

**Joshua:
The Defeat of Ai –
Learning the Lesson of Unconfessed Sin**

Joshua 8:1-34

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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There is something altogether beautiful, yes, beautiful, about the opening verse of this chapter. No matter what you make of the rest of this chapter, there is something absolutely beautiful about this opening verse. I don't know about you, but I imagine Joshua was feeling a little discouraged. The city of Ai had failed to be taken. Some of his men had been killed, and there had been this incident with Achan. They had taken Achan and his family outside and stoned them to death. I imagine he was a discouraged leader at this point, and how welcome then, these words, repeated now for the third time to Joshua, "Do not fear or be dismayed."

I wonder if that might be all you will take away from this message? Do not fear or be dismayed. That God, no matter what else you may make of the revelation of God in this chapter, and it is grim; whatever else you draw about the character of God, do not lose sight of the way in which God ministers to His servant Joshua at the very beginning of this chapter. He says to him, "Do not be afraid, and do not be discouraged."

There is a story that goes something like this. The devil was selling some of his implements and objects of war. And one of the prospective buyers is looking over all of these tools of Satan, and notices that one of them has a label attached to it that says, "Not for sale." And when he inquires further of the devil, why this tool is not for sale, the devil says to him that he has used this tool to considerable effect, to gain an entry into the hearts of men and women. And once having gained an entry into the hearts of men and women, he can then plant in those hearts whatever he desires. And that tool is called "discouragement." Many of you know it all too well. And many of you recognize the tyranny that Satan can wield in the lives, even of the choicest of God's servants with the weapon of discouragement, and therefore I say again, how marvelous that God should be the kind of God who knows about our discouragements and speaks a word for the third time, "Do not be afraid and do not be discouraged."

But there's more. Hold that thought in your heads, because we dive now into the depths. As I read that eighth chapter, I wonder what you made of it? Now, some

of you have been reading this chapter this afternoon, and have been making a great deal of it, but if you haven't read this chapter in recent days, or weeks or months, or perhaps years, I wonder what you make of it? There are three lessons I want us to see in this chapter, and the first of which is this:

I. The battle is the Lord's.

The battle is the Lord's. The opening verses of chapter eight inform us that God is saying to Joshua, "Go, now," the second time, having failed the first time because of Achan and what he had done, "Go to the city of Ai and I will give it to you. I will enable you to fulfill the conquest of Canaan that I had promised." He says it in verse 1 and He repeats it in verse 18, "I will give it into your hand." Now remember, Ai was a relatively small city. The spies, you remember, had come back and reported that it was relatively small, it would be easy to take, they should only send a small number of people, the text is a little unclear as to the exact number. And now God gives to Joshua the battle plan. There is to be a large contingent, some 30,000 or so, to the north of the city. They are to camp there. Another group of men are to be to the west of the city in order to be an ambush to take the city. The plan was that when the men of Ai saw the people of Israel to the north, they would come out of the city. Having won on the previous occasion, they would be filled with all kinds of confidence in their ability, and would come out and after being drawn away from the city, the men of Joshua would come from the west and capture the city and set it on fire. That was the plan. It may well be there was another group of men even further to the west to prevent the men of Bethel from coming to spoil this great plan. God gives to Joshua this plan.

You understand that when we read the book of Joshua, and when we read this battle plan, you and I, on this side of the cross, are meant to draw a spiritual and moral and ethical lesson from all of this. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual, mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. How different the weapons God supplies the Church. They have come from the hand of God, they are far superior to any of the weapons of the world, they need no modification, they need no improvement, they have served the Church for 2,000 years. They are weapons that have conquered and are still conquering, and God is saying to us, as we read this passage, we're also engaged in a fight. We also engaged in a war. Today we're fighting in America with the same weapons that the apostle Paul fought with. With fighting with the same great sword that was used by Athanasius and Augustine and Calvin and Luther and Whitefield and Wesley. The same weapons that the Church has always used are still being used. They are spiritual ArmaLites. They are spiritual Kalashnikovs, by which the Church goes about to gain its victory. And we're assured, as Joshua was assured, that the battle is the Lord's.

Now, there are all kinds of voices saying we need to use other kinds of weapons,

that we need to use the weapons of the world. And God is saying, these tried and trusted weapons assure you that the battle is Mine, and I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. The battle is the Lord's. The battle is God's. That's the confidence, that's the assurance that Joshua was given. And we are to trust in that word. That's what Joshua and his men are called upon now to do, trust in this battle plan that I give to you.

I wonder, are we losing faith in the battle plan that God has given to His Church? Losing faith in the confidence that we ought to have in the power of His word, in the power of the preaching of His word, in the power of the proclamation of the name of Jesus Christ. There are voices out there, telling us again and again that what we are doing here is old fashioned and out of date and doesn't work and doesn't attract people and doesn't win the victory. Well, look around, my friends, look around, and see that these tried and trusted weapons assure us still that the battle is the Lord's. But there's a second principle that I want us to learn from this chapter, and that is this:

II. The judgment is the Lord's.

There are some pretty gruesome details in this chapter, and we must plough through them, not just today, but for the next few weeks we must put on armor plating, because we're in the middle of a war. And we can glamorize and Hollywoodize war, but war is horrible and war is ugly. War involves death and bloodshed and mayhem and that's what we've got here. What we have here is unique. This is a holy war against the Canaanites. You either accept biblical revelation to that effect or you don't. The iniquity of the Amorites is now full. The justification of the Israelites conquering Canaan has to do with God's judgment on Canaan. It had reached such a sinful peak that it was ripe for being taken over.

It's the description in verse 22 that I want to focus on this evening. These men come out from the city to encounter them—the men of Ai. They are trapped between Joshua's men to the north, and the ambush that has been set to the west. They have come into the city and are now going northwards and the men of Ai are caught in this trap and all of them are cut down leaving neither survivors nor fugitives. We'll comment on the ethics of that in a later period. Tonight I want to concentrate on just one of the details of this story, and that is the hanging of the King of Ai. That's a pretty gruesome scene isn't it? Everyone else is killed and the King of Ai is captured, taken to Joshua and they hang him. They hang him on a tree and he is left there until nightfall, and then they take his body down and leave his body outside the city. And there is a heap of stones and it is like a memorial.

What's going on here? What's going on here needs to be understood in terms of what Moses had written back in the Book of Deuteronomy. That anyone taken by

capital offense could be hung on a tree until nightfall. That was the law as a kind of deterrent. You may say it's pretty barbaric. Yes, it is barbaric. What's going on here? What are we to make of this? The king is a representative who now finds himself under the curse of God. And you can't read this story without being reminded of another who was hung upon a tree-- upon a cross-- outside the walls of Jerusalem. They took Jesus just as they took this king. Jesus who had never done any wrong. Jesus who had never sinned. Jesus who had never uttered a cross word. They took Him and they crucified Him. They nailed Him to a Roman gibbet--to a cross. They put nails in His hands and His feet and they propped Him up in the air. They put a crown of thorns upon His head. They mocked Him; they spat in His face. There was a cry that was heard from the cross, "My God, My God. Why have you forsaken Me?" Uttering the opening words of Psalm 22.

What's happening? What's happening is that Jesus had been made a curse. God had made him a curse; God had put him under a curse. Instead of the blessings, He was receiving the curses. Instead of hearing the words of the Aaronic benediction, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace." Instead, the Lord has shut out His presence from His own Son. He is pouring out on His son His holy wrath and anger so that Jesus is in the place of the wicked damned. In the word of the creed, "He is descending into hell." That is, He is experiencing the curse that sinners deserve. Just as this king of Ai is hung upon a tree and left hanging there until nightfall, they did it to Jesus.

And you say about this 8th chapter of Joshua and this hanging that takes place, you say, "How horrible! How barbaric. How repulsive a thing it is to see a corpse hanging on a tree." And you turn 180 degrees from there and you walk, until you reach the New Testament, and you see the Son of God hanging on a cross, because sin is repulsive. It is repulsive to God. Because that's what sin deserves. And you realize tonight that we are sitting in church and we have this astonishing blessing of sitting in church on the Sabbath day, on the Lord's day evening, and we are hearing His words, and we're singing His praises, and we're enjoying assurance of sins forgiven and the hope of glory, because One has hung upon a tree in our place and in our stead, and born the guilt of our sins and born the punishment that that guilt deserves and born it to the full. "Amazing grace. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." The battle is the Lord's; the judgment is the Lord's, and thirdly, the life is the Lord's.

III. The life is the Lord's.

Something rather strange now happens. There's a sudden scene shift in verse 30. Did you pick it up? Did you notice? I really should have paused, perhaps. Perhaps not, because if this were a movie, suddenly the scene has changed. It's moved 20 miles northwards from the city of Ai to another city now called

Shechem. You need to consult your map now. No, you can do it later, but if you go north from Ai, think of Jerusalem. Twenty miles north is Ai. Twenty miles north again is Shechem. They've marched all the way up to Shechem and the text tells us that they've been joined now by everybody. The women and children have been in base camp in Gilgal. Now they've all come; they've marched up northwards, and if you sort of turn west, you'll see two huge mountains. One is called Gerazim and then to the north of it, Mount Ebal. They're still there. You can travel along the road and you can pass them—Gerazim and Ebal. One is going to be called a mountain of blessing and another one is going to be called a mountain of cursing. All the people are camped together at the base in the valley. Half of them are on one side; half of them are on the other, and in between is the Ark of the Covenant and the Levitical priests representing the presence of God. On the top of Mount Ebal—the mountain that represents cursing, there's an altar that's built made out of uncut plastered stone. Because then it would be easy to write on it and on those stones are written perhaps the Ten Commandments, or perhaps the greater part of the book of Deuteronomy. There are similar artifacts that have been discovered in Iran, for example, with inscriptions that are five times the length of the book of Deuteronomy. That would have taken a while to do, and I'm not sure how that would have been done. I can understand in the time frame that we have, at least writing the Ten Commandments.

And then, there is a ritual. It is a strange ritual. They read Deuteronomy 27 and 28. Now if you haven't read those chapters recently and you don't remember what they are, they are chapters that include, on the one hand words of blessing, that if the people of God are obedient, God will bless them. He'll bless them with food and He'll bless them with health and long life and family privileges and so on and so on. And then there's a whole list of things that God will curse them with if they are disobedient, and what is taking place is a worship service. It's a covenant renewal worship service.

Now remember, they are in the midst of a war. And God is saying, I want you to stop; I want you to pause; I want you to wait, because this is the most important thing for you to remember. "I want your obedience." And half of them are facing Mount Gerazim—3,000 feet high. Actually, it's just 1,000 feet above the valley that's below them, but 3,000 feet above sea level. They are hearing these words. If they are obedient, God will bless them in this way. And I think that as they were doing that; as they were promising to obey, as they were saying, "Yes, Lord, it is my desire and my longing to obey You and follow You wherever You will now lead us," but their eyes are drawn away from Mount Gerazim and their eyes drift toward Mount Ebal. Why? Because from the top of Mount Ebal there's an altar and sacrifices—peace offerings and burnt offerings—and the smoke is rising up into the air. As they are promising obedience, their eyes are drawn away to see this smoke that is rising up on the mountain of cursing.

I don't know whether you can understand this. It's important that you understand it. That from the mountain of cursing there is an altar that speaks of forgiveness.

If you don't understand anything else, can you understand that? From Mount Ebal the curse that was to come down upon Jesus from that mountain. There's smoke rising and it's like a giant object lesson that's saying, "I know that you will fail Me. I know that you mean it when you say that you want to be obedient, but I know that you won't be obedient. I know that you will fail Me, and you will fail Me again and again and again." But from that mountain—there wasn't an altar on the mount of blessing—but there was an altar on the mountain of cursing and it's saying, "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." That's what it is saying. It's saying, "there is a green hill far away outside the city wall, where my dear Lord was crucified who died to save us all. Oh dearly, dearly has He loved and we must love Him too, and trust in His redeeming blood and try His works to do."

Yes, this is a strange chapter, but right in the middle of this strange, strange chapter is a little glimpse of the cross and a little glimpse of the way of forgiveness. May God help us to see it. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we bow now in Your presence, we pray that You would write these words upon our hearts and help us as we constantly fail You and deserve the curses that come from a broken law. We thank You for one who was made a curse for us, who redeems us by His shed blood, and bless us, we pray, as we think and meditate and remember Christ our Savior, for Jesus' sake we ask it. AMEN.

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