there are a hundred things that you could be doing today, but you chose to come to church, many of you with your kids and grandkids, and with excitement and anticipation you wanted to come worship God and hear his Word read and explained to you.

But think about how quickly you will forget about how important God's word is the minute you leave out of here. I'm preaching to myself here. Are you going to pick up and dig into some of these other passages that we didn't get into deeply here? Are you going to take time tonight or tomorrow or this week to silently think about this word and ask God why he would bother to put in a big important book, allow you to hear it on a Sunday at church and somehow make it something that changes your life? Are you going to look ahead to Joshua 9 to anticipate what you get to come and hear about next week? If we had the view of the promises of God that Joshua had and Moses had before him then I would say we would take the reading and hearing and meditating on the Bible way more seriously than we do. We would be telling people at work and at school what we are learning from the Bible. We would be asking them to come join us next week or show up in life group and meeting us for coffee so we can read and talk about God's promises together.

When I see in Joshua that even the little ones came to hear the Law read to them, I don't get the sense that their parents gave them the option of staying in bed that day. The parents would go home and remind them of what they heard. God's Word wasn't an optional part of life that you turn to on special occasions or when things got bad. It is life or death. Ignore it at your own peril.

But what are God's promises to us?

Challenge

Failure is never final.

We left here last week at a low point in the story of Joshua. They were defeated by a city that they had no business losing to. But God does leave his kids in a place of perpetual defeat. When God dealt with their sin, they were ready to move forward and understand God's faithfulness in a totally new way.

God wasn't some distant king who viewed them as some sort of business partner entering a new territory. As long as they benefit God he will make sure things are OK, but the minute they aren't worth the trouble anymore he throws them away. No, when God made a promise to Israel he ALWAYS follows through. Their destination would not be sin and defeat. The destination is FAITH and victory.

So how does this apply to us?

There are many of you who come here for whatever the reason is, but it is not because you believe that God has anything victorious for you today. You rightly understand that you have failed God. You don't think you are worth his attention. If you were God, you would have given up on you, thrown you away, and left you alone to just do what you want to do. You basically treat yourself that way, as an expendable object with no future.

But understand that when you belong to God, failure is never final. Sin is not your destination.

One of the most beautiful doctrines in all of Scripture is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Westminster confession phrases it this way

They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

This doesn't mean you won't sin and it doesn't mean that there won't be brutal consequences for your sin. But it does mean that if you have by faith trusted Christ as your savior, then you belong to God and he is not finished with you. He will defeat sin in your life and your life will become something that he deems to be beautiful and worshipful.

What he is demanding of you is that if he hasn't given up on you and he has declared that your destination is something glorious, then you have an OBLIGATION to pick up, follow the plan, keep fighting toward what he has called you.

Peter understood this in a profound way. As we have mentioned earlier, if the story had ended with Jesus' crucifixion, Peter would have been lumped in a category with Judas as someone who wanted the results of Jesus without the plan of Jesus. He would go down in history with Judas as the greatest failure of all time. But we know that Peter belonged to Jesus in a way that Judas didn't. And Jesus' final commands to Peter in the Gospel of John are "feed my lambs" "tend to my sheep", "feed my sheep," "follow me," and "follow me."

John 21:18

18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, ^εyou used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

You may have failed spectacularly up until this point. But I'm telling you to follow me. I you will succeed in following me, because you belong to me. If you have given up control of your life and trust me, you will never finish as a failure.

Discussion Questions

- **How hopeless was Joshua at the beginning of Joshua 8?**
- **How do you think God's command to action renewed Joshua's sense of purpose?**
- **Why is it significant that God gave Joshua a detailed plan?**
- **Have you ever missed a blessing because you did not trust God to execute the plan you already claimed you believed that he made for you?**
- **How do we not trust God with the details of his plan for us?**
- **How has God been gracious in reminding you of his covenant relationship?**
- **What difference do God's reminders of his faithfulness make in your daily life?**