

The Battle Belongs to the Lord – Joshua 8:1-29

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I. INTRODUCTION

Well, this morning we're returning to our study of Joshua after a couple weeks in the gospels, so turn in your Bibles, if you would, to Joshua chapter 8, where we'll be focusing on verses 1 through 29 today. If you'll remember back to where we left off in Joshua three weeks ago, Joshua and the Israelites have just recovered from a devastating defeat at the city of Ai, a defeat caused by unresolved sin in the camp...the sin of a man named, Achan, who had taken valuable items from the city of Jericho that had been set aside for the Lord's treasury...a grave sin that was not discovered before the battle of Ai because Joshua and the Israelites rushed ahead without inquiring of the Lord and seeking his battle plan.

That devastating defeat at the city of Ai had cost the lives of 36 men and left Joshua in despair and questioning of God, but finally back on his knees diligently seeking the Lord. In this posture, God quickly revealed to Joshua both the sin problem and its remedy. And as Joshua listened to God and followed his plan to remedy the situation, God miraculously revealed Achan as the culprit and the whole nation of Israel carried out the justice God had forewarned ahead of time on Achan and his sons and daughters. And as God's promised consequences were carried out, as he brought trouble on the one who had troubled Israel, his anger turned away from the Israelites, making them ready once again to continue the conquest of the Promised Land in the power of his might.

So let's pick up now in Joshua chapter 8 and see how differently battles go when they're led and empowered by the Lord and his strength. The battle belongs to the Lord!

II. THE LORD GIVES THE BATTLE PLAN (vs. 1-2)

Let's begin by reading verses 1 and 2 of Joshua chapter 8, which I've titled: *The Lord Gives the Battle Plan*.

1 Now the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not fear or 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 "You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it."

Back to listening and following

Notice that this second attack on the city of Ai is starting out much differently than the first one: it's starting with direction from the Lord, which was notably absent prior to the first attack reported in chapter 7. And interestingly, that entire first battle against Ai was reported in Scripture with only 4 verses, because in not being supported by God's power it was extremely short-lived. In contrast, the second attack on Ai is reported in Scripture with 29 verses and has a much different emphasis and outcome. Because what we see here in these first 2 verses of Joshua chapter 8, is that Joshua is back where he needs to be before and during every battle: *listening to and following the direction of the Lord.*

The antidote to fear

Now I want you to notice the first words out of God's mouth as he speaks to Joshua: **"Do not fear or be dismayed."** Has anyone ever told you to just stop being afraid? It sounds so easy, doesn't it? But as you know, it's often a lot easier said than done. How do you put an end to fear in your life? Well God gives Joshua two clues about how to do it. Listen to what he says: **"Do not fear or 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."** In other words, to conquer your fear, Joshua, get up and start moving with trust in the promises and presence of God.

God tells Joshua: Instead of sitting here frozen in fear and worrying about what might happen, get up and start taking action on what I've called you to do and trusting that I have given (in other words, it's a done deal!)...I have given the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land into your hand. You have a choice, Joshua: You can sit here in worry and fear, or you can choose to trust that I am with you and supporting you and will give you what you need as you call on me and start

doing what I've told you to do! The antidote to fear, for us as well as Joshua, is to make that simple choice to trust in God's presence, power and promises as we get moving...putting one foot in front of the other in obedience to his Word. That's how we banish fear in our lives!

The battle plan revealed

Well, after calling Joshua to leave fear and worry behind and start moving, the Lord also reveals his battle plan for the second attack on Ai. And the key feature of the Lord's battle plan was the setting of an ambush...a group of Israelite warriors were to quietly and secretly move into position behind the city and surprise the men of Ai from behind. The Lord also told Joshua that the city of Ai and its king were to be treated just as they had treated Jericho and its king: The city and its inhabitants were to be devoted to complete destruction and judgment...there were to be no survivors. The only difference in Ai was that the Israelites were allowed this time to take the spoil and the cattle for themselves.

The Lord had spoken. The battle plan was given and his support was promised. This second attack on Ai would be launched only after the Lord had commanded it and provided the battle plan. Things were looking up, because successful battles in God's kingdom are always waged in dependence on the Lord as we follow his battle plan.

III. THE LORD SETS AN AMBUSH (vs. 3-9)

So let's move on to verses 3 through 9 now, and see how Joshua responds to his "face to face" consultation with the Lord. I've titled this section: *The Lord Sets an Ambush*.

3 So Joshua rose with all the people of war to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose 30,000 men, valiant warriors, and sent them out at night. 4 He commanded them, saying, "See, you are going to ambush the city from behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. 5 "Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out to meet us as at the first, we will flee before them. 6 "They will come out after us until we have drawn them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are fleeing before us as at the first.' So we will flee

before them. 7 "And you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the Lord your God will deliver it into your hand. 8 "Then it will be when you have seized the city, that you shall set the city on fire. You shall do it according to the word of the Lord. See, I have commanded you." 9 So Joshua sent them away, and they went to the place of ambush and remained between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua spent that night among the people.

Walking in obedience

Joshua and the people are again walking in full obedience to the word of the Lord. After listening to the Lord's instructions, Joshua gets right down to the business of implementing them. After the Lord told Joshua to take the men of war, arise and go up to Ai, what does Joshua do? He ***"rose with all the people of war to go up to Ai."*** He trusted in the word and promises of the Lord, rejected fear and worry, and started doing what God had commanded.

The ambush instructions from the Lord

In verses 3 to 9 we also get a lot more details on how the actual battle plan and ambush would work. We're told that Joshua picked out 30,000 warriors to travel by night to Ai and get into hiding for the ambush. Now that Hebrew word translated, "thousand," can also be translated, "units," as in a military unit; so this could also mean 30 military units of unknown size were sent out by night to Ai. But what's important is that a large group of warriors were sent out at night by Joshua to get secretly in ambush position behind, or to the west of, the city of Ai. Then Joshua with the remaining men of war would approach the city of Ai in plain sight and draw out the fighting men, pretending to run away in fear. When all the warriors of Ai had left their city in hot pursuit, then the men lying in ambush would rise up and seize the city, setting it on fire like Jericho, just as the Lord had instructed Joshua. This was the simple battle plan from the Lord. The Lord was setting an ambush, and for victory the people would need to trust and follow his plan.

The source of their strength

And notice that the taking of the city of Ai would not come about by the strength and wisdom of the valiant warriors. They would certainly need to take action and fight and be courageous and fully engage in the battle. But their ultimate victory would come about through the working of the Lord, as they trusted in him. In verse 7, we see that their taking possession of the city of Ai would be possible because the Lord would deliver it into their hand. In other words, they wouldn't take possession of it through relying on their own power and strength, but through relying on the powerful working of the Lord as they followed his instructions. The Lord was the source of their strength and victory!

Well, the warriors listened carefully to Joshua's battle plan from the Lord and then traveled through the night to set-up their ambush position between the cities of Bethel and Ai as directed. Joshua remained behind with the rest of the Israelites and spent the night in the camp.

IV. THE LORD'S ARMY WALKS IN FAITH (vs. 10-13)

This brings us to verses 10 through 13, which I've titled: *The Lord's Army Walks in Faith*.

10 Now Joshua rose early in the morning and mustered the people, and he went up with the elders of Israel before the people to Ai. 11 Then all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near and arrived in front of the city, and camped on the north side of Ai. Now there was a valley between him and Ai. 12 And he took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. 13 So they stationed the people, all the army that was on the north side of the city, and its rear guard on the west side of the city, and Joshua spent that night in the midst of the valley.

Facing their fears in the footsteps of faith

Have you ever heard the expression, "Let go and let God?" It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? I feel a load lifting just thinking about it! Certainly there is some truth in it. However, it has some major problems, especially in how it's often applied.

What it's trying to encourage is more trust in God and more dependence on him as opposed to trying to fix things ourselves through our own efforts. But unfortunately what it often leads to is this mentality: Just pray about it and then do nothing. But I'd like to ask you, "Would that plan have worked in the battle of Ai?" What if the people had said, "Ok, God, you've got this one. This battle belongs to you. We'll just wait here in camp while you go wipe out the city of Ai with an earthquake, fire and brimstone. Just let us know when it's done and we'll come on up and take possession." Is that what God had in mind here?

God certainly doesn't need us to accomplish his will or win his battles, but he does seem quite keen on involving us in the process and teaching us to trust him as we follow him in action. That's when our faith gets feet and starts moving and growing. Going out and fighting a battle on our own is doomed to fail, but so is asking God to go win our battles while we take a snooze on the couch. God's works and loves in the context of relationship, and faith in him that invites his powerful working is expressed in action. And this is what we see happening here in Joshua chapter 8. Joshua and the people are back to seeking, listening, and trusting God and that trust is expressed in the courageous actions they're taking. They're conquering their fears by trusting in God's presence and power and taking action in obedience to God's instructions.

Setting up for battle

We see this as Joshua gets up early the next morning and gathers the people together...as he and the elders lead the people in a march up to the city of Ai...and as they set up camp on the north side of Ai in plain sight of the king and the people in the city, effectively inviting them to battle. These are the faith proving actions that were a necessary part of winning the battle. As we look at how the Israelites set-up for battle, we notice that there was a valley between the Israelite camp and the city of Ai, and that Joshua put an additional 5,000 men or 5 military units in ambush position. Perhaps these were for attacking the warriors of Ai from behind should the other men in ambush be delayed as they captured and set fire to the city. We also learn that the whole nation of Israel, men, women and children, were there in the camp, and that Joshua spent the night in the middle of the valley. I'd say he'd conquered his fears, hadn't he?

V. THE LORD WINS THE BATTLE (vs. 14-23)

So the stage is set for battle, God's instructions have been followed, and we're ready to see how the battle played out in verses 14 through 23, which I've titled: *The Lord Wins the Battle*. Sorry, that title's a little like reading the last page of the book first, isn't it? But I think you've probably already figured out that victory is on the way! Beginning in verse 14, let's see how the battle played out:

14 It came about when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the city hurried and rose up early and went out to meet Israel in battle, he and all his people at the appointed place before the desert plain. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. 15 Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. 16 And all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were drawn away from the city. 17 So not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who had not gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded 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." So Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city. 19 The men in ambush rose quickly from their place, and when he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it, and they quickly set the city on fire. 20 When the men of Ai turned back and looked, behold, the smoke of the city ascended to the sky, and they had no place to flee this way or that, for the people who had been fleeing to the wilderness turned against the pursuers. 21 When Joshua and all Israel saw that the men in ambush had captured the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and slew the men of Ai. 22 The others came out from the city to encounter them, so that they were trapped in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side; and they slew them until no one was left of those who survived or escaped. 23 But they took alive the king of Ai and brought him to Joshua.

Setting up for the ambush

Well, as expected, the king and the people of Ai noticed the large group of Israelites camping near their city and unlike the inhabitants of Jericho who

remained locked up inside their city, the men of Ai rushed out to meet the Israelites in battle. Bolstered by their previous victory over Israel, they were ready to do it again, and at first it seemed like a replay of their previous battle as the Israelites seemed to be running away in fear.

The men of Ai took the bait held out by the Israelites and invited all the other men of Ai and the nearby city of Bethel to join in the fun and finish off this ragtag group of slaves who had been creating so much fear in the land of Canaan. It was the opportunity they'd all been waiting for and in their haste and excitement they left their city completely unguarded. The stage was set for the Lord's ambush.

Communicating in battle

But something quite interesting happens now. In the middle of the battle, when everything seemed to be going according to plan and all that's left is activating the ambush, Joshua is still communicating with the Lord. The Lord is speaking to him even in the heat of battle. This wasn't a case where Joshua just received instructions from the Lord and then set out to do it with no further communication with the Lord. On the contrary, Joshua, even in the heat of battle, still had an open line to the Lord and was able to hear from him and receive his continued direction and even encouragement. Joshua shows us here a picture of what it looks like to live life and fight battles in true dependence on the Lord. Joshua didn't just pray and then go do it on his own. He continued communicating with the Lord throughout the battle, and in so doing walked and fought in the strength and wisdom of the Lord.

This is something we each need to learn in our own lives as well. I can't tell you how many times I spend time in prayer before doing something, but then I get busy and focused and stressed as I lose connection with the Lord and try to work things out on my own. What God reminds each of us of here, is that walking in God's power, wisdom and strength involves maintaining communication with him at all times; not just a quick prayer and then we go do it on our own. This doesn't mean, however, that we need to be talking non-stop to God every moment of every day. That would be exhausting and impossible to maintain. Remember, prayer is as much about listening as it is about talking. But it does mean that God is leading us to live life with him, keeping the lines of communication open at all times, sharing our highs and lows with him, seeking and listening for his guidance,

and remembering that he is with us and in control and always the source of our strength and ultimate victory.

Victory comes from the Lord as his people take trusting action

Well, what did the Lord say to Joshua in the middle of battle? He said: ***“Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.”*** As the Lord had directed Moses to stretch out his staff over the Red Sea before it parted, the Lord directed Joshua to stretch out his javelin toward Ai before it was given to them. And the reason he was to stretch out his javelin, was because the Lord would give the city into his hand. Victory would be from the Lord, not from man. The javelin was raised to give glory to God and identify him as the source of their victory. And as Joshua received this word from the Lord in the middle of battle, he obeyed it and faithfully raised the javelin and kept it raised until the city of Ai was completely defeated by the power of God. Again we see that the Lord gives the victory as his people walk in trusting obedience and give all the glory to him.

Carrying out the ambush

And as Joshua raised the javelin, the men waiting in ambush jumped up from hiding, captured the city and set it on fire. As billows of smoke rose from the city, the tide turned as the fleeing Israelites turned around and started slaying the men of Ai who were now trapped on all sides as the men lying in ambush closed in from behind. We’re told that all the men of Ai were killed in this battle, except the king who was brought alive to Joshua. And not one casualty of the Israelites is reported!

VI. THE LORD’S VICTORY IS COMPLETE (vs. 24-29)

And this brings us to our final verses for today, verses 24 through 29, a section I’ve titled: *The Lord’s Victory is Complete.*

24 Now when Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the field in the wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them were fallen by the edge of the sword until they were destroyed, then all Israel returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword. 25 All who fell that day,

both men and women, were 12,000 — all the people of Ai. 26 For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. 27 Israel took only the cattle and the spoil of that city as plunder for themselves, according to the word of the Lord which He had commanded Joshua. 28 So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation until this day. 29 He hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua gave command and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the city gate, and raised over it a great heap of stones that stands to this day.

When the Lord brings the victory, it's complete and way beyond anything we could accomplish on our own.

The destruction is full

First, we notice that the destruction of the city of Ai and its inhabitants was full. All the men of war and all those who had remained in the city were put to the sword, 12,000 people in all. That would be like everyone that lives in La Grande. That's a lot of people, isn't it? Just as it had in Jericho, the time for judgment and wrath had come for the people of Ai who had chosen to fight against the Lord instead of align with him, and when that time had come there was no escape. It was too late for repentance and faith. The door was shut....Another reminder to us that we should never delay in finding our refuge and salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The obedience is complete

Secondly, notice that the Israelites obeyed completely this time, as opposed to what had happened in Jericho. In full obedience to the command of the Lord, the Israelites took only the cattle and the spoil from Ai for themselves and they utterly destroyed the people of Ai and burned their city. This was all in obedience to the command and judgment of the Lord.

Two monuments for learning

Thirdly, we notice that Joshua and the Israelites set up two monuments for learning from the disaster that had come on the people of Ai...two monuments that would warn others of the deadly consequences and futility of denying the one true God and fighting against him, rather than accepting his grace and mercy through repentance and faith. These monuments might be described as teaching people of the world the vastly different outcomes of grasping the wind versus catching the wind. The people of Ai had chosen to try and grasp the wind, to engage in the futile pursuit of fighting against the One who had created them and was holding them together and was actually giving them the very breath and life and strength that they were then using to try and destroy him and his people. Think of the irony in that! The chance of winning this battle against God was much like the chance of being able to grasp or stop the wind...it will always slip through our fingers because there's simply nothing to hold on to and it's way too powerful to ever stop. On the other hand, had the people of Ai come to the Lord in true repentance and faith with an authentic cry for mercy, they would have caught the wind like a bird does, being held up and carried and supported and brought to places they could never have gone on their own...an infinitely better outcome!

VII. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Well, as we begin to wrap up today, I want to give you a short statement that I believe summarizes the key truth God wants to teach us in this passage of Scripture. Here it is: *God wins battles as we listen, trust and follow*. Do you win the battles? Is the outcome up to you or dependent on what you can accomplish? No. God wins the battles. Three times in this passage we're told that the Lord would deliver the city of Ai in the hand of the Israelites. He was the one who would ultimately win the battle! But it's also very clear that his people had a key role to play in the battle and needed to be fully engaged in it and following the Lord's instructions, communicating with him and calling on him even in the heat of battle. Twice we're told in this passage that taking action according to the word of the Lord is crucial to victory. The Lord wins the battle, but he does it as we listen, trust and follow.

Are you trying to win the battle without him or maybe with just a little help from him? How's that going for you? I don't know about you, but when I'm fighting the

battles of life on my own, I'm frantic, stressed, fearful, overwhelmed and feel like I'll be fortunate if I just escape with my life. But when I remember and believe that victory is from the Lord; when I remain connected to him and communicating with him in the battle; when I focus on just doing what he's called me to do instead of trying to take on everything; I can breathe again, I can let the tension in my shoulders go, I can enjoy doing the things he has called me to do, and I can leave the results to him. God wins battles, not me.

Do you believe that today, and does it show in the way you're living your life? Remember that expression, "Let go and let God?" I think we should change it today to "Latch on and let's go!" God calls us to connect with him, listen to him, learn from him, and get moving with him...walking out with him into battle supported by his strength and power and trusting the outcome to him. So latch on to him and let's go! That's how we conquer our fears and win the battles, connected with and walking in the strength of the Lord. The battle belongs to the Lord!

SERMON APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read Joshua 8:1-29 several times, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it.

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scriptures that come to mind; 4) any questions you have.

In verse 1 the Lord told Joshua to not be afraid or dismayed. What did He say to do instead?

What are some things you've been afraid of in your life and how have you conquered them? What are some things you're afraid of now and how can you apply what God said to Joshua in verse 1 to help conquer those fears?

Joshua was communicating with and hearing from the Lord even in the heat of battle. How are you at maintaining an open line with the Lord throughout each day and in each battle? What are some obstacles to doing that and what are some ways you can keep your communication with the Lord going at all times?

Joshua is a well-recognized “type” of Christ...a person whose life pointed in various ways to Jesus Christ and what he would accomplish. What are some things about Joshua that point to Christ?

Explain the difference between the expressions: “Let go and let God” and “Latch on and let’s go.” What would the second statement look like in a practical sense in your life?