

# Victory After Defeat

## Joshua 8

Fear falls on Israel after the defeat at Ai but the Lord appears to comfort and empower. The book of Joshua unfolds from crossing the Jordan (chapters 1-5), to conquering (6-12), to allotment (13-21), and finally to worship (22-24). Right here in the midst of conquest, Israel suffers a setback. Now they must regroup and move forward. The Christian life and the advance of the gospel follow this same pattern: victory in Christ, setbacks and suffering, and encouraging advance.

### Summary of the Text

The Lord tells Joshua not to be afraid or dismayed but to go to Ai with all the men of war (v. 1). He will deliver it to them as He did Jericho, this time the spoil will be theirs, and they will lay an ambush outside the city (v. 2). Joshua and the men go up and he sends 30,000 men to a position near the city where they'll be ready to ambush the army of Ai after they draw them out (vv. 3-6). Then they will take the city and burn it (vv. 7-8). Joshua set out at night and places a second group of 5000 men between Bethel and Ai, west of the city, and then goes into the valley before the city (vv. 9-13). The king of Ai sees them early in the morning, musters his troops, and sends them all out as Israel pretends to flee into the wilderness (vv. 14-17). The Lord then prompts Joshua to raise his spear toward Ai (v. 18). He does and the men in ambush enter the city and set it on fire, which causes the army of Ai to panic as smoke rises and they have nowhere to go (vv. 19-20). Their army is destroyed and the king brought to Joshua. After they destroy the city, the king is hanged on a tree until evening and then taken down as the law required (vv. 21-28; Deut. 21:22-23). They raise a heap of stones over his body at the gate of the city that stands as a memorial (v. 29). Joshua then goes to Mount Ebal and builds an altar of stones where they offer ascension and peace offerings (vv. 30-31). He writes a copy of the law of Moses on stones and then divides the people, half in front of Mount Gerizim and half in front of Mount Ebal to hear the book of the law, the blessings and curses, with all the people of Israel (vv. 32-35).

### Preparation

Joshua wisely understands the existential crisis Israel faces after the defeat at Ai (7:9). The Canaanites heard about the loss and would muster their armies to finish off these invaders who just a generation ago left Egypt a smoking crater. Israel did the exact thing the Lord said not to do: "by all means abstain from the accursed things, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the camp of the Israel a curse, and trouble it" (6:18). Had Joshua and Israel played down what Achan's treachery and not sought God's mercy for what only could be forgiven and not excused, they would be on their way to the next defeat. But because they repented down to the ground and obeyed His instructions, the Lord turned away from the fierceness of His anger (7:26). The verb "confess" in the New Testament means literally "to say the same thing", to name and confess the sin as God calls it. Doing so results in complete freedom from fear, guilt, and shame: "Do not be afraid, nor 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" (v. 1). Israel is not haunted by what just happened but instead cleansed and strengthened: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand" (Ps. 37:23-24). This chapter contains brilliant military strategy that soundly defeats the enemy, but the foundational preparation occurs here when the Lord tells Joshua not to be afraid or dismayed. Achan did what he did, and like all sin, it was a bad trade. What he took unlawfully will be given freely to Israel (v. 2). God only encourages, relieves, and unburdens the repentant. Know that sin will occur in your life and be willing to own and learn from it: "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20-21). Joshua is a great father in the faith because he

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left the failure behind and believed that God would bless him and His people (Heb. 11:6; Phil. 3:13). D.L. Moody said, “God never made a promise that was too good to be true.” The Lord never disciplines us apart from His desire to bless.

### Strategy & Success

Israel can now listen and become an effective fighting force. Unlike the marches around Jericho during the day, this attack begins at night by setting up the army for ambush (v. 3). Whereas at Jericho the walls came miraculously down, this attack depends upon stealth and disciplined execution by the soldiers. Joshua gets clear instruction from the Lord on the ambush as well as prompting within the battle to raise his spear (vv. 2, 18), but it was his decision to put the additional 5000 men for ambush between Bethell and Ai. He was a faithful leader embedded with his men (v. 9). The Lord gives us all kinds of instruction that applies to what we do both generally and in particular. Regarding our work: “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24). In preparing to build a household: “Prepare your outside work, make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterward build your house” (Prov. 24:27). In raising kids: “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). And disciplining them: “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly” (Prov. 13:24). In discipling the nations: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). In all these endeavors the instruction is clear and there are innumerable decisions and applications to be made. Walking by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit we apply God’s principles and obey His commands.

### Credit & Covenant

In the ancient near east a triumphant king would record his exploits on plaster-covered stones. Israel travels 20 miles north to Mount Ebal, near Shechem where Abraham first received the promise to inherit the land (Gen. 12:6-7), and Jacob returned from his exile and was promised the same (Gen. 33:18-20). Israel’s mission thus far: preparation and covenant renewal (5:2-12); advance and success (5:13-6:27); sin and chastisement (7:1-26); restoration and victory (8:1-29); covenant renewal (8:30-35). Rather than articulating their achievements, Joshua builds the altar to the Lord and writes a copy of the law of Moses on stones (vv. 30-32; Ex. 20:25). Instead of boasting, the ascension and peace offerings proclaim that the victory is all due to the Lord’s grace and mercy. The word “all” is used five times in verses 33-35: all Israel gathered to read all the law of Moses before all the assembly. The stranger, the foreigners, the women, the children, everyone comes to hear about the mercy of the Lord given to those who seek Him, and the curses that fall on those who reject Him. They dedicate themselves to every word of God. The curse fell on the king of Ai whose body was taken down by evening, as Moses wrote: “for he who is hanged is cursed by God” (Deut. 21:23; v. 29). This verse is quoted and applied to Jesus: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). We too have a monument, the cross that speaks of the curse that fell on Jesus in our place, and the everlasting victory He won proclaimed by His resurrection from the dead.