

Planning a Comeback After Failure

Joshua 8:3-8

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, April 2nd 2023

Introduction:

Most of us have experienced major failures in life, and sometimes very embarrassing failures. We saw last week that sometimes those failures make us want to give up. Joshua certainly was ready to give up after his failure at Ai and after a loss of 36 lives. But God corrects him and shows him that when we approach our failures in God's way, the very failure can become a jumping off platform for victory. This is the remarkable thing about God's grace - our very failures sometimes become the launching point for victory.

But it depends upon how we handle that failure. James Lowell once said that our failures are like sharp kitchen knives that can either serve us well or cut us badly, depending upon whether we grasp our failure by the handle or whether we grasp it by the blade. In chapter 8 Joshua grasps the knife by the handle and turns an utter failure into a glorious victory. And we want to learn from that process. Today we are looking at verses 3-8. We are not going to hurry through this chapter. There's way too much good material in it. These six verses deal with planning a comeback after failure. Next time we will see how wonderful it is when a plan begins to come together. But today we are just going to look at the planning process.

I. Base your battles solidly on the promises of God (review of vv. 1-2)

And let me take a minute or two to review verses 1-2 that we looked at last week. Point 1 says, "Base your battles solidly on the promises of God." Verses 1-2 say,

1 Now the LORD said to Joshua: "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. 2 And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves. Lay an ambush for the city behind it."

Last week we saw that those two verses are rich with promise from a generous God of grace. Despite a wretched defeat, the moment Israel repented and turned around in their attitudes, God welcomed them back to confidence, to being useful servants, to faith in His promises, to stewardship, fulfillment, instruction, joy, and victory. He showed Himself to be a generous God whom they could all depend upon. And God encourages them now to match *their* plans to *His* promises. This is so important. We do not want man-centered plans, driven by man-centered goals, grounded in man's wisdom, and leading to man's glory. No way.

Hudson Taylor said that he had witnessed three ways that Christians have tried to carry out God's work, and only one of those ways receives God's blessing. Some try to make their own plans and then try carry them out in their own strength. Some make careful plans and ask God to bless *their* plans. But he said the right way is to ask God what the plans should be and offer ourselves as servants to carry out His purposes.¹ That's what this section is about. It is making sure that our plans are anchored in God's promises, in tune with His Word, sensitive to his leading, and completely under His Lordship. So I am assuming you have already heard last week's sermon, and we will move on to the second point.

II. Get your head back in the game (v. 3a)

After hearing from God, what's the first thing you need to do? It is to get your head back in the game and leave the past as the past. We have a hard time doing that - especially if the past is embarrassing. Verse 3 begins, "So Joshua arose, and all the people of war..." He stopped mourning and moping around like he had been doing in chapter 7, and by faith he got his head back into the game. He knows that he won't be able to remedy the 36 lost lives. There will be widows and children left behind who will be mourning, so God does not in any way minimize the mistake. There will be pain, and Joshua owns it. So getting his head back into the game does not mean he will be insensitive to the widows and those who have lost loved ones. Not at all.

But if he is going to succeed, he has to focus on what God has called him to do and pursue that with His whole heart. When we constantly stew about the past with all of its regrets, our head is not in the game. Romans 8:28 promises that God can turn even our blunders into blessings since He causes all things to work together for good. And in this case He definitely did. But this idea of focus, faith in God, and moving forward is so important if our plans are to succeed. Our minds and emotions cannot be chained to the past failures.

III. We need to return to the scene of the previous defeat in God's strength(vv. 3b)

But the next point is also important. Getting your head back into the game means returning to the scene of previous defeat and dealing with it. And that too can be uncomfortable. Verse 3 goes on to say, "So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai..." They once again face *the very place* of their humiliation. Though they had suffered a defeat at the hands of Ai, they commit themselves to tackling Ai once again - but this time in a right relationship with the Lord.

What was the turning point? Besides dealing with the sin in their midst, it was learning the lesson that without God they could do nothing. When they learned that lesson, God

¹ W. Wiersbe, Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers, p. 243.

delighted to use them. They finally understood that they needed to have God's power for even taking on a smaller city like Ai.

In the same way, we are utterly dependent upon God for *any* success. Too many preachers rely on their eloquence, their learning, or their charisma, but without God's blessing a preacher's words will fall to the ground no matter how eloquent he is. In contrast, Paul felt very inadequate in his speech, yet because he completely depended upon God, God used him in powerful ways.

Let's apply this to you. Many of you are amazingly skilled at hospitality, or arithmetic, or athletics, or other things. But have you thought about consecrating your very *strengths* to God and asking God to *anoint* your strengths and to *transform* them by His grace? He can use even your athletic skills, your skills at sales, your gardening skills, or your administrative skills and make them *more* than effective. It's great to be effective. Don't get me wrong. It's great to be effective. But God can also make our strengths *transformational* for the kingdom. Take seriously the thought that even what seems easy to you *will* become an Ai if God is not in it. It will. Daily we must give all that we are to the Lord and ask Him to use it. And accomplished people have a hard time doing that. They are too used to depending upon their strengths. This is why God many times bypasses them and uses people who sense their weakness. They are more useful to him than the people who don't sense their weakness. Let me read 1 Corinthians 1:27-31. Paul says,

1Cor. 1:26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, [and here is the purpose:] 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— 31 that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

It's a simple lesson, but many of us are slow learners. It's easier to depend upon ourselves. Sometimes our strength becomes our *problem* because we depend upon it rather than depending upon the Lord. So now that they are depending upon the Lord, they are returning to the very place of their defeat. They are no longer intimidated by it. Their confidence is not in themselves; it is in God.

IV. Don't make the same mistakes twice; learn from your mistakes (v. 3c-d,5)

Well, the next point says, “Don't make the same mistakes twice.” What was their previous mistake? It was thinking, “This is easy. We can do it. All it will take is 2-3000 men.” It was self-confidence. *Now*, when the Lord says to take *everyone*, they take *everyone* - even if the city is tiny. Verse 3 goes on to say that Joshua will send a small group as an ambush - but

not 3000 small. Even for the ambush he will send 30,000. It says, “and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night.” And verse 5 says, “Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city.”

Many people say that Joshua had underestimated the power of the enemy. That may be, but the primary problem was that he hadn't gone to the Lord for guidance and the leaders had pridefully overestimated their own strength. So that was their mistake.

In any case, the best people down through history are not the people who have never made mistakes. They are the people (like Thomas Edison) who have *learned* from their mistakes. In Frederick Robertson's book on writing, he said,

“Life, like war, is a series of mistakes, and he is not the best Christian nor the best general who makes the fewest false steps. Poor mediocrity may secure that; but he is the best who wins the most splendid victories by the retrieval of mistakes. Forget mistakes; organize victories out of mistakes.”²

Or to use the language of John Maxwell, when we fail, let's make sure we are failing forwards. And he gives several ways that we can fail forwards.³ We have already seen some ways to fail forward last week, but let me outline very quickly five more ways that are hinted at in chapters 7-8.

First, don't point fingers and blame others for your failure. The victim mentality robs you of the mental framework needed to move forward. These Israelites had owned their sin as well as their prideful mistake, and they moved on. So don't point fingers or see yourself as a victim. Own your mistake and move forward.

Second, people think that failure is an event. It is almost never *simply* an event. For example, when you fail on a school exam, you shouldn't think of the school exam as being a failure. The real failure was likely a failure to adequately prepare for the test. The failure *preceded* the exam. Well, the same is true of most failures and mistakes.

Third, don't see *yourself* as the failure. If you do, you will be prone to get discouraged and to give up. God didn't see these Israelites as failures now that they were right with Him. He saw them as victors. Our discouragements over failure are often because we see *ourselves* as the failure rather than seeing the action, the poor planning, or the sin as the failure. We can't change who we are, but we can certainly change our actions. So see the actions as the failure, not you as a person. That may seem like a subtle nuance, but it makes all the difference in the world when it comes to confidence.

Fourth, don't see failure as the enemy to be avoided. People often don't try because they are so afraid of having another failure. NBA coach Rick Pitino once said, “Failure is good. It's

² Frederick William Robertson. source/Notes: Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers (1895)

³ <https://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/failing-forward/>

fertilizer. Everything I've learned about coaching I've learned from making mistakes." Now, obviously we want to avoid sin and not minimize it, but even with sin, if you fear doing challenging things because you might sin in the process of doing them, you will sin by failing to do the things God is calling you to do. Weak as we are, we must obey God despite the risks - that's the point.

Fifth, don't focus on the past; focus on the future. These Israelites learned from their mistake and didn't repeat it.

V. He used all the resources God commanded including night and topography (vv. 1,3b,4b,5)

The other thing that I see in these same verses is that Joshua used all the resources that God had commanded him to use. Certainly God uses miracles in our lives from time to time where we don't have any resources and yet we have tried to be responsible. Sometimes God will do miracles even when we do have resources - like he did with Jericho. But God expects us to do what we can with the resources that we do have. Planning requires *recognition* of resources, *analysis* of them, and *use* of them.

What are the resources that Joshua had at his disposal? Obviously the people were a resource. And among the people he distinguished which ones were what verse 3 calls "mighty men of valor" and which ones were not. They were all resources, but he used them in different ways. So there were a variety of people resources.

Their weapons and armor were resources and in verse 4 he tells them, "all of you be ready." That means that each one had resources that he needed to be ready to use. If you go into battle without good weapons and without training in using them, you disobey that phrase in verse 4.

Verse 3 shows that night darkness was a resource that he used to his advantage to hide 30,000 soldiers who are going to travel to the deep valley that's pictured in your outline. You may not have thought about darkness as a resource, but it can be.

John Lovell of the Warrior Poet Society talked about objects, gear, furniture, and other things as sometimes being resources when clearing a room. A mounted light can be a resource, though he speaks of them as bullet magnets. He doesn't like them apparently, and I totally understand his logic. I guess it depends on the situation, right? But Lovell has you analyze what natural resources that are in your environment that you can take advantage of in a crisis situation. Well, in the same way, verse 4 speaks of the walls of the city themselves being a resource they could hide behind.

In a bit we will see that the expectations of the enemy can be a resource that can be used against them.

And as Joshua looked at the topography all around them he noticed that there were deep ravines where people could hide completely unnoticed from the ramparts of the walls of Ai. And I've given you an elevation diagram that shows a clear line of sight from Joshua to the

scout for the ambush party. And we will look at that next time. But it also shows the deep depression where no one from the city would have been able to see the 30,000 men who were going to be part of the ambush. So Joshua sent one group behind the city into a deep ravine and he sent another group to cut off escape from Ai to Bethel and to keep people from Bethel from coming to Ai's aid. But the point is, he used the topography of the area as a resource.

So this chapter shows Joshua thinking outside of the box at all the potential resources that were at his disposal. He studied his situation carefully. And it is good for us to think outside the box at what resources we already have at our disposal. Sometimes there are resources staring us in the face that we don't even recognize, like the darkness and those ravines.

Obviously we can see the importance of this for actual battle. But this is a principle that is true in all of life. For example, God calls us to anticipate disasters that can happen and to make plans for them by allocating resources that could potentially help us out. Are you aware of the potential for the Federal Government to start assimilating banks this year and to issue a new digital currency that can be tracked and even control where money is spent? I think they are aiming for this summer. Even the mainline media is beginning to talk about that. Florida and Texas governors are encouraging states to resist this move because they see it as more federal control. China's already doing that. So that is just one of several potential future evils that we need to think about. It's important to at least start guessing at how these things could impact us and what resources we have at our disposal to handle the new situation.

Could there be war? If so, what are our plans? What if they draft our daughters? The Bible talks about anticipating potential disasters. They may never happen, but God calls us to plan and be prudent.

In your home are you using all the resources at your disposal to train your children. Well-planned chores for the children can be tremendous character training opportunities. Do you take advantage of the mice and ants that come into your kitchen to train your children, or do you always take care of those things yourself? Many people think that they don't have much in the way of resources for training their children, but if you look around you will notice all kinds of resources that are underutilized.

Do you use all the resources that you could use for the success of your business? Or the success of your devotions in family worship? There are plenty of resources out there that can help us.

Do you try to equip your wives with the resources that would enable her to better manage the home? Sometimes buying them tools can save them a lot of time and effort.

It's a simple principle of planning, and most of our failures are the direct result of poor planning and poor use of resources.

VI. He took his leadership seriously (v. 4a)

Next, in verse 4 he took his leadership seriously. It says, “And he commanded them, saying...” And we will see that what he commands is exactly what God commands. Unlike individuals and families, who are free to do anything God has not forbidden (in other words, individuals and families have *maximum* liberty in the Bible), the law of God was quite clear that the church and the state had to be much more limited in their liberties than the individual or family. We refer to this as the Regulative Principle of Government. The church and the state are strictly regulated by God in what they can and cannot do. They may only do what God has explicitly authorized them to do. This helps to prevent church and state from encroaching on the liberties of individuals and families. But it also makes for a very small church and a very small state. The state may only command what God has authorized the state to command. The same is true of the church.

But leadership in both church and state *must still lead*. God isn’t going to do the leading for them. *They* must make decisions. *They* must plan. *They* must conscript, guide, counsel, and charge people with what God has authorized them to lead in. And Joshua took his military leadership seriously under God.

Now, most of you aren’t military people, but we men must lead our families, and the women must learn to lead their children, and the children need to be taught over time how to lead, by giving them opportunities to lead other children. Leadership doesn’t just happen. It must be a part of our planning.

Brothers and sisters, this section is a call to improve your planning rather than continuing to dart from one crisis to another - so busy that you can’t plan. This week we are looking at the importance of planning and in next sermon at the process of a plan coming together.

VII. He came up with a new strategy (vv. 4-8)

In any case, having failed before, Joshua knows that he needs to come up with a new strategy. Some of our failures are because we keep using the same failed strategies. As we go through verses 4-8, it might be worth asking yourself if you need a new strategy (that is, if things have not been working out well for you). Let me illustrate this with a simple story of the need to take care of your tools. Some people are very poor stewards of their tools. They don’t include maintaining their tools in their planning. I worked in the logging industry up in Canada for about two years. It was hard work, but not as hard as when my grandpa Kayser worked in the logging industry. He cut down trees with axe and saw. And the story goes that a young man had applied to be on a logging crew and the foreman let him demonstrate his ability to chop down a tree - just to see how good he was. The young man very skillfully chopped the tree down, and the impressed foreman hired him on the spot. He was good. The foreman told the young man to start work on Monday. Well, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday rolled by and the foreman approached the young man on Thursday afternoon and told him, “You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today.” Startled, the young man said, “I thought you paid on Friday.”

“Normally we do,” answered the foreman, “but we’re letting you go today because you’ve fallen behind. Our daily felling charts show that you’ve dropped from first place on Monday to last on Wednesday.”

“But I’m a hard worker,” the young man objected. “I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!”

The foreman, sensing the boy’s integrity, thought for a minute and then asked, “Have you been sharpening your ax?” The young man replied, “I’ve been working too hard to take the time.”⁴

That was obviously a big mistake. But this is a syndrome any of us can fall into. We get too busy to plan, prepare, and hone our skills, or to evaluate our tools. Joshua regrouped and comes up with a new plan. Let’s take a look at it.

A. A hidden ambush from behind (v. 4) and cutting off escape to Bethel (v. 9)

The first part of the plan is to make an ambush on one side and to station a group on the other side who could prevent Bethel from either helping out or from being a city to which the men of Ai could escape. You see the ambush in verse 4:

“Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind the city. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready.

The group that cut off escape is mentioned in verse 9 (which we will be looking at next time). It says,

Joshua therefore sent them out; and they went to lie in ambush, and stayed between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua lodged that night among the people.

So this speaks of strategy, creative wisdom, and thinking through options. This is the stuff that leadership is made of.

B. Drawing the enemy out (vv. 5-6)

Next, he plans to draw the enemy out of the city so that the city will be unprotected. Verses 5-6

5 Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city; and it will come about, when they come out against us as at the first, that we shall flee before them. 6 For they will come out after us till we have drawn them from the city...

Most of you will not be involved in battle, but let’s apply this to things you will be involved in. In apologetics, this involves getting the opponent to state the parts of his worldview that

⁴ K. Hughes, *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome*, Tyndale.

are most obviously without foundation and the hardest to defend. You want the onlookers to notice that what seems like a secure worldview is actually very vulnerable. And presuppositional apologetics can teach you how to draw out the enemy in arguments. And if you haven't studied presuppositional apologetics yet - Oh my! You really need to. Isaac Botkin did a cool video on why everyone needs to have an AR-15 - including grandma. Well, I'm telling you that everyone needs to know apologetics - including grandma. And a nice introduction is Greg Bahnsen's book, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*. And by the way, we have put all of his apologetics courses (and actually, all of his audio files - even his seminary courses) up for free download on the website, bahnseninstitute.com. It's an incredible free resource. Anyway, Bahnsen was brilliant at drawing the enemy out.

But right now you have a perfect resource in the Worldview class that Josh Fugate is leading in his home. It is using Dr. Robert Fugate's book, *The Foundation and Pillars of the Biblical Worldview*. It's a fantastic book, and you really should be thanking God for the resources we have with Dr. Fugate right here in this church. Take advantage of that class.

C. Taking advantage of the enemy's presuppositions (v. 6b)

Anyway, if you look at verse 6 you will see that Joshua was in a sense taking advantage of the enemy's presuppositions. Everyone has presuppositions that make them act. In this case, verse 6 goes on to say,

for they will say, "They are fleeing before us as at the first.' Therefore we will flee before them.

Presuppositionalism helps you to get into the thinking of the enemy and teaches you how to take advantage of the absolute bankruptcy of their false presuppositions and how to use that to lead people to Christ.

But certainly in a real war, there are all kinds of warroom strategies like this that are trying to second guess what the enemy will do. But the same is true in apologetics. The more we study worldview and apologetics the more prepared we will be to be good soldiers of the cross. Josh, did I give a good enough advertizement for your course?

VIII. By faith plan for victory and believe that you will achieve the victory (v. 7)

The next point is, "By faith plan for victory and believe that you will achieve the victory." If you plan for defeat and believe the church will be defeated, you will be defeated. Scripture says that without faith it is impossible to please God. He is not going to bless. This is the problem with at least some forms of Amillennialism and certainly with all forms of Dispensationalism. Both of those eschatologies are what I call hyper-futurism. They are eschatologies that guarantee the defeat of the church. I blame them for the mess we are in America. Those eschatologies have robbed people of hope in the future by saying that God's promises don't relate to our age. But hyper-preterism does the same thing. It removes God's promises from our age. Verse 7 shows faith, hope, and commitment to action - all of

which have been lacking in the church for the last 100+ years. C. I. Scofield, the founder of Dispensationalist eschatology, and the writer of the miserable Scofield Study Bible (which you need to throw away if you own it) died in 1921 - just over 100 years ago. Anyway, verse 7 says,

Then you shall rise from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand.

Notice the confidence: “seize the city, for the Lord your God will deliver it into your hand.” It is critical that the church once again begin believing that the Great Commission is not an empty slogan, but is God’s marching orders that He intends for us to accomplish. It’s not an unfulfillable commission. He calls for taking every nation for Christ, and teaching every nation to obey everything that the whole Bible teaches for the whole of life. When will modern missions begin taking the Great Commission seriously like the missions of the 1800s did? Missions is not just about converting people. It’s about discipling the nations. If the church will once again plan for victory by faith, this Great Commission will be accomplished. That’s why I believe eschatology is such an important topic. And by the way, Hyperpreterism (which believes that 100% of the prophecies of the Bible been fulfilled) also robs the church of the promises that we can bank our faith upon. It robs the church every bit as much as Dispensationalism has. And if you don’t know what Hyperpreterism is, you can talk to me afterwards. It’s an unbelievably paralyzing (and brand new) system of thought. It is imperative that we regain the Postmillennial hope that drove the missions of the 1800’s to accomplish astounding things. And it is imperative that we not just become armchair theologians, but that we actually start impacting the world.

IX. Antithesis: don’t make a peace treaty with the world (v. 8a)

The next point is antithesis. Don’t make a peace treaty with the world. God is not going to be content until there are no enemies left in the world. They will either be destroyed in judgment or be destroyed through conversion to Christianity. 1 Corinthians guarantees it. Hebrews says that the book of Joshua is a symbol or type of Christ’s Gospel conquest of the entire world. And notice that there is total antithesis. There is no compromise. There is no taking of the best of Ai’s wisdom into our education. No. Verse 8 says,

And it will be, when you have taken the city, that you shall set the city on fire.

What? Even the libraries of Ai? Even the schools of higher learning? Even the art galleries? Even the drama and dance theatres? Yes. Everything. God wants pagan civilization eventually to be erased from memory and He wants a Biblical civilization to replace it in its entirety. He is OK with plundering money, animals, and land, but He is not in favor of plundering the learning of the wicked. He called for book burning and civilization destruction. Christian civilization must not be a mixture of Plato and Christ, or Marx and Christ. Christian civilization must be 100% Biblical. And even if it takes another 20,000 years, that must be our goal. And if it is our goal, it will affect how we interact with life right now. You can tell that I am really passionate about this.

X. Once again make sure that your plans are consistent with God's Word (v. 8b)

Well, God ends this section with one more admonition - which in one sense is a repeat of an earlier one.

According to the commandment of the LORD you shall do. See, I have commanded you.

It's following God's marching orders. It's living out the Bible.

Obviously we won't get a Christian civilization overnight. But at every step along the way of conquering our Canaan we must press for true Christian civilization, which means *Biblical* civilization. It drives me nuts when people call things "Christian" - like Christian thinking, Christian worldview, Christian civics, etc that mix Bible with man's laws and ideas.

But again, this means planning. This will never happen if the church does not begin planning for the longterm.

Sir Jacob Epstein was a famous British sculptor who died in 1959. He was visited in his studio by George Bernard Shaw. Shaw noticed a huge block of stone standing in one corner and asked what it was for. Epstein said, "I don't know yet. I'm still making plans."

Shaw joked. "You mean you plan your work. Why, I change my mind several times a day!"

Epstein laughed and said, "That's all very well with a four-ounce manuscript, but not with a four-ton block."

Creating a Christian Civilization is *more* than a four-ton block of stone. It is a massive undertaking that will require hundreds of thousands of Christians making plans from the Scripture, spreading the news, conscripting other Christians to join in the building, and passing on the mandate from generation to generation. We can't do it all, but we can at least do our part.

Brothers and sisters, let's make plans consistent with God's Word, consistent with faith, consistent with God's Almighty power, and consistent with a hope that is generated by believing God's promises for our age. And one of those promises is that if He is for us, who can be against us. Amen? Let's pray.