

Sermon Outline

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”: A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

DO NOT FEAR (JOSHUA 8:1-2)

I. Introduction

II. “Do Not Fear” (Joshua 8:1)

- A. 8:1 begins: “And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Do not fear and do not be dismayed.’”
1. Those words are similar to the ones in 1:9: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”
 2. God is reaffirming his original commitment to Joshua.
 3. Now that the nation’s sin has been removed, Joshua is free to lead the troops into battle again, and do what God has called them to do.
- B. This is also the pattern that we find in the Christian life.
1. Before God forgives our sins and makes us his people, we are unable to serve God.
 2. But once we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, God adopts us into his household and fits us for battle.
 3. The same pattern appears in our daily lives.
 - a. Each of us sins on a daily basis in some way. And when we do, our hearts are pricked.
 - b. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins and we may feel a sense of shame and sadness.
 - c. But once we ask God for forgiveness, the Lord reminds us of what Jesus has done for us.
 - d. He restores our sense of being forgiven and righteous in Christ.
 - e. And then he raises us back to service.
- C. So forgiveness is not an excuse to sit back and do nothing.
1. Right after forgiveness and restoration comes a confident and joyful return into battle.
 2. God calls us back into the struggle to extend his rule in the world.
 3. This is precisely the pattern that we are seeing in Joshua 8.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How are the Lord’s words in 8:1 similar to his words in 1:9? What is the significance of the repetition of the theme, “Do not

fear”? (2) How is Joshua’s/Israel’s experience of cleansing and reinstatement similar to what we experience in our Christian lives?

III. “Arise, Go Up to Ai” (Joshua 8:2)

- A. Now that Achan’s sin has been removed, the Lord gives Joshua a new set of instructions.
 - 1. He says: “Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai.”
 - 2. Ai was the little city that defeated Israel back in chapter 7.
 - 3. The Lord now wants Israel to return to Ai and deal with it.
- B. Notice also that God calls all the fighting men to go up to Ai.
—Contrast this with Joshua’s previous instruction in chapter 7 for only a few soldiers to go up.
- C. Another point that is different in chapter 8 is that this time, the Lord also gives a very clear and verbal assurance to Joshua.
 - 1. The Lord says, “See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land.”
 - 2. Now, Joshua definitely knows that Israel has the Lord’s support.
 - 3. When Israel was first about to invade Ai back in chapter 7, you recall that God said nothing about being with Israel.
 - 4. Israel assumed that the Lord was with her—only to discover that Achan’s sin had already driven God’s Presence away.
 - 5. The Lord’s words here are similar to those in 6:2: “See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor.”
- D. Once again, we are reminded that YHWH’s lordship extends over all the nations (see Josh 1:1-9 and 2:22-24).
 - 1. The Lord says that he has “given” the King of Ai and his land into Israel’s hand.
 - 2. Because YHWH is Creator, YHWH is also the supreme Landlord of the whole world.
 - 3. So the Lord has absolute right to decide what people occupy *which* space at *what* time.
- E. A further implication of God’s ownership of land is that Israel’s wars in Canaan must not be seen as a war of colonization or imperialism.
 - 1. Israel was *not* taking land that they had no right to.
 - 2. Israel was granted her own land by the Lord God of heaven and earth.
 - 3. If Israel would remain obedient, God would allow Israel to stay in the land for the rest of their lives.
- F. The Lord gives further assurance of victory: “And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What new instructions does the Lord give to Joshua? (2) How many fighting men does the Lord want Joshua to bring up to Ai? (3) What assurance does the Lord give to Joshua? Compare this to the words uttered in 6:2. (4) God says that he has given the king of Ai and his land to Israel.

What does this teach us about God’s power over nations other than Israel? (5)
What is Israel to do to the king of Ai?

IV. A Strange Provision (Joshua 8:2)

- A. But then comes a rather puzzling statement.
1. The Lord says: “Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves.”
 2. We have questions: *Why is the Lord now allowing for the behavior that got Israel into trouble in the first place?*
- B. To be honest, this is a question that we don’t quite have an answer for—and perhaps may never will in this life.
1. Scholars themselves see the need to respect the silence of the Scriptures.
 2. Since God does not clearly explain why he makes this allowance, we shouldn’t try to be overly dogmatic about what God has not revealed.
- C. How are we to deal with puzzling passages like this in the Scriptures?
1. Whenever we are confronted with puzzling texts like this, we need to remember our commitment to the Lord.
 2. The whole Bible—including the puzzling texts in Joshua and other books—is God’s Word to us.
 3. You and I must be covenanted readers of Scripture; we must read Scripture with a sense of accountability to God.
 4. We must never, ever say that God made a mistake.
 5. The safest rule to follow is this:
—If God says no or yes to something, go with God!
 6. In this case, God, for reasons known only to him, has chosen to lift the ban on the goods of Ai.
 7. As V. Philips Long writes: “God has the right to determine the nature and the extent of destruction in any given instance”!
—We may just have to leave it at that.
- D. To ease our curiosity, we may wish to accept John Calvin’s explanation.
1. Calvin says that God let Israel have the spoils from Ai so “that they may engage in the expedition more willingly.” (*Joshua and the Psalms*, 51)
 2. That may well be the case.
 3. But it still raises questions.
—Why doesn’t God therefore allow for the spoils to be taken from the other cities if doing that would motivate Israel to fight?
- E. Even if we don’t know the rationale for God relaxing the *herem* law in the case of Ai, we can say something more about the law itself.
1. The fact that God is willing to relax the *herem* law in Ai’s case shows that this law is not part of God’s universal moral code.
 2. The *herem* laws are part of what theologians call the civil laws, those laws that apply to the political governance of ancient Israel.

3. Unlike the Ten Commandments, which are a summary of the moral law, the civil laws are temporary.
 - a. They apply only to Israel.
 - b. They can be removed once their usefulness is over.
4. Civil laws are more like temporary living arrangements for a specific time in Israel's national life.
5. In this specific case of Ai, God decides that the *herem* laws will not be comprehensively applied.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) The Lord says: "Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves." What is puzzling about God's modification of the *herem* law in the case of Ai? (2) Few interpreters have an explanation for this verse. Why do you think the Lord modified the *herem* law in this case? (3) What should be our basic attitude when dealing with puzzling texts in the Bible?

V. A Different Tactic (Joshua 8:2)

- A. Aside from the issue of the scope of the destruction, another major difference between the Jericho campaign and the Ai campaign is in the area of *tactics*.
 1. In Israel's war with Jericho, the emphasis was almost entirely on God's power.
 2. Features of the Jericho campaign:
 - a. Israel went against Jericho in a very public fashion.
 - b. Israel marched around the city in broad daylight for six days, and seven times on the seventh day.
 - c. Israel's campaign looked more like a religious ritual than an actual military procedure.
 3. In the case of Ai, Israel is going to do things very differently.
 - a. It's going to feel more like a conventional military operation.
 - b. There is not going to be any marching around the city.
 - c. Instead, the Lord instructs Joshua to "Lay an ambush against the city, behind it."
 4. The emphasis in the Ai campaign seems to be on Israel's work, and not on God's.
- B. Yet, it would be a serious mistake to think that God is not in the picture.
 1. God said that he will give Ai and its people into Israel's hands.
 2. God is still involved—and will see to it that Israel gets the victory.
- C. We learn that *God delights to use the efforts of his people in the advancement of his rule*.
 1. Although God can do things without us, he prefers to involve his people in the process.
 2. Paul himself says, "we are God's fellow workers" (1 Cor 3:9).
 3. Although God has already decided the outcome of the battle, God also decides the means to get there.
 4. In this case, God has decided that he will conquer Ai using more conventional military tactics.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How is the Ai campaign different than the Jericho one in terms of tactics? (2) What instruction does God give Joshua in 8:2 concerning the capture of the city? (3) The emphasis in the Ai campaign seems to be on Israel's efforts. How does this reconcile with God's sovereignty?

VI. The Lord of Strategies

- A. The Church needs to learn that *God can have us adopt different tactics to expand his influence in our society.*
- B. A clarification:
 - 1. When we talk about expanding God's influence today, we don't mean some kind of military conquest.
 - 2. We mean two related and inseparable things.
 - a. Expanding God's influence is about spreading God's Word in the society that God has placed us.
 - b. Expanding God's influence is about applying God's Word in the various fields that God has placed us.
—As we speak and apply God's Word, God expands his influence, his rule, wherever we are.
- C. The fact that God called ancient Israel to employ different tactics in the expansion of God's rule suggests to us that God can—and does!—call Christians today to do the same.
- D. This has practical implications for ministry in our multi-religious, pluralistic society.
 - 1. We don't always have to be loud and obvious in the way we proclaim the Gospel!
 - a. Just as God instructed Israel to take Ai with subtlety, there is also a place for subtlety in the way we share the Gospel with others.
 - b. Subtlety is required (at least at first) because of how our non-Christian friends would see us.
—They may equate our persuasion with coercion.
 - 2. There is also a need for tactical wisdom in our personal evangelism.
 - a. How you present the Word of God in your relationships can affect how you are received.
 - b. We need to know our audience, and their needs.
 - c. Perhaps one reason we don't get far in our evangelism is because we don't start with respect.
 - d. But we need to heed 1 Peter 3:15: "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; *yet do it with gentleness and respect.*"
 - e. That God requires wisdom in evangelism can also be inferred from Proverbs 26:4-5: "Answer not a fool according to his

folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

- E. God wants his children to employ different tactics when they engage with the world.
1. Being tactical means knowing how to maximize the impact of our speech.
 - a. It means knowing *when* to speak, *what* to speak, and even *how* to speak.
 - b. To do that, you need to get to know people—their fears, their dreams, their pet peeves, their lives and so on and so forth.
 2. Being tactical also means recognizing the full spectrum of deeds that God uses to advance his Word (public teaching, mercy ministries, counselling, Bible studies, family worship, etc.).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What are different tactics you can use to advance God’s Word in your various communities (school, office, home, etc.)? (2) What do we mean when we talk about expanding God’s rule today? (3) Based on 1 Peter 3:15, how should we do our personal evangelism? (4) What considerations does Proverbs 26:4-5 call from us?

VII. Rise to the Call of the Lord

Joshua 8:1-2 calls us to obey the Word of the Lord on our lives. Will we rise to the calling of being God’s people in the World today?

- A. Like Jericho, Ai is yet another symbol of the unbelieving World.
1. Ai is very much like any unbelieving city in the world.
 2. Ai also stands for all the Godless religions that the World believes in—religions like Atheism, Secular Humanism, and all the lesser religious faiths that emerge from those idolatries.
- B. 2 Corinthians 10:5 defines the nature of the Christian’s warfare today.
1. Paul writes: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”
 2. These words call Christians to address the subtle lies and false ideologies that hold the world captive.
- C. One of the greatest lies that rule people today is *that God is not relevant to our lives*.
1. This is the lie behind secularism.
 2. Out of this single, wicked idea comes a whole universe of evil.
- D. God calls his people today to address this lie with his Word—and to work at destroying its rule over people’s lives.
- E. But it all begins with us first.
—Like Israel, we have to root out our little Achans, and from there, we have to press on in holiness.

F. The Lord reassures us today: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What is Ai a symbol of? (2) According to 2 Corinthians 10:5, what is the nature of the Christian’s warfare today? (3) What is one of the greatest controlling lies today? (4) Where can we find assurance that the Lord is with us?