



What's a recent time when you've messed up and needed a second chance? 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 replied, "Not at all, young man, we have just spent millions of dollars educating you."

If you're that guy, that's a good day! You have a boss who believes in your ability to try again. You're going to get a second chance.

This morning, God's Word is going to teach us how God gives second chances to His followers. If you're beating yourself up because of a failure... if you're feeling defeated and discouraged because you said "yes" to your habitual sin yet again... if you look at your weaknesses and wonder, "can God use someone like me?", God's Word today is going to fill your mind with eternal truth and fill your heart with inspiration. The God of the Bible is a God of second chances.

Let me set the scene for our passage of scripture today. In Joshua 8, the mood amongst God's people is down. They were as low as they could be. They were defeated trying to capture Ai because of the sin and disobedience of one man, Achan.

- Thirty-six men were killed in battle as they tried to overthrow the city of Ai.
- God's people were thoroughly defeated in the battle at Ai.
- Chapter 7 verse 5 tells us that the hearts of the Israelites "melted in fear." That's the same phrase used to describe the fear in the hearts of the enemies of God's people. But now, God's people are melting in fear.
- The nation has just punished Achan and his entire family for stealing from the Lord by stoning them.

This was a heavy moment. Discouragement and fear hung over them like a dark cloud. It's not easy to rally after a spiritual defeat either. Look with me at verses 1-2 and let's see how God engages them at the moment of their defeat.

**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."**

Did you notice all of the ways God is picking Joshua and his people up? "Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged." You mean you haven't forsaken us? "Go attack Ai (again)." You mean you still believe in us? "I have delivered (past tense) Ai into your hands. You may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves." You mean you're going to bless us with riches and gifts? Four different examples of God picking His people up after they'd failed Him.

What do we learn about God? God gives second chances because we blow it. Don't forget that just a few days before "*the Lord's anger burned against Israel*" (Josh. 7:1). We've got to wonder, how does God switch so quickly? God isn't giving a second chance because He takes a casual approach to sin. God is never casual with sin and rebellion because He is Holy. But God is always ready to give a second chance so long as His wrath has been satisfied.

In the situation of Joshua 7, God's wrath was satisfied when Achan and his family were stoned to death. In the situation of a follower of Jesus Christ today, God's wrath was satisfied when Jesus Christ died on the cross. And for anyone who turns to God in faith and belief, they will escape the wrath of God as well and experience His salvation. Salvation is God's second chance he offers to everyone. "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them*" (John 3:36). His holiness demands that rebellion is punished but his love always seeks second chances with His people.

I've wondered over the years, what's it like for God to give a second chance? God has the ability to be filled with anger over sin one moment and be gracious and loving the next. That's not human! Let me tell you of a time I was wronged to illustrate how spectacular God's love is.

Many years ago I was in a financially vulnerable position. I had to sell a house before I got financially upside down. And we moved into a rental with some good schools for the kids. I had purposeful conversations with my landlord that I needed a stable place for my family. As a father of small kids himself, he empathized with my situation and assured me that this house

would be a great place for my family. Part of our conversation was a 2-year lease. I was feeling secure and stable. When I went to sign the lease agreement, it indicated that this was a month-to-month lease. I was confused but the landlord was in Europe on business and I needed to move.

When he returned from Europe I talked with him on multiple occasions and asked him to rewrite the lease agreement with longer terms and he told me not to worry about it, he writes all of his leases month-to-month. I was assured multiple times that my family could live in the house as long as we desired.

So we settled in. Unpacked. Got rid of all the boxes. Started witnessing to our neighbors. Hosted birthday parties. We quickly and fully settled in. On an April morning, six months after we moved in, there was a knock at our front door. Thinking it was a neighbor, Cassie went to the door in her robe only to meet three strangers: a real estate agent and a married couple that were under contract to buy the house. My landlord had been lying to me from the very beginning. It turned out that he had been quietly seeking a buyer before I even moved in. And his deception was bringing great disruption to my wife and my children.

My anger burned against my landlord. I'd been used; lied to; and my family was suffering for it. Are you angry at my landlord too? What a jerk! What a selfish liar! This anger is just a tiny sliver of what God feels when people sin against Him. Understanding God's anger amplifies the amazing love and grace of God that He can switch from such anger and offer a second chance.

That's exactly what God is offering his people in these opening verses of chapter 8. What an encouragement and inspiration! God gives second chances.

But God's second chances aren't given so people can give all their energy to their jobs or fill their days with whatever desires they have. No. God always has a plan of action for His people because God uses faithful and obedient people to accomplish His will on earth. At the end of verse 2, God tells Joshua what their action plan is: "Set an ambush behind the city."

**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 (Josh. 8:3-9).**

Did you notice how different this attack plan is from the Jericho plan? In verses 2 and 4 they set an ambush. In verse 3 men were sent out at night to hide. In verse 5 Joshua and part of the army will advance, then run away. In verse 7, when the city is unprotected, the ambush guys will burn the city and surround the Ai army. This is **nothing** like the military plan of attacking Jericho.

Tony Snow, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, when asked what spiritual lessons he has 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." That's what we see God doing here in the form of an ambush. God goes off-road and lays out a new strategy for taking Ai.

With Jericho there was **no** military strategy. The people simply marched around the city and God made the walls fall down. It was totally supernatural. A miracle! In contrast, the battle of Ai was a brilliant military strategy. Ambushes are very effective ways to defeat your enemy. And 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? God achieves His promises in diverse ways. We learn that God doesn't work in the way we expect him to. His ways are not our ways. His plans are not our plans. The temptation for us to behave like God has the same formula for victory every time. 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. Every day is a new day, with new challenges. And while God never changes in character, He changes His methods so we don't depend on His methods, but on Him.

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 whatever way He leads. There should be no sacred cows in our lives or in our church.

Three years ago I was meeting with a guy who had questions about Christianity; we'll call him Joe. I've done this with so many people over the years, it's fair to say I have a bit of a method that's proven to be very effective. Through conversations and relationships God has used me to lead over a hundred people to faith in Jesus Christ. We talked about God's holiness, man's sin, God's plan for salvation in Jesus, and the faith to receive Jesus' Lordship. After meeting four times we were at the typical spot when I'd ask if there was any reason he wouldn't want to surrender his life to Jesus. But I sensed the Holy Spirit saying, "don't

say anything. Just let Joe wrestle with the tension that he's separated from a holy God because of his sin. Don't offer him the resolution. Don't offer him the chance to enter a relationship with Jesus." I had **never** used that strategy before.

Weeks later when Joe and I met again, he told me he'd been quite mad with me after our last meeting. After Joe mentally and spiritually wrestled with God for days, he had a powerful moment of surrendering himself to Jesus' Lordship fully and completely.

As he told me his story, both of us were crying! I was so excited for him! I told him that I'd been diligently praying for him and that I'd been feeling unresolved because I hadn't helped him surrender his life to Jesus. He smiled and said, "it's better you didn't tell me. I had to work through this on my own. God and I needed to wrestle." I didn't know that; I was just following the Spirit's lead in that conversation.

God is not limited to any strategy or approach, no matter how successful something has been in the past. God simply wants His people to obey His instructions and trust the outcome to Him. Perhaps you're trusting in past methods and practices to do God's work. God's message to you today might be just this: God achieves His promises in diverse ways. Maybe God has a brand new method, an unexpected approach, a new beginning for you to do His work. That's the way God works and I encourage you to seek God in relationship, listen to His voice and act in obedience.

That's what the Israelites did in Joshua 8. They set the ambush and easily defeated the army at Ai. Verses 10-29 describe how they burned the city and killed the people. A totally different strategy, but the unchanging God is still leading.

Let's read verses 30-35 to see how God is going to wrap up chapter 8 with one final lesson that ties all of this together.

**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.**

Let me point out the significant actions in these verses:

- Joshua built an altar in the valley of Shechem. It's the fourth altar built in the book of Joshua. Shechem is the same place where Abraham first received the promise of land (Genesis 12:6-7). Abraham even built an altar there. Joshua reminded all Israel that God's promises have indeed been fulfilled.
- Burnt offerings and sacrifices were made on the altar.
- Joshua wrote the Law of Moses on stones.
- All the people were gathered: Mt Gerizim on the left, Mt Ebal on the right.
- The entire law of God was read out loud as the million-plus crowd of people listened attentively.

What can we learn from this? Worship of God flows from second chances and promises realized. Think back over your life to a time when you experienced your biggest second chance from God. How did you respond to God? Maybe you cried, even though you're not a crier. Some people have told me they've laid prostrate before God. Some people kneel, others shout, sing, lift their hands in adoration. All of these are examples of worshipping God. This is a natural result of experiencing the God of second chances.

Think back over your life to a time when you experienced your biggest answer to a prayer. This is an experience of a promised realized. I think about the woman who told me of her new job with tears in her eyes. The natural result that flows from realizing God's promises is to worship God.

Maybe you're thinking, that's me today. I'm there. You are ready for me to stop talking so you can sing your heart out to Jesus! Raise your hands, cry, because you are intimately aware of your second chance or you have freshly experienced God's promise. Maybe you're thinking, "it's been too long since my heart responded in worship to God like this." Maybe you'd say, "my memory of getting a second chance from God is in the distant past." Or maybe you'd say, "I'm not sure I've experienced any of God's promises. I'm still waiting."

How do you worship God if you relate to these statements? We all feel like this at different times. Tim Keller's insight into the Gospel of Jesus Christ has helped me more than anything else. Our worship is fueled by seeing that "we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."

If you are feeling spiritually dull today, ask God to show you how sinful and flawed you are. He'll show you. When He shows you, confess your sin. The more of your sin you're aware of, the greater the love of Jesus. You'll see and experience your second

chance freshly. And the more you experience the love of Jesus, you can't help but worship Him.

*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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