



Tom Watson Jr., CEO of IBM between 1956 and 1971, was a key figure in the information revolution. The story is told about a young executive who had made some really bad decisions that cost the company millions of dollars in losses. He was summoned to Watson's office, fully expecting to be fired. As he entered the office, the young executive said, "I suppose after that set of mistakes you want to fire me." Watson was said to have replied, "Not at all, young man, we just spent millions of dollars educating you." Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, is famous for saying, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." When his factory was burned down, with much of his life's work inside, Edison said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

This morning I want to talk about failure and starting over again. Some of the most powerful lessons we learn in life can come from our failures, difficult times and even our own sinful mistakes. If you have been a Christian for any amount of time, you know and have experienced failure, defeat, disobedience and discouragement. Unless you are perfect, that's just part of what it means to be a follower of Christ. The question is, how do you handle failure? How do you recover from defeat and discouragement? How do you pick yourself up off the floor of life when you get knocked down? Maybe for some of you, that's right where you are today—defeated, discouraged, and ready to give up. You're tired of being tired. You're sick of being sick. If that is you, there is hope today.

In Joshua 8, Israel was like a dog with its tail between its legs—dejected, discouraged and caught red-handed disobeying God. They were defeated trying to capture 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. Israel's sin of self-reliance and pride resulted in 36 men losing their lives in battle as they tried to overthrow the city of Ai. Joshua was at fault too. He did not seek the Lord before moving into battle and suffered the consequences of his disobedience. Thankfully, Joshua went before the Lord and they removed the sin from the camp. And at the beginning of chapter 8, we see God ready to fight for Israel once again.

In this chapter, God tells Joshua how to attack Ai and like Jericho, God promises to give the city into their hands. Chapter

8 concludes what started in chapter 5. What began as a "mark of the covenant" (circumcision), ends with a complete reading of the covenant in front of all Israel. As Joshua and Israel are licking their wounds, God speaks to Joshua again and offers a new beginning. Look with me at verses 1-2.

A New Beginning

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."

In the opening verses of chapter 8, God gives Joshua yet another word of encouragement. As the leader of Israel, Joshua was taking their failure to take Ai pretty hard. They had just conquered Jericho, they were on a spiritual high, only to come crashing down because of their own sin. It's been said that the greatest enemy of future success is current success. The same is true for a follower of Christ or for the church. When things are going great and when you are sensing the Lord's blessing, the great temptation is to take our eyes off of God and begin to think it's about you. We need to stay humble and obedient, especially when things are going well.

God's encouragement to Joshua was in the form of a promise. Joshua has heard these words several times before but he needed to hear them again, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged...I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land." D.L. Moody once said, "God never made a promise that was too good to be true." That's true, but every promise of God must be claimed by faith. It's not enough to **hear** God's Word, we must **believe** it and **act** on it. Lots of people hear the Word of God; few believe it and respond in faith. That's why we stress the importance of the Bible so much around here. We need to know the Scriptures so we can obey them fully, not just the parts we like. And what we see all throughout Joshua is the tension between faith and obedience. When Israel obeyed, they were successful. When they disobeyed God, they failed. Yes, God is sovereign, he is fully in control and at the same time, we are responsible for our actions. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are two sides of the same coin. That tension is all over the Bible.

Like Joshua, the answer to our discouragement and failure is in the hearing and believing of God's Word, "fear not." Some of you need to let that sink into your soul today—"fear not." I know I do. People often say, "Fear is the absence of faith." I would argue fear is actually misplaced faith. It's faith in the wrong things. Fear is often placing your faith in the "what ifs" of life. Things like: What if the economy falls apart again and I lose my job? What if my spouse gets really sick? What if I never get married? What if my kids don't get into that school? What if I don't make the right decision? And the fears continue to spiral out of control, "What if...? What if...? What if...?" Fear and worry can be absolutely paralyzing. For some, seeing a Christian therapist and taking medication is needed. For others, fearful moments come on us and dissipate over time. For his all, the good news, according to 2 Timothy 1:7, "God has not given us" – what? "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of" – what? "but of power and of love and self-discipline."

Not only does God encourage Joshua, he then gives him instructions on how to take the city. God tells Joshua to set an ambush to the city and once they take it, like Jericho, kill the king and everyone in it, except this time they can take the plunder for themselves. God always has a plan for his people to follow. Do you believe that this morning? As followers of Jesus, we have the written word of God, the Holy Spirit, and godly counsel to guide our every decision. But, the only way to have victory in our lives is to obey God's instructions. Sure, they are not always clear! It takes patience and wisdom to understand and hear from God. I get that. But, for example, if Achan would have only waited a few days and did things God's way, he would have been rich. Instead, he saw, he coveted, and he took that which was God's and all Israel suffered the consequences as a result. When we run ahead of the Lord and his timing and his will, what happens is we often hurt ourselves and others in the process. Warren Wiersbe says, "God always gives his best to those who leave the choice with Him." Maturity in Christ—that takes time to develop—helps us to leave the choice with God. Let's look next at how the new strategy to take Ai unfolds in verses 3-13.

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."

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.

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.

Tony Snow, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, who died of colon cancer in 2008, when asked what spiritual lessons he learned from his battle with cancer replied: "We want lives of simple, predictable ease—smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see—but God likes to go off-road." And that's what we see God do here in the form of an ambush. God goes off-road and lays out a new strategy for taking Ai, one that militaries have been using ever since.

If you were with us a few weeks ago when we looked at the battle of Jericho, you'll notice this plan was completely different. At Jericho for seven days Israel walked around the walls of Jericho during the day, in silence, except for the occasional blowing of trumpets. Jericho was an unorthodox military strategy at best, yet because of God's work, the walls fell down and Israel took the city by faith. The battle of Ai was another story altogether. An ambush is a smart military strategy. It required strategy, planning, and preparation as they operated at night. This took courage as well; they've never done this type of warfare before. But, learning from their mistake of self-reliance, they brought the whole army out, all 30,000 of them in this attack. Unlike Jericho, there were no miracles in this plan and not even one prayer was uttered. God was going off-road for sure.

What can we learn from this? It's a great reminder for us all that God doesn't always work in the same way we expect him to. His ways are not our ways. His plans are not our plans. The temptation for us is to behave like God has the same formula for victory every time. We think that if we go to the same conference every year, or read the same book, or fast once a month or whatever, then God will do what he's done before in our lives. But, we can't put God in a box. We can't always expect God to show up and act in the same way every time. And we can't rely on past obedience and past victories for today's battle either. It doesn't work. Every day is a new day, with new challenges. And while God never

changes in character, he often changes his methods so we don't depend on his methods, but on Him. I know I'm preaching to someone here!

Churches can get stuck in this pattern as well. We can do the same thing year after year, never evaluating the effectiveness or fruit of the program or the ministry. Christians and churches must focus our dependence on the Lord and allow him to work in anyway he sees fit. There should be no sacred cows in our lives or in our church.

My son Levi is obsessed with basketball. He is on a competitive AAU team, so I get to see lots of games. His basketball coach could call a timeout for any number of reasons at any different point in a game. For example, he might see a flaw in the opponent's defense he thinks his team could exploit. He might want to stop the momentum or a hot hand by one of the opposing players. He might use it to try icing a free-throw shooter. He might use it to stop the clock near the end of the half or regulation. He might use it to force a review of a questionable call by the officials. That's six different options right there. And they're all determined by the flow of the game, the opponent, the time left on the shot clock, or the game clock—any of these factors and many others could dictate his purpose in asking for a timeout. Plus it's all dictated by the coach's unique, personal knowledge of his players, his awareness of what each of them can do, what makes them perform best, what puts them in the best position to win the game. Why must God's decisions for our lives be any different? Real life is much more complex than a basketball game, but this illustration shows how any wise coach can make good decisions that we may or may not understand. In our relationship with God, there's one crucial difference: basketball coaches make mistakes; God doesn't.

A New Victory

Israel had a new beginning which led to a new strategy, which ultimately led to a new victory. In verses 14–29 we see God's plan play out perfectly. For the sake of time, I'm not going to read it all, you'll just have to trust me. The king of Ai sees the small army of Israel and takes all his men out of the city to fight them, thinking we beat them once, we'll do it again. Israel retreats into the wilderness with the warriors of Ai in hot pursuit. At a certain point, Joshua, like Moses (Ex.17:8–16), holds out a javelin in his hand, signaling the rest of Israel's army to take the city and set it on fire. The men of Ai look back and see their city destroyed and find themselves surrounded by Israel on both sides. Ai is emptied, captured, and its army, people and king are all destroyed just as the Lord had commanded. What follows next seems like an awkward transition from slaughter and execution to basically a church service. Let's read verses 30–35.

A New Commitment

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. 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.

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.

Here's a picture of modern-day Nablus, where this scene takes place. I believe this is taken on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal is the far mountain. In between is the valley of Shechem, which forms a type of natural amphitheater. Joshua and all the people of Israel traveled about 20 miles from Ai to this valley. With all Israel watching and listening—half on one side of the mountain and half on the other—Joshua builds an altar (fourth altar built in Joshua), writes the law on stone tablets, and reads the entire Mosaic law to everyone present, which was somewhere between 1 million and 2 million people.

They did this for a couple of reasons. First, Moses commanded them to stop and worship at this location in his farewell speech (Deut. 27–29). Second, this religious act signified the completion of their entrance into the Promised Land. Shechem is the same place where Abraham first received the promise of land (Gen. 12:6–7). Abraham built an altar there as well. Joshua is reminding all Israel that God's promises have indeed been fulfilled. God is faithful. As Israel renews their covenant to God, we see how obedience to God's Word is more important than fighting God's war. Israel's future success will be fully dependent on their faithfulness, not their fighting skill. God wants their complete submission to God's Word. This was a time of renewal and recommitment to God.

For us, as followers of Jesus, this covenant renewal reminds us of our need to come together regularly as the Body of Christ and renew our commitment to God and obedience to his will. There are more Sundays than I want to admit where I come here

struggling with sin or doubt. And the enemy of our souls loves to whisper the lie, "You don't belong here. Stay home." Some of you heard that Satanic whisper this morning. It's a lie from the pit of hell. The church has to be the place where everyone is struggling and everyone is repenting. It should be a place where you and I can come broken, hurting and lost. At the same time, it has to be a place where we leave changed and transformed by the power of Jesus Christ.

Just this week, I had the opportunity to teach at Men's Fraternity, our men's ministry that meets Tuesday nights. After my talk, I sat at a table with a great group of men who were sharing openly and honestly about their pain and problems with one another. One man in particular is going through a really hard time. He's new to our church and new to Men's Fraternity, and there he is sharing his brokenness and heartache with us. We encouraged him and prayed for him. As I left that night, I was so encouraged that we are a church where no perfect people are allowed. We are a church where lost, hurting, and broken people are free to be authentic while yearning for and moving toward continued growth. Jesus Christ came to seek the lost, heal the broken-hearted, and transform lives to reflect his glory. But, transformation doesn't happen overnight with any of us; it only takes place in an environment of both grace and truth—grace that frees us to be transparent about our hurts and failures, and truth that encourages us to continue to walk in obedience to him.

This passage, more than anything, is about failure and starting over again. Joshua and the elders own up to their failure to obey God, and the Lord accepts their repentance and gives them a second chance. After a great military victory, they gather everyone for worship. They renew their commitment to God, to his Word, and they promise to obey him. Alexander Whyte once said, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings." That means failure is never final for the follower of Jesus. We are safe and secure in God's hand. We are not forsaken because we know the One who was forsaken. On the cross Jesus cried out, "My God! My God, why have you forsaken Me?" On the cross Jesus bore the wrath of God for you and for me. He died, was buried in a tomb, and on the third day we was raised to new life. And because of his life, death and resurrection, we are given a second chance, a third chance, and as many chances as we need to start over because it's not about what we do but about what God has done in the new Joshua, Jesus Christ. According to his promises, we always have a yes and an amen in Jesus Christ.

Like Joshua and Israel, we too need to hear the wonderful word of encouragement from the Lord, "Do not fear, do not be discouraged. I have your best in mind. I am committed to helping you take defeat and turn it into victory. I love turning things around and redeeming your mistakes and failures. I am the God of new beginnings." By faith we can claim our inheritance in Christ and keep marching forward in victory.

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

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1423-7N