

Sunday 10th July 2016 AM - Recovering lost ground - Joshua 8

Title: Recovering lost ground - Joshua 8

Purpose: To know how to recover lost ground when we have previously fallen flat on our faces through failure & disobedience.

INTRODUCTION

Ever been lost?

I remember the occasion well - it was about 3 years ago and it was a Sunday afternoon. We went as a group of us from this church and we headed out into the forest at the top of Cold Ash. It was a glorious afternoon and we had probably an hour-and-a-half before the evening service would start and everything began very well, we followed some tracks that Bola and I knew reasonably well.

Everything was good until we made the decision to take a slightly different path on the way back that we didn't actually know but which we figured was near enough to the car park to not cause us any difficulty.

How wrong can you be!! After about a half-an-hour I concluded that we were now officially LOST!!

Time was getting short by this stage and so I was forced to take the rather uncomfortable decision that we would need to retrace our steps all the way back to where we had embarked on this new path and then, and only then, would be safely able to get out of the forest.

Recovering lost ground is hard

***** I think the truth is that RECOVERING LOST GROUND - DOES TAKE WORK. *****

Last week we saw that the people of Israel were **facing a very serious setback due to the SIN of one man Achan** and we saw some of the reasons that we too typically find ourselves getting into places of SETBACK and no longer knowing the blessings and rest of victorious Christian Living.

We considered **3 uppermost reasons why we meet with SETBACK**

-what you might call "**FRUSTRATED CHRISTIAN LIVING**":

- **the FIRST** was - **the presence of SELF-CONFIDENCE** - it was just a bit too easy for the people to think that one victory guaranteed another and they began to look to themselves and not to God
- **the SECOND** was - **the absence of PRAYER** - we said that "if Joshua had remembered to **PRAY after the victory of Jericho** he wouldn't have had to **PLEAD after the defeat of Ai**"
- **the LAST** was - **the entrance of SIN** - here effected by this man Achan who **SAW** the treasures in Jericho, who **COVETED** and then who **TOOK** - a very classic three-fold sequence.

Ai - Traumatic - *NOT* Terminal

If you were to fully rehearse the events of Joshua 7, where Israel knew humiliating defeat, it would be fair enough to describe that particular episode as somewhat **TRAUMATIC** - that said, what we learn in this next chapter is that the events of Ai were ***NOT*** going to prove to be **TERMINAL** for Joshua 8 introduces us to **THE WAY BACK** and to **RECOVERING LOST GROUND**.

But let me ask a question at this point:

Q. How do you cope with FAILURE?

Perhaps you agree to undertake some new task in the church:

- and no-one thanks you
- no-one ever comes up to you and says "that was good" or "I enjoyed that"
- perhaps you have made a meal, it has taken you hours of cooking and baking things

And to your dismay one after another cancels with a lame excuse (or, worse still no excuse at all!)

Q. What do you do? Q. How do you respond?

- **MAYBE** you say - "**Never again!!**"
- **OR** you just conclude - "I'm no good at this" - and so you **slowly withdraw** from the **early discouragement**.
- **PERHAPS** you start to **lick your wounds** - your **rehearse** and **nurse** all **the painful things** that have formed a part of your overall experience.

I think there is no question that FAILURE or just PERCEIVED FAILURE (and sometimes it can be **just that**) are HARD PLACES TO RECOVER FROM, they can quite easily TAKE THEIR TOLL.

So as we work through this chapter, I hope that we will be able to see the various ways in which Israel, under God, learns to RECOVER LOST GROUND.

And what I think we'll see as an ongoing feature of this chapter, is that there are quite a number of NEW or FRESH things. #1 then:

#1 - A FRESH START

The people of Israel had been hurt once and so the idea of starting out again might have been a bit painful - perhaps some of them were resistant - they were still licking their wounds.

This passage shows us that God truly understands what it is like for us when we go through a time of FAILURE.

This is one of the lovely things about the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. Because He took on flesh and became one of us, He is truly able to **COMPREHEND & CONNECT WITH** the feelings that we have:

Hebrews 4 verses 15-16 "For we **do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses**, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

1) FEAR - "Do not be afraid..."

Notice the starting point there in **Verse 1**:

"Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid..."

It is very natural once you have FAILED, it is very much to be expected when you have been HURT in some way - to want to RECOIL with some measure of FEAR. As they say: "Once bitten twice shy!"

It's encouraging to know that God does not gloss over this and His first word to Joshua (and thus to the people as a whole) is: "Do not be afraid...". - our God is BOTH a CONQUEROR and a COMFORTER for the weak and fearful.

2) DISCOURAGEMENT - "Do not be discouraged..."

It might be that your greatest obstacle to move on after a SETBACK is *not* FEAR but rather it is DISCOURAGEMENT.

Example - my leading a service

I remember a time - probably 15 years ago now when I was getting used to leading services - but I remember one particular service and it just seemed to me that I was doing a terrible job and as the service progressed I felt more and more discouraged. To be honest I just wished a hole would open up and I could disappear into it. People's faces just seemed so lifeless and I really thought that it was all my fault.

Your experiences

Perhaps if you've **led a service** maybe you've had an experience a bit like that.

It could be in some other area - maybe you tried **leading a bible study** and it seemed like it was just "bombing!"

It might be an attempt you made to do **some evangelism** and you felt really uncomfortable and in your heart you were saying to yourself - "I don't think I'm going to try that again for a really long time" (which might have been code for perhaps never again!).

And God says there in that opening verse "Do not be discouraged...".

The verse goes onto say: "Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai."

Q. Did you ever wonder why God tells him to take everyone for this battle?

I suspect the answer might have a couple of aspects to it:

- FIRST God wants to counteract the attitude that played a part in their recent FAILURE - that of SELF-CONFIDENCE where they were saying - "We only need to take a few thousand soldiers..."

It is interesting to see that in Chapter 8 and Verse 25 it tells us that 12,000 men and women were killed from all the people of Ai and even if you divide that by 2 for the men that still is somewhat more than just 2-3,000.

So quite possibly this is God's corrective for their OVER-CONFIDENT manner.

It is quite the reverse of the policy God used with Gideon who would have dearly liked to have taken lots of Israelite soldiers into battle against the Midianites and so God does the reverse, He whittles them down from 32,000 to just 300!! Gideon was TIMID and needed to learn to trust more in God's great power and ability.

- SECOND - due to the new circumstances - that this is now a second attempt at conquering Ai - God allows them to take all the soldiers to give them that additional bit of COURAGE and REASSURANCE.

So this is a new beginning and perhaps this morning that is exactly what you need - A NEW BEGINNING.

If so - see from this that God is given the Israelites exactly that - a crisp and fresh NEW BEGINNING.

If you are fearful, if you are discouraged and feel as though you are down in the ditch - then draw strength from Verses 1 & 2 here. The end of the first verse is yet **one more help to them** - see what it says:

Verse 1b "For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land."

Q. Does this not seem somewhat reminiscent of what God told them before they headed out to fight again Jericho?

Joshua 6 verse 1 "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men."

God is reassuring them that He has reset their relationship and that all obstacles have truly been removed and they are once again at peace with God and can expect His full help & support.

The past tense "I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai..." is simply communicating to them that it is a "done deed" - it is as good as done.

So God is gracious and full of tender mercy. He picks them up and pulls them emotionally out of the ditch and sets them in motion again.

Q. Are you up and running again OR are you still a bit down in the ditch and just nursing your bruises?
We must get up and move on - as one writer put it (Alexander Whyte):

"The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings."

So #1 A Fresh Start - #2 now:

#2 - A FRESH STRATEGY

It does seem clear, when we look at how God chooses to work from one end of Scripture to the other, that He is *not* into mass production.

We do not have a "cookie cutter" God who simply rolls out the same strategy or technique time and time again. To be honest that seems to be much more the device and character of Satan who appears to only have a very few tools in his toolkit that he uses again and again.

Now change is a problem for a lot of us - we like to stay in our comfort zone and that tends to mean that we stick to doing what we've always done.

One very successful business leader said: "When you're through with change, you're through."

And this tends to happen with churches that over time just grow old and can no longer take on board anything new - and you know what happens to them - basically they decline and die.

Let me ask you:

Q. Having been defeated once, or perhaps discouraged in the past year - are you now in a place where you have basically just stuck (you are not moving forward any more, you are not taking onboard new ideas, making any fresh steps forward)?

If that is you, you're in a worse place than you might think!!

Change is very important in life:

- **too much change**, too rapidly is **DISCONCERTING** and often leads to **CHAOS**
- **too little change**, on the other hand, should be equally **DISCONCERTING**, because it leads to **BACKSLIDING** and **FOSSILIZATION!!**

Comparing Ai v2 against Jericho

It really is quite a mistake to SECOND GUESS God for He truly bakes fresh miracles every day.

If you compare the victory over Jericho against this one against Ai they could not be more different:

- **with Jericho** it was all done in **broad daylight** (all that walking around the city)
yet with Ai it was very much a **covert operation** with large numbers of troops moving at night and remaining hidden just out of plain sight.
- **with Jericho** the **army was all together** - they were all doing the same thing at the same time
however, with Ai everything was much more complex - **the army was split up** into at least 3 groups.
- **with Jericho** none of its fighting men **ever left the city**
with Ai, it was the complete reverse, **none of the soldiers remained in the city**, all of them were lured out.
- one last simple contrast - **with Jericho** you have to say that the victory was **thoroughly miraculous**
yet with Ai it was a **comprehensively mundane** victory

There are times when we have lost ground and God will say to us: "go back and do the things you did at first".

At other times when we have stopped moving forward, he will say: "get up break camp and keep moving, keep moving on."

You know a good man doesn't give up:

Psalm 37 verse 23-24 says this (NKJV): "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds him with His hand."

A fresh start, A fresh strategy - now #3:

#3 - A FRESH VICTORY

It is worth noticing that this battle here at Ai, which was really just a relatively small hill fortress, is in fact the most detailed battle in the whole conquest account that is this book of Joshua.

And so I don't want to go through it blow by blow but simply point out a few things that particularly stood out to me:

- **the FIRST** is that God is even goes as far as to make use of our FAILURES in constructing future SUCCESSES.

Recall how the people of Ai on the first time around came out and beat back the Israelite soldiers and were able to chase them and pursue them until they had killed 36 of them in that sad process.

Well here they are and that original sad fact that the Israelites would have been only too keen to bury - is now the very thing that God uses for their good!! Yes - nothing, even bad experiences - are wasted with God - He re-tools them for our ongoing benefit and good.

- **the NEXT** is what God tells Joshua to do there in Verse 18 - he says:

"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 his javelin toward Ai. 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."

Now that might not seem particularly significant - however when you read on a little further to Verse 25&26 maybe this will start ringing some bells, some echoes of another event:

"Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. **For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai.**"

Recall 40 years back when they had just had a Jericho-like victory at the Red Sea when the walls of the Red Sea had collapsed back and swallowed up every last person in the might Egyptian army.

Then just a matter of days later on Joshua is involved with a battle against an enemy group known as the Amalekites (who are a group somewhat symbolic in Scripture of SIN) and there Moses goes up the hill and prays with the rod of God held aloft and whilst that is held up then Joshua prevails but when it was lowered (because Moses arms grew weak) the Amalekites began to prevail.

It appears that this lesson of 40 years previous had lodged in Joshua's memory and he does not make the same mistake that Moses began to make. Fortunately Aaron and Hur were present with Moses and were able to sit him down and stand on each side of him holding up his arms until the victory down in the valley was secured.

Does that not teach you the importance of older Christians passing on the lessons of their failures onto younger Christians that they might learn from them.

So God does not WASTE our earlier FAILURES

and we too should not WASTE them by FAILING to pass them onto others that trail along in our footsteps.

Joshua feeling a little rebuked (re: earlier lack of prayer)?

You do wonder if Joshua - while he held out his javelin here was feeling somewhat rebuked for his earlier failure to be praying after the victory at Jericho.

Well as Henry Ford, the early car manufacturer said:

"Failure is just an opportunity to begin again - more intelligently!"

A **fresh start, strategy and victory** and now rounded off **#4** with:

#4 - A FRESH COMMITMENT

You know SETBACKS and coming to places where you realise that you have LOST GROUND - do not have to be just depressing.

Think of it this way - Q. When you have a falling out with your husband, your wife, your very close friend or colleague - what is the sweetest thing of all?

Is it not when you come to a place of MAKING UP - when you find that you are able to SAY SORRY, MAKE AMENDS and once again enjoy the fresh air of RECONCILIATION.

And that is what appears to happen next.

Joshua halts any more military steps and takes everyone 30 miles North to a place called Shechem.

Shechem

Now that name might not mean anything to you - but Shechem is actually the very first place to be named in Genesis in the Land of Canaan.

As soon as Abram comes into Palestine from Paddam-Aram in Genesis 12 this is what we read:

"Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him."

So Shechem was essentially the first place where Abram left his mark in the Promised Land.

Later on Jacob, Abram's grandson would live there for a while and now Joshua is coming here to build an altar of his own and to re-affirm the covenant.

Carrying out Moses' command

Now we should be clear, this is *not* Joshua's idea - in going to Shechem he is expediting something that Moses said needed to be done at this spot.

Now Shechem was a very historic and significant place but it was also located in a valley between two mountains - and they are mentioned here in Joshua 8 - they are Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim.

And apparently they form a very natural amphitheatre meaning that dividing up the people of Israel and positioning half on the slopes of one mountain and the other half on the other would mean that people would be able to hear words spoken in the middle.

3 things Joshua does

Now there are 4 things that Joshua is going to do here:

- **FIRST** he is going to **build an altar** - just like Abram did those 400 or so years previously.

It is going to be built on **Mount Ebal** because this is the mountain that is associated with **the curses**.

The only way that the curse of SIN can be dealt with is through sacrifice, ultimately the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This altar is going to be made just with field stones and no iron tool will be used on it and that is symbolizing the fact that no human contribution is fitting here - so that (as Ephesians puts it) "no man may boast".

(And by the way, it appears **archaeologically** that they have found this altar that was built some 3,000+ years ago.)

- **The SECOND thing** is that **curses and the blessings are going to be spoken out and responded to** with an AMEN - which means something along the lines of "it is true" or "so be it".
- **The THIRD thing** is that the Words of the Law are going to be **written down** for all to see and read.

How important it is that we the Word of God is never far out of our line of sight.

This is typically where we begin to go wrong when the Word of God is something that is no longer in our minds and on our lips.

- **The LAST thing** is that they are going to **bring offerings**:

There is the burnt offering - and that is one which speaks of total dedication - everything being given or dedicated to God.

The other offering is a fellowship offering - where those bringing this type of offering are able to actually participate in things. There is a fellowship meal as a part of things.

So taken together we have an act of dedication (or, as here re-dedication) and then an actual of communion or fellowship.

It is very reminiscent of what we do today with Baptism symbolizing that whole of life dedication and then the Lord's Supper as a fellowship meal - an act of communion with God and with each other.

Needed today also

To be honest there really couldn't be anything much more fitting for where the people of Israel were at at this point:

- There had been this dreadful SETBACK - Ai was a pretty TRAUMATIC experience BUT IT WAS NOT TERMINAL.
- As we came into this chapter - Israel was at that place of having to RECOVER LOST GROUND - and no it wasn't going to be 10 minute job!!

Yet now that they have put things right - what could be more fitting and helpful than a ceremony speaking of FRESH COMMITMENT.

Here at this historic place, they rebuild a historic altar.

They remind themselves of the great principle of obedience leading to blessing and disobedience leading to cursing.

They put the Word of God back in place right in front of their eyes.

And they seal it all with a dedication and a fellowship offering.

Q. So what about you this morning - had a recent setback? Q. Where do you find yourself - recovering lost ground?
Let's pray ... AMEN