

Getting Back On Your Feet

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Joshua

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Well, we looked last week at the sin of Achan, the battle of Jericho had been won wonderfully by God, God had said that the Israelites were not to touch the things in Jericho that were devoted to destruction and the silver and gold was to go into the Lord's treasury. Achan took something that was devoted to destruction, had that cherem, the ban on it, the beautiful Babylonian robe, and took some silver and gold, 200 shekels and a big wedge of gold for himself and hid them in his tent and in so doing, he caused a collapse in Israel so that when the people went out against Ai there was disaster. That sin of Achan's was as we were thinking last week, progressive. He saw something, nothing wrong with that. You can't go around with your eyes closed, but then he coveted it, something wrong there, and the disaster was that his heart was captured by this thing, his heart was swayed and so he reached out and he took it and he hid it, and in that action he irrevocably connected himself with the thing that was banned, took for himself a thing that should've been for the Lord and God had said that destruction would come upon anything that was banned and upon anybody who clung to it because we know, don't we, that we can be forgiven our sin but if we hold onto our sin, we will go down with it. God will judge sin. He is holy. He is pure and right so if you hold onto it, you'll go down with it.

That sin of Achan's was not only progressive, it was covenant breaking which is how God sees it. "You have violated, they have violated my covenant," he says in Joshua 7:11. That bond of love between himself and the people. That bond of love which was strengthened prior to them going into Jericho by the command not to take anything. That existed as sort of a dimension to the covenant, the covenants of closeness and of love that brings two people together, coming together of people. And that's a covenant breaking sin was disasterously spread throughout the whole camp, 36 men died in the battle against Ai; that's 36 widows probably, 36 families without dad there, 36 men, sons. A humiliating defeat which as Joshua is quick to see is a bad witness to the name of God. All Israel, verse 11 of chapter 7, is implicated. "All Israel has sinned," God said because the people are connected, they are one people before him. So they are more like a net than individuals so what happens to one pulls on all the others and we were thinking about that as far as our own culture is concerned, what we do inevitably affects other people in the fellowship whether we can trace the lines of that connection or not, it does.

Ella Fitzgerald, no mean theologian, sang, "Every time you say goodbye you die a little." Well, every time you sin, you die a little. And every time you die a little, every time something in you of devotion and closeness to the Lord, a zeal for his name, every time you sin, something of the brightness of the Lord's love in your face goes; something of your willingness to reach out and help other people; something of the quickness with which you respond to need around you; something of the readiness of those feet that are shod with the Gospel to go out and share the good news. That dies a little. Even if nobody can trace the direct lines of cause and effect, everybody is affected.

And the whole thing leaves, as we're going to consider this week, it leaves Joshua in a mess. Joshua groveling in self-pity and bewilderment and faithlessness. Joshua wanting to jack the whole thing in. Joshua with his discernment in what's going on completely out the window. And it's that that I want us to focus on this week, it's Joshua. He is the leader so there are many lessons in here about Christian leadership in whatever capacity as being exercised. But in so far as there are lessons here about leadership, there are lessons for all of us. There are lessons which affect the whole fellowship in here. There are lessons for all of us to learn about the way not only as individuals but as a fellowship, as a family of the Lord's people, we conduct ourselves as we go out into the world, as we go out and wage spiritual war, as we go out as citizens of Jerusalem to take the countryside surrounding the city of Babylon, so to speak; as we of the kingdom of heaven launch out and attack into the kingdom of this world; as we assault the gates of hell that will not prevail against us, there are lessons for us all.

God, of course, is not very impressed with Joshua lying on the ground groveling in the dust in self-pitying woe. Joshua, let's read from verse 6, and we'll see Joshua's condition. Joshua tore the hearts of the people had melted and become like water which is very interesting, isn't it, because that was the kind of phrase that describes how the people in Jericho were when they heard about how powerful God was. Well, now the shoe is on the other foot, so to speak, and all the people in Israel, their hearts had melted and become like water. "Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, 'Ah, Sovereign LORD,'" which immediately signals to us that something is not right. How can you say, "Ah, sovereign Lord," and mean it, believe it, and at the same time grovel in the dust of death with ashes on your head as if the whole world has come to an end? If you believe that he is sovereign, Joshua, you shouldn't be down there like that bewildered. Now he isn't down there in repentance because he doesn't know what's gone wrong. He's just down there in defeat and woe and bewilderment. He's not feeling sorry for sin because he doesn't know Achan has done it yet. He's feeling sorry for himself and in that monumental self-pity, he's actually even feeling sorry for God. "Ah, sovereign Lord, what a mess you're in because of the mess we're in." Don't think so. But anyway, we'll see how it works out.

"Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?" Now you notice the way that sentence is constructed? He doesn't say why did you bring us across to the river Jordan, was it to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us, as if that was the question. He has

already answered that question in the affirmative. Yes, he brought us over here to destroy us. All he's saying is why? So he now sees no future. That's astonishing. They set out from Egypt. God was with them. Joshua stood there with Caleb after the spies had been sent in and came back with a report and said, "Of course we can take this land. God is with us. God has promised it. Of course we can take it." Great victory at Jericho after God himself had met with Joshua and said this is a battle that the Lord of hosts is in charge of. They come to Ai, complete collapse. Spiritual discernment completely gone, blown apart so that now he sees no future. He does not say, "Why did you bring us into this land, was it to destroy us by the Amorites?" Which still leaves open the possibility in his mind, no. He says, "Why did you bring us over to get destroyed by the Amorites?" No future.

"If only we had been content." What? Just remember who is saying this. Remember what he has seen. Remember who he has spoken to. Remember what he has seen even as Moses' sort of Lieutenant, down there in the valley battling with Moses, up on the hilltop praying, where his hands were uplifted in prayer, the battle went the Israelites' way. He saw God at work. He knew that these battles were up to God. He knew that it was the command of the Lord of hosts that was in charge of things and yet he says, "If only." This is the land he has brought them into, "If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!" The whole covenant, if only being content to say, "No," to a land flowing with milk and honey. "Very nice of you to offer that to us, Lord. It's going to be a bit difficult getting in there. Frankly, we don't think you're up for it so we'll just be content." How modest. How moderate and godly. If only we had been content to stay on the wrong side of the Jordan. What are you saying? Now, you know I'm coming up a bit but I've got to get the point over to you.

"If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! Oh Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out," hmm, interesting, "wipe out our name from the earth." Since when was that the first concern of the people of God? Since when was the biggest thing on God's agenda the glory of our name? Since when? Then he turns it around and it's the order that gives a lie to it, isn't it? It's the fact that he's most concerned about his name and the name of the people first. It's the sort of the projection of self-pity onto God. You know, "We're sunk, where does that leave you, Lord? You know, we're sunk, everything's gone wrong. The whole project has gone belly up but what do you do for your own name, Lord?" So it's not surprising that God isn't it very impressed with this.

Now, it is an ungodly woe. It is an ungodly groveling. It's an ungodly humility that Joshua is displaying here just as the whole venture against Ai was an ungodly venture. Before they went to Jericho to fight it, Joshua had that meeting that we just referred to, or I just referred to anyway and you were all very quite at times so it's probably just me referring to it. It refers to where he met with the commander of the Lord of hosts. The whole battle of Jericho went according to God's word, it's God's battle plan. It's like no other battle plan on earth with God's power against God's enemies.

Now, when we read of the approach to the battle of Ai, what's missing? What's missing in all their talk is God. Now, if we read how that whole battle plan was forged here in an ungodly manner, you'll see what I mean. Let's read from verse 2, "Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, 'Go up and spy out the region.' So the men went up and spied out Ai. When they returned to Joshua, they said," now this is the spies saying and in this there is absolutely not one reference to the power of God, the promises of God. "Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the people, for only a few men are there." And Joshua listened to them. What Joshua didn't do was to say, "Okay, not many men there, before we just cut down the army, we need to talk to God about this. How does he want us to take Ai because he had a really brilliant idea against Jericho and I'd rather listen to him."

Now, it's not the cutting down of the numbers which itself is necessarily presumptuous, God cut down the numbers on many occasions, the most notable was in the book of Judges when Gideon was about to go against the Midianite and God said, "Whoa, there are far too many of you. Cut them down. Cut them down again. Let's cut them even more." God reduced the army to an almost insignificant crowd. So it's not the cutting down of numbers, it's the way that there is absolutely no referring the whole matter to God. That's the problem.

The spies went back from the original spying of the land, Joshua and Caleb were the only two who spoke well and they said, "Of course we can go in." They were confident. They were confident in the Lord. These men come back and they're just confident in themselves, no reference to God at all and Joshua listens to them. So they go out against the foe not depending upon God. They don't go out in the attitude of King Asaph many, many, many centuries down the line who gave us the words that Edith Gilling Cherry turned into the hymn we just sang,

"We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go."

They didn't have that attitude. They just went out against them. So you see, God didn't have his right place in going out. It was an ungodly venture and it leaves Joshua in an ungodly humility.

Now, for all that we can sit here with hindsight and analyze the text and at least a little bit, and come up with these things and make these observations, I have to say that I actually have a lot of sympathy with Joshua. I have a lot of sympathy. He's doing what 99 percent of blokes would do and it's okay for us to sit here in 2008 and, you know, expose Joshua's faults. One day I'm going to meet Joshua and so are you if you are going to heaven and what Joshua did far, far outweighs anything I'll ever do so don't sit there and snide off Joshua. He was a real person who one day I'm going to meet. Actually, I sympathize because I can see myself in there and I can see not just 99 percent of blokes, I

can see most church leadership in there, much church leadership which sees a thing happen well and knows that it is God who has blessed and yet with frightening speed forgets the power, the blessing, the success, all came from God. They were not in us.

And I have to keep coming back to that again and again and again, especially at the moment when the number of things that we are doing is going up, the number of ways in which we are going out into the world with the Gospel is increasing. Tuesday lunch times every week. The door open out onto Union Street, come rain or shine Thursday lunch times. A small band of people which should be a bigger band of people and could be a bigger band of people. Saturday night, 9 to 11, hot chocolate in the vestibule there down the steps engaging with people. Last night about a dozen or so. It's that kind of number, that's a good number. The services that we take off-site, so to speak, have gone up which is wonderful, absolutely wonderful. ?? teen out for a fortnight. Never done that before. Holiday club. Haven't done that for too long in the summer. Guest event, eighth of February. That's coming quickly. Think about who you can invite. A little plug.

How easy it is, how frighteningly easy it is to say, "Yup, been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt. Let's do another. We can do it." Jesus said, "Without me, you can do quite a bit, actually." No, Jesus said, "Without me, you can do nothing." Nothing. You can organize stuff until you're blue in the face, you can have planning meetings until they're coming out of your ears, you can get a whole army of volunteers perfectly well coordinated all wearing the same T-shirts with name patches with little pictures on, you can do it brilliantly but without me, says Jesus, the whole thing amounts to nothing. In terms of kingdom work, nothing. In terms of bringing people from death in sin to life in Jesus Christ, nothing. Or a church gets a reputation for good things and it begins and can do so frighteningly easy to think that the blessing lies in the way we do things or the times that we do things or the kind of phrases that we use or how slick we are when the blessing was never, ever located in those things that we do in the first place. So that just by repeating our own ventures, we do not automatically therefore create more blessing and yet that is how most, I think most of institutional church life tends to go. Day by day dependence upon God for the things that are done again and again, the new things that are tried; moment by moment dependence, a constant sense, not a gnawing, defeating sort of inner cancerous sense but the right and proper sense of the utter inability of a leadership and a fellowship to do anything of eternal value. That is rare in Christian circles. The sense that we only have ?? As we depend upon God and as we listen to his direction, as we obey his word. A sense that, "Well, I know we opened the doors last week and the Lord blessed us and everything," but we dare not open the doors this week just expecting that the mere act of opening the doors will do it. A sense of, "We're about to open the doors Thursday at 11 o'clock, Saturdays at 9 o'clock, we're about to open the doors." Nothing will happen of eternal value without Jesus. That sense is a gift from God.

And that's why the venture was a good venture but done in an ungodly way and that's why Joshua's humiliation or humility or whatever, looks godly, even has some godly phrases in there but it is utterly ungodly. It's why I can sympathize with him. I can sympathize with that sense of being absolutely flawed. I can sympathize with that. It's one of the most common feelings there is in church leaders, that sense that something

goes wrong and you just collapse. Most people I know who preach, who speak on conference platforms, most people I know who do that go into self-destruct sometimes within minutes of the end of the speaking and there can be a profound ungodliness if you give into that, if you listen to the accuser. Some of it is physiological, you are pumped full of adrenaline, when you come down off it physiologically you slump further than you started out at and so some of that is sort of a post-adrenaline thing, it's a physiological thing, it's purely physiological but the devil can get in there as well. Or something that you've tried doesn't go well, only a few volunteers turn up and you think, "Oh, woe is me. The whole thing is a catastrophe."

So God comes to Joshua and the Lord said to Joshua, verse 10, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned." It is wonderfully strong, clear, direct, helpful, positive, it lifts, immediately it lifts a huge burden off Joshua's own shoulders, doesn't it? It is a wonderfully restorative robust approach from God. Now, how does God heal our hearts? How does God get us up on our feet again? Sometimes it is with a tender and gentle voice but sometimes what God does and sometimes it might actually come through some other person, is he's really quite robust with us and he says, "Get up. What are you doing down there? There is a perfectly simple explanation for this, Israel has sinned. You don't need to be groveling around in the dust. The future has not just disappeared." So what God does is, in a sense, he proves the sovereignty that Joshua himself saluted to and he gives the explanation.

So what God then calls Joshua to out of this slough of despond. If you've ever been to Slough, you'll know exactly why it's called a slough of despond. I've wanted for years to say that. Any of you in Slough who listens to sermonaudio.com, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. What God does is he picks him up, he gives him the things to do that will put the situation right and so Joshua has to mortify the sin. He has to expose it first of all and he has to bring God's judgment upon it and then he has to mortify the sin. That's not going to be easy. It is not going to make Joshua popular among some people but Joshua's popularity is not the issue. It is absolutely vital that Joshua deals with the problem within the camp; that Joshua deals with the sin. It is going to demand quite a bit of courage from Joshua and that is why I think Joshua is the one who gets this first address from God. It's God who picks Joshua up. It's God who speaks to Joshua. It's God who does exactly what he had done before the crossing, tells him what to do. God steps in at a point where Joshua feels he has no captain at all leading him and he's useless and God tells him what to do; he takes command of his man again, as many wives like to do. He takes command of his man and through that man he will take command of the people.

Now, of course, Joshua needs encouragement and so God gives him encouragement. Joshua needs to learn about God's sufficiency. Joshua needs to learn that the battle is not his but God's until God reminds him of all these things and God, in effect, re-covenants with Joshua. But when the sin is dealt with in the camp, when the magnet for divine destruction, that is, those things that were banned and were given over to destruction, when the magnet for divine destruction is dealt with, then Ai can be taken. So just transgressing the chapter boundaries which aren't in the original anyway, we see that in chapter 8, verse 1, "Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid; do not be

discouraged. Take the whole army with you," this time so everybody sees the victory and besides, God's going to do it very differently from the way the Israelites did it. They were going for sort of a head on attack and you only needed a few for that. God had a fantastic battle plan which we'll see next week which involved splitting the people up into different groups and feints and false moves and ambushes. Absolutely fantastic and you need to deploy people around. So God says, "Take the whole army with you and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people." Just as God said, "I have delivered Jericho into your hands."

So where are the challenges for us as a fellowship? Well, the challenge is to do good things in a good way, first of all, to do godly things in a godly way. The challenge for us is not to grow proud, not to grow complacent, not to grow self-trusting, not to believe our own publicity, so to speak, not just to be on a roll. The challenge is to be constantly dependent upon the Father. That does not make you hesitant, by the way. That doesn't mean you say, "Right, nothing new is going to happen. No developments. No nothing. No." It doesn't make you do that but it makes you go out literally onto Union Street, literally into this world wherever God is going to place us tomorrow, it means we go out in total dependence upon God and go out with the attitude in verse 4 of Edith Gilling Cherry's hymn,

"We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise."

We go out, verse 3,

"We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing."

We go out with that attitude. So when we think of the new things or when we think of repeating the old things, when we think of going out at Easter time into the parish visiting homes in the parish prior to the Easter services, we go out in one sense like we have never done it before. We go out in fear of the Lord, we go out with all our hope in him. That's the first thing.

The second thing for us, I think for a fellowship, as far as a fellowship is this, that there is no glory given to God when we behave as if all of God's promises suddenly meant nothing just because our experience has been a bad one. Now, that happens in a Christian life. It happens in fellowships. We have a bad experience, maybe I personally have a bad experience and we project from that onto God and onto all God's work an attitude of false brokenness which does not honor God because it immediately wipes from the slate all his promises, all the assurance of his presence, all the past demonstrations of his power, and all the hope that the mission of God will succeed unto God and it is a danger that we do that. It is a danger that we discourage one another, where we take personal blows and defeats and project them in this way. It's a danger when we indulge in a personal collapse at the expense of the rest of the fellowship.

If God had not reached down into the miry clay, Psalm 40, of Joshua's despondency, if God had not reached down and picked him up and set his feet upon a rock, nobody else was going to do it. So maybe some of us here need to have God reach down and pick us up again, need to have God reach down and pick us up so that we do not become a nonparticipant, a noncombatant in this battle that is God's. Maybe some of us need restoring for the sake of the fellowship's advance as a body of people who belong to the kingdom of heaven who day by day take on the kingdom of this world. Has it occurred to you in your distress that maybe some of the people around you need your hope in God, need your trust in him, need you to encourage them?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we need you. We need your strength. We need your astonishing poise and rights and proper glorious self-confidence. We need it, Lord, because we are easily knocked and we need it because, Father, we acknowledge before you that we often fear that the whole edifice is a deck of cards just waiting for someone or something or Satan to come along and just flick one of the bottom ones and the whole lot come tumbling down. Lord, we need your strength. We need to rest on you, our shield and our defender. We need you to pick us up so that we might truly arise and face the foe. We need you, Lord, to be our courage. We need you to be our vision. We need you, Lord, to be all these things for us. Lord Jesus, you said, "Without me you can do nothing," so help us, we pray, to abide in you; like branches in the vine, draw all our life and all our fruitfulness as a fellowship from you. In Jesus' name. Amen.