



I am a baseball fan like many of you. And like many of you I watched two games this week. Both games were exciting, both were amazing pitching performances up until the 9th inning. The first one ended well and the second did not if you are a Giants fan! I have to admit when I saw Sergio Romo walk off the mound, I felt sorry for him. I don't know whether Sergio is a Christian or not, but if one's purpose and identity rises or falls based on whether one can get 3 outs late in a game, I can only imagine the pain and discouragement he must be feeling.

This took me back 30 years. I grew up in Orange County and suffered along for many years hoping to see the California Angels get to a World Series. 1986 seemed like the Angels' year. In fact, October 10, 1986 the Angels had a 3-to-1 series lead in the American League Championship Series. It was the bottom of the 9th and there were two outs. The Angels were up by a 5-4 score. Boston had a runner on first, and Dave Henderson was at the plate. The Angels brought in their star relief pitcher, Donnie Moore. All he needed was one out and the Angels were going to the World Series. The crowd was in a frenzy already celebrating that the Angel curse was about to be broken. Donnie Moore, their best reliever, was on the mound. And I think you know where I am going... Henderson hit a two run home run off Donnie and the Angels went on to lose the game in the 11th inning, and then lost two straight back in Boston and the Angels were eliminated again.

The story gets even more tragic. Donnie Moore never again rose to the level of star relief pitcher. In fact he was cut from the Kansas City Royals in 1989. Those who knew him said he was never the same after losing that playoff game and carried the guilt for the loss. In 1989 Donnie was distraught. He got in a fight with his wife and shots were fired and she thankfully survived. While she was on her way to the hospital, Donnie, back at home, turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

Trying to live life while being unable to accept the forgiveness of God and of others, or unable to forgive one's self leads to despair. Trying to live life unable to accept that our God is a God of second, third and fourth chances leads to despair. Trying to live life while unable to accept that all our sins and all our failures are nailed to the cross leads to unbearable guilt. Trying to live life while unable to resist enslavement to one's ego, to the approval of others, to our talents, which ebb and flow, leads to crippling fear.

The world has its ways to learn from failures. In fact what some have said about the lessons through victory and defeat is actually inspiring. Bill Gates said, "It's fine to celebrate success, but it's more important to heed the lessons of failure." Coach Johnny Wooden said, "Failure is not final. But failure to change might

be" and "Success is never final, failure is never fatal. It's courage that counts."

What does the Bible say about second chances? When we look at Joshua 8 a big idea surfaces that should encourage us:

God is Pleased to Turn Our Defeat into His Victory

As we begin Joshua 8, Israel is like a dog with its tail between its legs, dejected, discouraged, and caught red-handed disobeying God. They were defeated trying to capture the Canaanite city of Ai because of the sin and disobedience of one man, Achan. Instead of giving all the devoted things to the Lord's treasury, Achan secretly took some of the plunder and the entire community suffered as a result. And Joshua was at fault too. He didn't seek the Lord before moving into battle and suffered the consequences of his disobedience.

But Joshua learned from his defeat and went before the Lord and removed the sin from the camp. At the beginning of chapter 8 we see God ready to be there for Israel once again. I love this quote from Alexander White: "The Christian life is a series of new beginnings." In chapter 8 we will see four new beginnings that I hope you will find to be an encouragement to you if you are struggling through a failure, discouragement or a defeat. This is more than pithy quotes from wise people; this is the timeless wisdom of God.

Turning Our Defeat into His Victory Requires a New Word

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. 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, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city" (verses 1-2).

It struck me that this time God gives them permission to carry off their plunder and livestock. Isn't that what got Achan in trouble with God in the first place? Isn't that what led to the deaths of 36 of Israel's finest soldiers? Achan saw the silver and gold and the fancy coat and he had to have it. The question isn't whether or not they needed the plunder this time around, the question is this: "Will you hear the Lord's instruction and do what He says?" Through this failure God was teaching obedience, but also the foolishness of coveting, because God will always give us what we need, and even more.

There are a couple of lessons that jump out to me on how to turn our failure into God's victory. First, we need to remember that God never forsakes his children no matter how they fail him. After we sin, the devil whispers in our ear, "You messed up big time, and God can never use you again." It is at such a moment in

Joshua's life, following a humiliating defeat, that God specifically reminded Joshua of his promise. Isn't it wonderful to know that for Joshua when His morale was likely at an all time low, walking off the mound feeling very insecure as a leader, he was reassured that God does not permanently withdraw His blessings, that God doesn't fail him when he fails God.

Second, notice that to turn our failure into God's victory, we need to learn not to repeat our same mistakes. Did you notice this time God said, "Take the whole army with you and go attack Ai." Although Achan's sin was the primary reason for the failure in chapter 7, a contributing factor was underestimating their enemy and overestimating themselves. Listen to the new word and obey. Identify your mistakes and don't repeat them, learn from them.

So here God speaks a new word of encouragement, instruction and promise. I can't emphasize enough the importance of making scripture central to our lives. I think this is an appropriate analogy. We are Christian soldiers that go into battle every day, and we are poorly equipped without the encouragement, instruction and promises of God through His Word. The Apostle Paul calls the word of God the Sword of the Spirit. This isn't just good descriptive writing; it's truth for life, and the Bible says that His word is new every morning.

Turning Our Defeat into His Victory Requires a New Strategy

So Joshua and the whole army moved out to attack Ai. He chose thirty thousand of his best fighting men and sent them out at night with these orders: "Listen carefully. You are to set an ambush behind the city. Don't go very far from it. All of you be on the alert. I and all those with me will advance on the city, and when the men come out against us, as they did before, we will flee from them. They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are running away from us as they did before.' So when we flee from them, you are to rise up from ambush and take the city. The Lord your God will give it into your hand. When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the Lord has commanded. See to it; you have my orders." (verses 3-8).

It's interesting, God doesn't use the same winning strategy that worked at Jericho. Jericho was a one-week march around the city day after day in broad daylight. The campaign at Ai is a covert night operation and a daylight assault with a deception and then an ambush. At Jericho it was a miraculous collapsing wall. Here at Ai it's a well-planned military strategy. Both battles result in God's victory. Why the new strategy? I'm thinking God changes his strategies on purpose so we don't relax into depending on habits, or history, or on our own personal experience.

I have a lot of experience in my years of ministry and I find that there is some merit to going back into my memory banks to try to find wisdom for a present-day challenge. But unless past wisdom is translated into present trust and obedience, it isn't fruitful. God's victory is won by a present dependence on Him. God wants from us a present tense faith for present tense challenges. What is going to grow me today is more important than what God did to grow me 30 years ago.

The next time you get in a spiritual conversation with someone and you talk about what God has done in their life take notice of this: Is the person talking, are you talking about experiences that occurred years ago, maybe some mission trip from a distant past? Maybe some community group experience they had years ago? Maybe some ministry team they loved being a part of years ago? Where the point of view seems to be, "back in the good ole days when God was really working....".

Do you think God cares more about what he did in your life 30 years ago than what he wants to do in your life right now? I don't think God thinks a lot about the good ole days. Let this passage in Joshua 8 remind you that God is presently encouraging you, presently instructing you, and presently giving you His promise to grow you into a more mature follower of Christ. God wants to grow you now so you can leave the best legacy of love and service to your family, your church and neighborhood.

Then Joshua sent them off, and they went to the place of ambush and lay in wait between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai—but Joshua spent that night with the people (v. 9).

Verse 9 tells us that Joshua spent the night before the battle with his men, probably encouraging them to trust the Lord and believe His promise. He was likely trying to quench their fears as they were about to march into battle over ground where their fellow soldiers had been slaughtered days earlier.

Early the next morning Joshua mustered his army, and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai. The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it. They set up camp north of Ai, with the valley between them and the city. Joshua had taken about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. So the soldiers took up their positions—with the main camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley. (verses 10-13).

It's a simple plan. Joshua moves the army 15 miles up from Gilgal to Ai. He sends an ambush force of 5000 and puts them to the west of the city between Ai and Bethel. He will try to draw the army of Ai out of their city, and then have the ambush force invade and destroy the undefended city. Then the ambush force and the main force would turn on the Ai army and in a pincer movement crush them.

That night it says that Joshua went into the valley. The picture here is that Joshua spent the night with his men, but in the middle of the night he got up and went close to the city in the valley to be alone and pray and anticipate the battle strategy like he did at Jericho. We get the impression that Joshua was totally focused on the Lord's leading and that he was hourly checking in for any new direction, new strategic change that God might have for him. Our failures become God's victory when we remain connected to him.

I won't take the time to read verses 13-17, but it tells us that the battle plan was working perfectly. When the King of Ai saw Joshua and his army on the east side, he took his whole army and they left the safety of their city and pursued Joshua who retreated back drawing Ai's army farther away from Ai. And then

on the west side of the city Joshua's ambush troops waited for Joshua's signal.

Turning Our Defeat into His Victory Requires a New Role

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city." So Joshua held out toward the city the javelin that was in his hand. As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire (verses 18-19).

Verse 18 is the turning point in the story. The Israelite army is about to win the battle. There are three observations that I see from verses 18-19. First, there is no doubt the Lord Himself is responsible for the victory. Second, Joshua's success is due to his faith in God's Word and his obedience to it. Third, we can't help but be reminded that Joshua holding out his sword or javelin is like Moses holding out his staff. Moses holding out his staff and Joshua holding out his sword are both accounts of God's power and strength. God says, "into your hand" I will deliver the city. Turning our Defeat into His Victory requires for us a new role in the battle. To go from our defeat to God's victory requires us to let go of control. To go from our defeat to God's victory requires us to obey commands, not give the commands.

It struck me as I read this that failure places us in an undesirable position, a new role. We can feel pressure to remove ourselves from that position—to change something, to take back control, to fight back, and God may lead us to change. But while we are in that undesirable position, I think God wants us to open our hearts to the lessons from that failure. Don't ignore what God may want to do in the midst of the failure. Can we learn to quietly wait on him to learn? Is it possible that where God has you right now is the best place you can be to grow your character and serve God the most?

I saw a movie this week called *McFarland*. It is a movie based on a true story. I'm sure not all that happened in the movie actually happened in real life; it was a movie, not a documentary. Jim White was a football coach in Boise, Idaho, and at halftime at one game he lost his temper trying to correct a disrespectful player on his team. In a fit of anger Jim threw a cleat intending to hit the locker next to his player, but he missed and the cleat hit the player on the cheek. Jim was fired as head football coach. Jim had failed. Short on money and unable to get the prime teaching assignments, let alone a quality coaching job, Jim and his wife and daughters, a Caucasian family, took a teaching assignment in the poor mainly Latino town of McFarland, California.

When Jim arrived at McFarland, he immediately apologized to his wife for bringing her to such a place. He had no choice but to take the job, but he began to plot his strategy to leave McFarland. For several months he kept to himself, ignoring the needs around him. One day, he spotted two young Mexican boys running through a field. They were running far and fast. Jim's natural coaching instincts kicked in and he went to his principal to convince him that these boys were better suited for track than for football. As he began to meet the needs around him right there in McFarland and stopped coveting living somewhere else,

it changed his life. And then Jim was tested. An unfortunate incident where Jim's 15-year-old daughter is slightly injured when a group of punks assault the boys with his daughter leads Jim and his wife to consider a generous offer from a prestigious high school in Palo Alto. Let me pick up the dialogue between Coach White and his wife.

COACH WHITE: Palo Alto feels like everything we've ever wanted. Everything we ever talked about. You know, big house, financial security, great school for the kids, nice neighborhood. Nice safe neighborhood.

CHERYL WHITE: I don't know.

COACH WHITE: What do you mean you don't know? The owner of the corner store was washing away blood from his parking lot when I drove out this morning.

CHERYL WHITE: Jim, the owner of the store has a name, and he's our friend. And you looked him in the eye two days ago and thanked him for everything he's done for us.

COACH WHITE: I know. I know. But you were there. We were there. Our daughter was ... how close? This close? How could that not bother you?

CHERYL WHITE: Of course it bothers me. But do you know how she got hurt? Your team jumped in front of her ... They protected her like she was their family. You think she's going to find that in Palo Alto? ... It's your decision, okay? And I know it's hard. But, please don't just let this be about our safety.

Coach White ended up turning down the Palo Alto job and stayed at McFarland High and led his teams to nine state cross country titles over the next 14 years. All seven runners depicted in the film except one went on to attend college and succeed in their careers. Jim White retired from coaching in 2003 and he and his wife still live in McFarland.

Why do I take the time to share this story? Because I think it relates well to us. Failure can put us in places we never imagined being. Places that make us uncomfortable at best, and fearful at worst. We dream of a another life, someone else's life, any life but ours must be better. The real coach Jim White was a Christian who eventually surrendered his life. He was humbled. He accepted the place he landed. He accepted his new role. And he made a difference. He sought to serve. He gave of himself.

Coach Johnny Wooden said, "You can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you." I love that. Where ever God has us, whether it feels like Palo Alto or McFarland, God says assume this new role. Seek to make every day a perfect day, extend the sword of the spirit, serve God, receive God's orders and do what Jesus did: Every day serve someone who will never be able to repay you.

In verses 20-29 it tells us that the battle was won totally according to God's instruction. The king of Ai was captured and killed and hung on a tree, representing the judgment of God placed upon all the wickedness of the nations that God was going to drive out of the Promised Land. The last section in Joshua 8:30-35 brings a change of pace, maybe even relief after all the killing. Instead of moving his army south to push the attack on other fortified cities, Joshua takes all the people on a detour north about 30 miles to a valley named Shechem. Shechem was situated between Mount Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. Here is a modern photograph. It

was a beautiful area. The place was very important in the history of Israel. Six hundred years earlier when Abraham first came into the land, he stopped there and built his first altar of sacrifice to the Lord. Jacob dug a well there, and that was the well where Jesus himself later offered the Samaritan woman life-giving water.

The two mountains are about 3,000 feet above sea level, and the valley between is often green. And in one place the mountains come close together and form a natural amphitheater with natural benches. The acoustics were wonderful. People at the foot of each mountain could hear each other. So the ark was taken to the center of Shechem and Joshua led a worship service just as Moses instructed him back in Deuteronomy 27.

Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the Lord burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings. There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on stones a copy of the law of Moses (verses 30-32).

It was common for a conquering leader to write down his victory in big letters and display it like a giant billboard for all to see his fame. But what did Joshua do? He wrote down the Law. He didn't brag about the victory. He knew better than anyone that the battle was won because they submitted to the law of God. God was the famous one.

All the Israelites, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the Lord, facing the Levitical priests who carried it. Both the foreigners living among them and the native-born were there. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel (verse 33).

As Moses had directed them to do this before he died in the wilderness, six of the tribes would stand at the foot of Mt. Gerizim to bless the people and the other six tribes would stand at the foot of Mt. Ebal and pronounce the curses. First the curses would be read by the Levites from Deuteronomy 27:15-26, and then the blessings would be read from Deuteronomy 28:1-7.

Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them (verses 34-35).

It must have been an amazing experience to be part of 2 million people reaffirming their relationship with God and their relationship to His law, shouting Amen after they heard the reading of the blessings of obedience and the curses on those who were disobedient. What does this worship service between the mountains mean to us today? Sin didn't end with the sacrifices on Ebal. But the sacrifices on Ebal pointed to a new solution. They point to the One who will make the ultimate sacrifice for all sins—the sins of the Israelites, the sins of the Canaanites, and all of our sins past, present and future as well as our failures and defeats.

Turning Our Defeat into His Victory Requires a New Solution

The new solution is a New Joshua. The sacrifices for sin offered by Joshua on Mt. Ebal point to another Joshua. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. Jesus and Joshua both mean God saves. Today we don't stand between these two mountains. For us the mountain of Ebal has been replaced by Mt. Calvary, where the blood of Jesus was shed. And Mount Gerizim has been replaced by the Mount of Olives, the place of future hope. It's on the Mount of Olives where Jesus before his death cried over his beloved Jerusalem and descended into Jerusalem on a donkey. And we can read the words of the prophet Zachariah in chapter 14 where he says that the Messiah will come back and claim His own and He will first stand on the Mt. of Olives and then come a second time, not on a donkey, but in great power and glory.

So be encouraged, we don't live under the curse of the law because Jesus bore that curse when He hung on the cross. The new solution: Our defeat is turned into God's victory because of the grace of God. We are loved and cared for and made like Him and will go to heaven to be with Him. We can face our failures this morning because God is a God of second chances. He is our solution to our failures. No matter our defeats, we can trust that He has a living Word for us, and a strategy for us to follow on faith in obedience, and a role made for us to grow us in those hard times. His mercies are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1423-7S