

Welcome Back!

Joshua 8:1-2

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, March 26th 2023

I. Introduction

It is *so* good to be back in the pulpit after being sick for so long. And given that, Gary thought the title of the sermon was pretty funny - "Welcome Back!" And I *do* feel very welcomed back by you all. It's been a joy to fellowship with you. But that's not what the sermon is about.

This sermon is dealing with a nation that was completely *out* of God's favor being welcomed back *into* God's favor. It is a chapter that shows a complete reversal of the horrible things that happened in chapter 7. It's a glorious but short paragraph.

As you know, in chapter 7 there was sin in the camp, and the sin of one man caused the defeat of the army and the death of 36 soldiers. In verse 13 of chapter 7 God said, "There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you." That was God's response to Joshua's earlier devastation in verses 6-9. He felt so discouraged that he wanted to give up and go back across the Jordan River. Let me read verses 6-9 of chapter 7.

Josh. 7:6 Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, "Alas, Lord GOD, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all — to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Oh, that we had been content, and dwelt on the other side of the Jordan! 8 O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies? 9 For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will You do for Your great name?"

Many times this is our reaction when we are out of fellowship with God or out of fellowship with each other. We are down and discouraged. And sadly, many never know how to climb out of that slump. Even though the person has confessed their sin and been restored, he or she feels like they have lost face, lost respect and won't be at the same level of trust and love as before. So they have an insecurity about their relationship with others. This may be true of two individuals who had a falling out, or it may be true of a man or woman who was under church discipline and has been restored to the church. They wonder if there is a future for them. And that feeling is sometimes made worse by the reactions of those to whom they are supposedly reconciled. The person who is excommunicated repents and is forgiven and comes back into the church, but the other members don't know quite how to relate to them. They don't want to make the person feel bad by talking about past events, but for fear of making a social blunder, they avoid the poor penitent. And he feels shunned. He feels like a pariah. And after a couple months of slouching around and feeling bad, and

feeling like he doesn't fit in, that person goes off and joins another church where he can have a fresh start. That's not good. And yet it happens in many churches.

Jay Adams points out in his book on church discipline how that should never be the case. Any time a person comes back into the church, the church should talk through the issue with the members, put on a banquet feast and welcome the brother as a full class citizen without making him feel like he is a leper. You do everything that you can to make them realize that life is now back to normal, and perhaps even *stronger* than it was before. Like the prodigal son you welcome the person back.

Well, God models what true reconciliation should look like in this passage. It isn't half-hearted. Israel doesn't have to now prove themselves before God will welcome them back. God gives them every assurance that they *are* welcome and will be powerfully used - *immediately*. And that is so encouraging to me. Let's look at several welcomes that we see in this passage (at least implicitly).

II. Welcome Back to Confidence (v. 1a)

First, God says in effect, "Welcome back to confidence." Look at verse 1.

Then the LORD said to Joshua: "Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed."

Those are astonishing words when you see how seriously God took the sin of Achan. Look again at chapter 7:12. It says,

Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you.

Things had been so serious that God told Joshua that Israel would be defeated, fearful, doomed to destruction and abandoned by God. You can't get much worse than that. And yet the *moment* there was repentance and a quick dealing with sin, God's words were, "Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed."

It does not matter how deeply you have fallen into any sin of the flesh. If you will humble yourself before God and man by confessing it and turning from it (as they did in chapter 7), you will find full and complete restoration to the Lord. Amen? It's a beautiful message.

Our security is not in how perfect we are anyway, is it? When the crucified robber confessed his sin at the cross and received the cleansing of Christ's blood, he was just as secure as the gossip who casts his or her sin at the cross and receives Christ's cleansing. And, by the way, he needs to be just as secure in the church. Ephesians 4:32 says, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *just as God in Christ also forgave you.*" That "just as" language shows that God is modeling restoration. If God says "Welcome back to confidence with Me" we need to say "Welcome back to confidence with church." Right? Go out of your way to be welcoming.

III. Welcome Back To The Joy of Being Useful Servants (v. 1b)

Secondly, welcome the person back to the joy of being useful as servants of the Most High God. Verse 1 goes on to say, “take all the people of war with you, and arise, go up to Ai.” This is in such stark contrast to what God said to the Jews 40 years before where he put them on a shelf and said that they were not useful to Him. Why were they not useful to Him? Because they didn’t repent. Back then He told them, “Do not go up, lest you be defeated by your enemies, for the LORD is not among you.” Those are words I don’t want to ever have the Lord say about me - that the Lord is not with me.

Without God’s presence those Israelites were useless. With God’s presence they were useful. We are useful to God not because God needs us. Nothing could be further from the truth. God doesn’t need any contribution we might make. Did God need Israel when He conquered Jericho? No. But God delights in making us useful, and significant, and a part of advancing His kingdom. Did God need the Israelites in taking Ai? No. He could have toasted Ai on His own like He did Sodom and Gomorrah. It would have been easy for God to do that. But God wants His people to be significant. And how does God do that? *By His grace. We are made to be useful by His grace alone.*

And notice its not just about Joshua. God involves *all* the army because He wants *all* the army to have the joy of being useful to Him. I don’t know about you, but I want my life to count for eternity. I want it to be useful. And I know the only way it can be useful is if God’s blessing, presence and power rests upon me. And that means that I need to be dealing with my sins and always looking to His grace. And by the way, don’t think of preaching as the only thing that is ministry to God. Their soldiering was ministry to God. Their administration was ministry to God. But back to the main point- No matter how deep your sin may be, you can be useful if you have repented of the sin and destroyed it.

You can be useful to God even after you have committed adultery, and repented of it. You can be useful to God as a former liar - emphasis on *former*, right? Your integrity and respect can only be re-established on God’s grace, not on your past. You can be useful to God and to the church no matter where you have been or what you have done. But the converse is also true, that you have no usefulness whatsoever (no matter how many gifts you may have) if you don’t repent of your sins; if you hold on to them because of fear, pride or carelessness. Believe me, it is worthwhile to repent and do the works of chapter 7. God says, “Welcome back to confidence.” Second, He says, “Welcome back to usefulness.”

IV. Welcome Back to Living By Faith in God’s Promises (v. 1c)

Thirdly, He says, “Welcome back to living by faith in God’s Promises.” What’s the first thing to come out of God’s mouth after giving assurance and giving a task? It is to make a promise that requires faith. All of God’s promises require faith. Verse 1, second sentence. “See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land.” Do they see any difference right now in Ai? No. The bodies may have been still strewn over the ground - unless they had recovered them. The city is still as secure as ever. But God calls them once

again to live by faith instead of by sight. And what a joy it is to once again start walking by faith.

In chapter 7:3 you don't see faith. You see confidence in what *men* can do, not in what *God* can do *through* men. They said, "Sure, no problem. We can take this city. Don't send everybody up. Only send up 2-3000 soldiers." They had confidence, but not faith. There is a big difference between self-confidence and faith. And without God's blessing you will automatically start living by sight and by confidence in what you can do rather than by faith or confidence in what God can do. I don't know how many times I have slipped from living in the joy of walking by faith in what God has promised to simply walking in terms of what is realistic. I'll confess that I sometimes struggle to live by faith and have to correct myself. And you have perhaps sensed the same thing in your own lives. So there is a very real sense in which God can say to these forgiven Christians, "Welcome back to living by faith in God's promise." What difference does it make to live by faith in the promises of God?

In my own life, living by God's promises for our future has brought profound joy and expectation. Becoming a Postmillennialist back in College was almost like a Second Blessing. We don't believe in the second blessing that Pentecostals talk about. We believe in a second, third, fourth, and continued blessings in our lives, right? But what a revolution God's promises brought concerning our future! It revolutionized how I thought, acted, studied, and worked. I now knew that my labors in the Lord were not in vain. It doesn't matter if I lose my money, my house, my family or even my own life. I have the joy of knowing I am contributing to the triumphant, guaranteed extension of Christ's kingdom. Such faith has helped me to avoid discouragement, depression, and doubts that could come from the criticisms of the world or the lack of immediate success.

But what happens when you rebel against God? You can immediately lose that sense. You begin to be cynical. You begin to even be cynical of other people's expressions of faith. You operate from duty rather than from joy. It's only a whole hearted, complete, unconditional restoration to the Lord that renews the joy of walking by faith in God's promises.

Why do people opt not to do that? I don't know all the reasons, but here's a couple possibilities. It is more comfortable to do what you can understand and what you think you can achieve than to do things God's way. And our tendency is to opt for comfort. So that could be one reason.

Secondly, it is unnerving to not have things under your control. It's unnerving. One of the issues in Joshua 7 was the thought that they had Ai under control and figured out. God had to show them that this was not the case. But nevertheless, how ever many times God may show us that we don't have things in control, we are tempted to still think that we do. Trusting God requires flexibility and a willingness to change.

God has provided for our family sometimes in miraculous ways, but more often than not, through the ordinary means of hard work. And we see the same kinds of differences between Jericho and Ai. These people wanted a miracle from God like at Jericho. God taught them that they needed to be prepared for either approach in His good timing. And the bottom line is that when you know that God is pleased with you, banking on His promises takes on a whole new meaning. When we are dealing with people who have blown it in the

past, let's be quick to encourage them with this point. "Welcome back to living by faith." But it is only when you are right with God that you have the security to do so.

V. Welcome Back to Stewardship (v. 2a)

Fourth, welcome back to stewardship. What was the issue in chapter 7? Achan did not act as a steward. He kept back something that God wanted for Himself. Chapter 7 demonstrated the principle that everything belongs to God, and that He has the right to dictate when, where, and if we will enjoy His good things. When we abandon stewardship and try to hold things for ourselves, steal things, control things, we lose the joy of those things. So God welcomes Israel back to the joy of stewardship. Stewardship has two sides.

First, it involves an acknowledgement that God can keep away from us anything that He chooses. Verse 2 begins: "And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king." God wouldn't let them have just anything they chose. That would have been a cool city to inhabit, with lots of cool buildings, water supply, public squares, etc. that would have been cool to use, but God had them bury it. And He had them destroy other things.

But second, stewardship also involves what He *allows* us to use. Verse 2 goes on: "Only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves." At Jericho God tested them by not allowing them to take any booty or spoil. Achan failed to pass that test of stewardship. But when you have a steward's heart, and you have devoted your house and everything you have to be used by God in any way He sees fit, there is such an excitement in seeing God use it. And God loves to bless you with more.

How do you tell if you've got a steward's heart? For me it is by my *reaction* when God takes things and gives things. When God took away Job's children and all his wealth, Job said, "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." That's a steward's heart. I love the prayer of Saint Ignatius. He prayed (and I have prayed this prayer as well - especially with regard to my recent memory loss) many many times. Ignatius said,

"Take, Lord, and receive, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me. To You, O Lord, I return it. All is yours. Dispose of it wholly according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is sufficient for me."

I'll admit that I sometimes get a little choked up when I read that quote because it gives God my memory. God has chosen to take away my memory in the last few months. And a couple weeks ago the neurologist said that there is nothing permanently wrong with my brain. He is convinced it is the result of viral inflammation, and the office said that this is happening to a lot of people who get Covid. He thinks it will come back in weeks or months. But whatever the case, my memory belongs to God, not to me. And I gladly tell the Lord, "Dispose of my memory according to your will. Dispose of my wealth, according to your will. Dispose of everything I have. It is all yours." That's a steward's heart. But I can have a steward's heart that says that because I trust God to do right. He doesn't need me. He doesn't need my memory. And if I can better glorify Him with less than with more, I want

His glory. When you are right with God it is a joy to be a steward. When you are not right, you want to take it all back.

Let's make this personal. Does God have the right to take away your children in a car accident today? He does. Does he have the right to take away your wife, your house, your retirement savings? He does. And we have to have a willingness to give all to God and to relate to all as if it belonged to God or we will not have the same joy in those things. What does Mark 10 promise? That there is no one who has given up brothers and sisters and husbands and wives and houses and lands for my sake and the Gospels who shall not receive the same things back one hundred fold. *One hundred fold!* That's incredible. But you see, He can trust stewards with more. He tested Job's stewardship heart, and Job passed the test. And God gave Job more.

There is a joy in stewardship. By giving up all to God we end up having far more. But those who selfishly seek to be first will be put last by the Lord. He says, "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). And so God says, welcome back to stewardship. Now that Israel had passed the test (and it was a test), God tells them that He can trust them with booty. He can trust them with victory, fame, and riches. So the principle is just the same in Ai as it was in Jericho. God wanted Israel to relate to things the way *He* told them to relate to things. And when you are right with the Lord, you want to do that anyway. You love stewardship. You believe that stewardship truly is a principle of life that works. So you are delighted to be welcomed back as a steward of God's kingdom.

VI. Welcome Back to a Life of Fulfillment (v. 2b)

Fifth, God in effect says, "Welcome back to a life of fulfillment." I find it so ironic that God gives these Israelites in verse 2 the very thing that Achan tried to steal. If he had just waited, he would probably have had all the silver and gold and fine clothes that he wanted. Second sentence in verse 2: "...its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves."

Our God is a generous God. Isn't He? We can never outgive the Lord. No matter how much we may be deprived or deprive ourselves, God will pour back more. When God tells us to take up our cross, to deny ourselves and follow Him, He is not calling us to a lifetime of misery and depression. On the contrary, the same Christ who said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24), also said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Not *less* abundantly. It is the paradox that when you seek your own life, you lose it, but when you lose your life *for God* you gain it.

If God has been convicting you about something you are not relinquishing to Him, put Him to the test. Give it all to Him and see if He does not enable you to find far more fulfillment than when you selfishly related to that person or object. God's purpose for our life is fulfillment in Him; joy heaped up, shaken down and running over. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Achan failed that lesson. These Israelites gained from it. Welcome back to fulfillment in life. Solomon after many years of vanity and emptiness was welcomed back by God to a life of fulfillment. And

he didn't find it in *things* like Achan was trying to do. He found it in serving God. And actually, what is weird about Achan is that he couldn't enjoy the things he had stolen. He had to hide them.

VII. Welcome Back to the Joy of Being Instructed (v. 2ff)

Sixth, welcome back to the joy of being instructed. God gives a whole series of instructions in this chapter of what they should and shouldn't do. Because they were walking rightly with God, they saw the relevance of the instructions; they rejoiced in the instructions. They didn't bristle or react negatively. But that isn't the case when you are out of fellowship with God. When you are out of fellowship with God, Bible Study no longer has the same joy. Devotions are no longer appealing. And when someone like Joshua outlines God's laws on some issue, they can seem so legalistic, dry and meaningless to us.

You know, during that time when David covered over his sin with Bathsheba, the Psalms tell us that he didn't have much fun. He wasn't interested in the Word. His heart was dry. But after repenting and being cleansed from his sin he could say, "Oh how I love your law. I meditate on it day and night" (Psalm 119:97). He said, "Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O LORD, and teach out of Your law" (Psalm 94:12). To the righteous God says, "Welcome back to My instruction." But (in contrast) Psalm 50:16-17 says,

But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to declare My statutes, or take my covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?'

There is a joy in instruction that only the penitent can understand. In other words, there is a logical order in all of these points.

VIII. Welcome Back to the Joy of Obedience (vv. 3f)

Seventh, welcome back to the joy of obedience. This whole chapter describes how they obeyed God in all the details. And it wasn't all comfortable obedience. Verse 3 says,

"So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night."

They had to silently climb up the mountain undetected at night and stay there undetected until the next morning. This meant sleep loss, cramped bodies, danger, bugs, no tent, cold. But they did it. Verse 5 speaks of exposing themselves to arrows as they pretended to flee in a false retreat. That was dangerous. Verse 8 speaks of torching many valuable buildings and artifacts in the city. But they obeyed. Verse 9 speaks of the 30,000 being separated from Joshua and the security of his leadership. But they obeyed. Verse 13 speaks of a sleepless night for Joshua, but he obeyed. Verses 24-25 called for the killing of all men and women - something not too appealing. But they obeyed. Verse 28 spoke of the hard work of burying the city with dirt - making it a huge heap. But they obeyed. The whole chapter called them to renewed obedience.

Obedience may not be easy, but when you are right with God, it is joyful. Romans 8:29 says that the purpose of God's salvation is to conform us to Christ so that we can serve Him. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." Titus 2:14 gave this as the purpose of Christ's coming: "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works." Purified from sin and zealous for good works. Zealous for good works. That's God's purpose in your life, and when you have been restored to Him, that zeal and that joy of obedience is restored. Welcome back to obedience.

I think by now you are beginning to recognize that the affliction of chapter 7 was worthwhile - *totally* worthwhile. It produced all kinds of benefits in their lives. God brought blessing even out of defeat. All things work together for our good. What did David say?

Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word... It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.

So God welcomed them back to confidence, to the joy of being useful, to living by faith, to stewardship, a life of fulfillment, to the joy of being instructed, to the joy of obedience and finally, He welcomed them back to renewed victory.

IX. Welcome Back to Victory

In chapter 7 He guaranteed them defeat after defeat until they would be willing to remove the accursed thing from their midst. He *guaranteed* their defeat. Here He *guarantees* their victory and they experience victory. It is truly a glorious thing to be reconciled to God.

And yet, I can almost guarantee that there will be some of you who will look at these eight benefits, and yet because of pride, or fear, or some other thing will refuse to confess your sin to man or to God. And you would rather have a life of defeat and rejection than to enter into the joy of walking in the Spirit. If you are tares and not wheat; if you are fake believers and not true believers you will ultimately choose to suffer in hell in the future rather than to suffer the shame of confession now. For tares, the pain of confession now is worse than the thought of a distant hell.

But sadly, there are even true believers who would rather risk God's future discipline and possible exposure than to *voluntarily* expose their sin and receive these eight blessings now. I don't understand it, but I know it happens. I know it has happened in my life. On one occasion I suffered two years of absolute misery before I was willing to confess my sin, pay restitution and get right with man. It took that long before the Lord humbled me sufficiently so that I was willing to confess to my highschool where I had cheated on a high school math exam and offered to retake the exam, and I confessed to my boarding school where I had stolen potatoes because I was hungry, and I paid them restitution. But once I did so, I had such joy, such victory, such satisfaction in each of these areas that I was astonished it had taken me so long. I endured far more pain by being slow than by confessing immediately. I don't understand the irrationality of my own heart or of my own sin. But I know it is there, and it is probably in at least some of your lives.

I can't play the Holy Spirit. All I can do is tell you that God's Word promises that if you will confess your sins; clearing them up with God and with man, that you will enter into revival of heart and victory of life. God will say, "Welcome." And your fears of rejection from man are probably overblown anyway. *We* are committed to saying, "Welcome" to you as well. Find blessing. Do not seek the path of Achan.

But there are those who end up treading Achan's path so long that God says, "I'm done with them on earth. They have sinned the sin unto death and I am now going to take them to heaven." And many Scriptures testify to this physical death that God brings into the lives of unrepentant believers - *true* believers. Many in Corinth were sick and many had died simply because they refused to sanctify themselves and mortify their sins. They finally crossed a point of no return and their sin was now unto physical death. 1 John 5:16 says, "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death." In other words, there are many sins in a congregation where my prayers can spare that person from judgment. But he goes on and says,

There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

Only God knows when a Christian has stepped over the bounds and will be brought to death. This is different than the unpardonable sin. God says that this is a brother. He is saved. But he says that there are true Christians who would rather risk all *that* than to face a present blow to their pride. May none of us be in that camp. Rather, may we be of those who respond to God's Word by saying, "We will pick up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow You, because where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. In You is fulness of life; in Your presence is joy."

So the bottom line is that Chapter 7 gives us the negative motivations to repent of sin and be restored. Chapter 8 gives the positive motivations: God's blessings. It is my prayer that each of you would enter fully into the blessings of this chapter. Amen.