



Joshua - Chapter Eight

II Joshua 6:1-12:24 - Taking the Land (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eight

The first attempt to defeat the city of Ai in Chapter 7 apparently proceeded without divine instruction, leaving Israel in the dark regarding its compromised standing brought about by Achan's disobedience. The resulting defeat was costly, as was the remedy made necessary by Achan's and Israel's offence.

The present episode recounts the successful defeat of Ai in response to explicit divine instructions, thus underscoring the importance of adherence to <<*the Word of the Lord*>> (v.8 and v.27), followed by a special ceremony near Shechem (vv.30-35). The passage goes into great detail for a small battle, probably to emphasise that success comes only from seeking the Lord and following his instructions.

II.c Joshua 8:1-35 - Israel's Renewal: Ai's Defeat

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.c.i Joshua 8:1-29 - Ai Captured by a Stratagem and Destroyed

The Israelites go up against the city of Ai under the instruction of God to set an ambush with the main body of troops out of sight of the men in the city who are to be drawn out to chase off a smaller group of Israelites as they had done before, while the main body move into the city behind them and destroy it by fire. The plan works for it is of God. The city is destroyed and Israelite claims the spoils.

¹ Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and go up now to Ai. See, I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city, and his land.'

Joshua 8:1

Do not fear or be dismayed recalls Joshua's charge in 1:9 and implies the assurance of the Lord's abiding presence. This was the first key to regaining victory. They had to receive encouragement from God. Despite breaking faith in the preceding chapter, Israel is now restored and given a second chance.

Although Israel stumbled through Achan's sin as shown in Chapter 7, they dealt with the failure and now had to move on. What is past is past. People must deal with it before God in repentance and dying to self, and then look forward to what he has for them right now. God wants his people to use their failures in a good way, to use them as a foundation for great victory in the Lord.

Take all the fighting men with you, and go up now to Ai. God was not despondent or depressed, and he did not want Joshua or the nation of Israel to be either. Now it was time to set about being victorious for the Lord, because he has not abandoned them.

² You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king; only its spoil and its livestock you may take as booty for yourselves. Set an ambush against the city, behind it.'

Joshua 8:2

Its spoil and its livestock you may take as booty for yourselves. God allows them to keep the spoil from the city of Ai. How foolish the sin of Achan seems now! He could have had all that his heart desired, if he had only waited on the Lord for it. God has the right to determine the nature and extent of destruction in any given instance. For example, the prescribed treatment of cities outside the land of Canaan is less severe (Deuteronomy 20:10-15) than that of cities within the land that Israel is to occupy (Deuteronomy 20:16-20). Compare also the total destruction of people and the taking of plunder in Deuteronomy 2:34-35 and 3:6-7. Permission to take spoil here is ironic, in view of Chapter 7; if only Achan could have waited!

Set an ambush. God gives Joshua a plan for conquering the city of Ai, and now he must follow it. When Christians need to regain the victory, they too must follow God's plan. Battles are sometimes won more by deceptive military strategy than by brute military strength, as is attested not only in the Bible but also in ancient Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman sources. Unlike the earlier case of Jericho, the divine instructions for the defeat of Ai depend less, if at all, on miraculous intervention than on clever strategy. The key in both instances is that the Lord's instructions are to be heeded.

³ So Joshua and all the fighting men set out to go up against Ai. Joshua chose thirty thousand warriors and sent them out by night ⁴ with the command, ‘You shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it; do not go very far from the city, but all of you stay alert.

Joshua 8:3-4

Joshua chose thirty thousand warriors. This time Joshua does not send three thousand men as before in Joshua 7:4. Now he sends thirty thousand mighty men of valour. When the church needs to regain victory, they must use every resource, and the best resources for that victory.

You shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it. Although God had given Joshua the general plan in v.2, he left it up to Joshua’s experience and sanctified common sense to lay out the specific plan of battle.

Thirty thousand warriors seem to some commentators to be a remarkably large number to lie in ambush. It is possible that the Hebrew word translated thousand should be understood in the alternative sense of a military unit. Further, the thirty thousand or ‘units’ may not all have been involved in the ambush (v.12).

⁵ I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. When they come out against us, as before, we shall flee from them. ⁶ They will come out after us until we have drawn them away from the city; for they will say, “They are fleeing from us, as before.” While we flee from them, ⁷ you shall rise up from the ambush and seize the city; for the Lord your God will give it into your hand. ⁸ And when you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire, doing as the Lord has ordered; see, I have commanded you.’ ⁹ So Joshua sent them out; and they went to the place of ambush, and lay between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai; but Joshua spent that night in the camp.

Joshua 8:5-9

When they come out against us, as before, we shall flee from them. The plan is for a smaller force to approach the city and then run away as they did at the time of the previous defeat. The men of Ai would give chase as before, emboldened by their previous victory. This would then allow the main force to rise up from the ambush and seize the city.

In contrast to the first attack on Ai, this time everything is done as the Lord has ordered. This phrase is translated <<*according to the word of the Lord*>> in v.27.

Joshua spent that night in the camp. Joshua was especially near his people during this crucial time of trying to regain victory. The people needed to know he was near, and they needed to follow his leadership. If Christians are to gain victory, they must live with and follow Jesus, who is their Joshua. He is always near to them at these crucial times in their Christian life, and always goes first to lead them into battle.

This is also an important point for those called to church leadership. They are not required to be involved in every aspect of the work but they must be seen to be at the forefront of prayer, mission and ministry, not just on the stage on a Sunday morning. Leadership tasks can be devolved but responsibility for leadership cannot.

¹⁰ In the morning Joshua rose early and mustered the people, and went up, with the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. ¹¹ All the fighting men who were with him went up, and drew near before the city, and camped on the north side of Ai, with a ravine between them and Ai. ¹² Taking about five thousand men, he set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. ¹³ So they stationed the forces, the main encampment that was north of the city and its rearguard west of the city. But Joshua spent that night in the valley. ¹⁴ When the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the inhabitants of the city, hurried out early in the morning to the meeting-place facing the Arabah to meet Israel in battle; but he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. ¹⁵ And Joshua and all Israel made a pretence of being beaten before them, and fled in the direction of the wilderness. ¹⁶ So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were drawn away from the city. ¹⁷ There was not a man left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel; they left the city open, and pursued Israel.

Joshua 8:10-17

All the fighting men who were with him went up, and drew near before the city. If Israel will regain victory, they must take the offensive. They do not wait for Ai to bring the battle to them, bring the battle to Ai. The battle against sin is often seen purely in negative terms - about what not to do. However, those who are the church must also take the offensive against the powers of darkness and temptation, and do what the Lord would have them do.

Perhaps the five thousand men, or five military units, set in ambush represent a subset of the force mentioned in vv.3-4, and the other twenty five thousand or

military units constitute the main attack force. This would then help to explain why the king of Ai falls for the ruse. Israel appears to be attempting the same direct approach of Chapter 7, but with more than eight times as many troops.

When the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the inhabitants of the city, hurried out early in the morning to the meeting-place facing the Arabah to meet Israel in battle. The men of Ai tried the exact same strategy against Israel as before. Generally, Satan will stick with a strategy against the church until it does not work anymore.

Joshua and all Israel made a pretence of being beaten before them, and fled in the direction of the wilderness. God directed Joshua to use a completely different strategy against Ai. When the diversity of God's methods are seen, it can be more easily remembered that it is because he is a personal God.

¹⁸ Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Stretch out the sword that is in your hand towards Ai; for I will give it into your hand.' And Joshua stretched out the sword that was in his hand towards the city. ¹⁹ As soon as he stretched out his hand, the troops in ambush rose quickly out of their place and rushed forward. They entered the city, took it, and at once set the city on fire. ²⁰ So when the men of Ai looked back, the smoke of the city was rising to the sky. They had no power to flee this way or that, for the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers. ²¹ When Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that the smoke of the city was rising, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai. ²² And the others came out from the city against them; so they were surrounded by Israelites, some on one side, and some on the other; and Israel struck them down until no one was left who survived or escaped. ²³ But the king of Ai was taken alive and brought to Joshua.

Joshua 8:18-23

Reminiscent of Moses' wielding the staff of God in his hand in Israel's wilderness battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:9), and earlier at the division of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16), Joshua is instructed by the Lord to stretch out the sword that is in your hand towards Ai. Perhaps serving as a signal to the troops in ambush to arise and attack the city, this action more importantly symbolises the Lord's giving the city into Joshua's hand.

Israel struck them down until no one was left who survived or escaped. The victory and God's judgement is complete. Because of God's faithfulness to Israel and Israel's faithfulness to God, this is not a halfway victory. The stratagem

succeeds, the city is set ablaze, and the soldiers of Ai have no power, literally 'hands' in Hebrew, to flee this way or that.

²⁴ When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. ²⁵ The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand – all the people of Ai. ²⁶ For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. ²⁷ Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their booty, according to the word of the Lord that he had issued to Joshua. ²⁸ So Joshua burned Ai, and made it for ever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. ²⁹ And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree, threw it down at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.

Joshua 8:24-29

The defeated city of Ai is left as a heap of ruins, and its king, after being hanged on a tree, signifying he was under a curse (Deuteronomy 21:22-23), is buried beneath a great heap of stones. Both heaps, different words in Hebrew, remain to this day; that is, to the time of the text's composition. If the great heap of stones over Achan in Joshua 7:26 was a monument to Israel's breaking faith, the present great heap of stones over the king of Ai is a monument to Israel's second chance and restoration. Refer to the comment made on Joshua 4:20 regarding heaps of stones as monuments.

If Israel will regain victory, they must show no mercy to their enemy, but crush the enemy completely at every opportunity. The key points for victory from this chapter are:

- Be encouraged.
- Follow the Lord's plan.
- Use every resource, and the best resources.
- Live with and look to Jesus.
- Go on the offensive.
- Show no mercy to your enemy.

Although the final point is valid in this context, the teaching of Jesus cannot be ignored: *<<But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who*

persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous>> (Matthew 5:44-45).

So far, Israel's experience is an illustration of their whole history, and the spiritual history of many Christians:

- Obedience followed by victory.
- Victory followed by blessing.
- Blessing followed by pride and disobedience.
- Disobedience followed by defeat.
- Defeat followed by judgement.
- Judgement followed by repentance.
- Repentance followed by obedience.
- Obedience followed by victory, and the cycle continues.

II.c.ii. Joshua 8:30-35 - Joshua Renews the Covenant

Joshua carefully fulfils the command that Moses had given in Deuteronomy 27:1-8 by building an altar on Mount Ebal and writing the law upon it. Then, with half the Israelites on Mount Ebal and half on neighbouring Mount Gerizim, the specified blessings and curses of the covenant with God are read out to the entire nation.

³⁰ Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, ³¹ just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, 'an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used'; and they offered on it burnt-offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed offerings of well-being. ³² And there, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. ³³ All Israel, alien as well as citizen, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark in front of the levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel.

Joshua 8:30-33

Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord. This is in fulfilment of Deuteronomy Chapters 27-28. There, the Lord told Israel, when they came to the Promised Land, to come to these two mountains, build an altar, sacrifice to the Lord, and read the law. This is precisely what Joshua did.

They offered on it burnt-offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed offerings of well-being. This is an appropriate act of worship, and consecration unto God, following a great victory. God always should get the glory. Even when men looked at the altar, they would not see elaborate carvings which, although beautiful, would naturally draw attention to man's work for this was an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used.

Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, thereby creating a fourth stone monument in the land; refer again to the comment made on Joshua 4:20. This monument was to be a reminder of Israel's duty to live in obedience to the divine Torah or instruction (Joshua 1:7-8). In this act of obedience Joshua is seen as a man of the Book, obeying the command of Joshua 1:8. Israel is also seen as a people of the Book ordering their lives after God's Word.

The mention of the alien as well as native born citizen among those assembled at Shechem may hint that some Shechemites voluntarily joined Israel. However, it seems more likely to be a reference to the mixed crowd who exited Egypt with the Israelites in Exodus 12:38, as well as the family of Rahab who had joined them at Jericho. A key point is that the ark was at the centre of it all, representing the presence of God in this covenant renewal.

Mount Ebal, along with its counterpart Mount Gerizim (Deuteronomy 11:29), is about 20 miles or 32 km north of Ai, near Shechem, a city with long-standing ties to the ancestors of Israel, beginning with Abraham (Genesis 12:6-7), and also Jacob in Genesis 33:18-20 and 34:1-31. These associations may help to explain the curious fact that Israel is able to hold a covenant renewal in Shechem, apparently without having to capture it first. This was even at a cost or inconvenience for the distance from Ai to Mounts Ebal and Gerizim was a long way to move all the tribes of Israel.



This was a beautiful place to do this, and the whole nation could hear this reading of the Law. The area has a natural amphitheatre effect because of the contour of the hills. This event, at this place, shows that Israel controls the middle of Canaan and the highlands. The rest is a matter of taking advantage of this strategic position.



The map shows the location of Shechem and the distribution of the twelve tribes on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal.

³⁴ And afterwards he read all the words of the law, blessings and curses, according to all that is written in the book of the law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them.

Joshua 8:34-35

Included in the blessings and curses sections of Deuteronomy Chapter 28 are statements of the Lord's intent to set the people of Israel <<**high above all the nations of the earth**>> or 'land,' Hebrew *'erets*, (Deuteronomy 28:1), and to <<**cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you**>> (Deuteronomy 28:7). If the Canaanite kings in Joshua's day heard that these and similar words were read during the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, this would certainly have contributed to their alarm.