

Hearing the Right Message in Defeat
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Many years ago I worked in a music store, and there was a guy who worked in the repair shop named Buddy who happened to be a very good mandolin player. Buddy had his own bluegrass band and really loved bluegrass. And he wanted all of us to love bluegrass! Every chance he got he'd switch the music from Steely Dan or Al Dimeola to some bluegrass band. He'd say to me, "you got to hear this song..." and I'd listen but it sounded like every other bluegrass song I've ever heard. No offense if you're into bluegrass music, but it's one type music I really don't enjoy. Anyway, Buddy had an amazing story. Years earlier he had been playing at a bluegrass festival when a thunderstorm rolled in. Everyone was running for shelter, and as Buddy was trying to get to shelter he was hit by lightning! True story. Miraculously he survived, and he said he knew God spared his life for a bigger purpose...to spread the love of bluegrass music everywhere he went.

I always had this feeling that God went to extraordinary lengths to get Buddy's attention...but Buddy walked away with the wrong message. I think the message God wanted him to get was Jesus, but he heard that message as "bluegrass".

In Joshua 7 God hit Israel with a lightning bolt and it definitely got their attention! The people of God, the army of the Almighty, the ones who conquered in the Name of Yahweh were crushed and humiliated by a small, weak city named Ai. 36 Jewish soldiers were killed, the rest of them running for their lives. It was a devastating defeat. Even worse, they knew once word of their defeat got out to the surrounding nations, they'd be emboldened to join forces and wipe Israel off the face of the earth. Israel got hit by lightning at Ai and it got their attention! But what message did God mean for them to hear?

Everyone of us will encounter our own Ai's as we go through life; defeats, failures, disappointments, mistakes, Ai's come in many different forms. Some defeats can feel like a direct lightning

strike, leaving us with 3rd degree burns, and wondering what message am I supposed to get from this?

We might walk away thinking the message is, "don't ever try that again!" We interpret failure as a stop sign telling us to go in a different direction. Our choices get very limited as we spend more time avoiding failure than pursuing God's will.

Or we may take home the opposite message, "I'm going to try harder and get it right this time!" We adopt an *If at first you don't succeed, try, try again* approach. This is a better message than the message of giving up, but God has a better messages for us to hear when we encounter defeat and failure.

Message #1 – Get things right with God (chapter 7)

In chapter 7 we see that Israel's root problem wasn't lack of effort. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" wasn't going to cut it. It's possible to try, try again and fail, fail again because there's something's wrong that needs to be made right. Something's hidden that needs to be brought into the light.

In this case, Achan had hidden forbidden things in his tent. If there's sin hidden in our tent, all the try, try agains won't get a different result. God wants us to walk in the light. We looked at this last week, but it's important enough for us to look at it a little more.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:5-7

Walking in the light doesn't mean never sinning, it means not hiding our sin under our tent. It means allowing the light of the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and our lives and reveal any wicked way. Failures and defeats don't necessarily mean there's sin hidden in the tent, but it's something we always should be

open to, especially when we see a reoccurrence of the same failures and defeats.

Let me use relationships as an example. The gospel is all about relationships: Jesus restoring our relationship with God, and with each other. But relationships are often messy and carry the risk of failure, defeat, and pain. After a couple failures and painful defeats we can be tempted to stop trying. I'm done with relationships, it's not worth it. The message we think we hear is God saying don't try that again.

I remember many years ago having a debate with a brother in the Lord, and at one point he said that I had a habit when we argued of attacking him personally by making demeaning remarks about him in the context of the debate. I said, "I don't do that. You just say that cause you're an idiot." Over the years I've come to see that is a sinful trend in my heart. When my pride feels threatened, my flesh wants to attack the other person. The problem wasn't the content of the debate, or the other person.

Junk hidden in the tent of my heart.

That may not be where you struggle relationally but we all have sinful relational tendencies hidden in our tents – crud in our hearts that we bring into our relationships. It may not be fight, it may be flight. It may be gossip, saying behind their back what you would never say to their face. You might tend towards being controlling. It may be the tendency to interpret people through a filter of insecurity (what did they mean by that?) or self-righteousness (thank God I'm not like that sinner over there). Whatever it is, the failures we encounter relationally may mean there's something hidden in the tent and God's message is, bring it into the light, confess it, turn from it. I will forgive you and begin to change you. Get it right with God, walk in the light. That's the message from chapter 7.

Message #2 – Listen to God's word

Let's read **vv. 1-8,10-17, 21-23**

Once Israel got things right and dealt with the Achan problem, Joshua had a choice to make. Would he lick his wounds, mope around in self-pity, blame God, and give up? Or would he assume that everything was a go to attack Ai again? Joshua did neither. He went back to God and said, "ok Lord, what are you saying to us?"

There is no formula to tell us what to do. Sometimes failure may be an indication we need to move on, try something different. Sometimes failure is an instructor teaching us how to do it better next time. Sometimes failure means there's something wrong. We don't need to hear from failure, we need to hear from God. For us, primarily that means hearing this word, the Bible. Rom. 10 says faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. God can and does speak to us personally by the Holy Spirit – I believe that, I've heard His voice – but that internal subjective word must always be anchored in and submitted to the authority of the objective word of God, the Bible. I want to point out three basic words God gives Joshua that apply to us today.

1. God speaks a word of faith

In vv. 1-2 God basically says, go for it, I am with you and I have given the city into your hands. Listen, if you're coming off your own Ai where you failed big time, I don't know if God is telling you go for it again or move on to something else. The point is, don't let failure and defeat be the thing you're listening to, get the message from God. Don't build a wall around yourself to protect you from the outside getting in. Don't live your life in regret, wishing things had been different. Don't let failure be the thing that determines where you go and what you do. Let God's word be what guides your steps.

God's word will speak a word of faith to you, no matter what the specifics. His promises to us in Christ are yea and amen – meaning God is always for us and moving us in a faith-filled, positive direction. If Jesus is your Savior then you belong to him and he belongs to you. He is with you always.

I have friends who many years ago felt called to plant a church in Boston. They were there for quite a few years and worked hard, but nothing they did seemed to grow their church more than a couple dozen. They would say, "we went to do a work in Boston and Boston did a work on us." One day Phil felt the Lord say it was time to close down the church. Phil answered, "I'm not a quitter Lord." The Lord answered, "I didn't say quit. I said stop." God doesn't say "quit", give up, run away, don't take anymore risks. Those would be the wrong messages from defeat. He may say try again or He may say stop, but always with a sense of positive faith that He is with us and leading us and has good things in store for us. God speaks a word of faith. But that's not all He says...

2. God says go for it again...only this time be wiser

God gives Joshua a wise strategy for taking the city, splitting the army into two groups sending 5000 soldiers into hiding behind the city, and the rest gather at Ai's front door, challenging them to come out and fight.

But the wisdom of the plan doesn't stop there. As Ai comes to fight, Joshua –still following the Lord's instructions – tells the men to fight just enough to be convincing when they begin to fall back and flee. Ai, overconfident from their first victory, calls all their fighting men to join them as they pursue Israel, purportedly to finish them off. Drawn away from the city, the waiting soldiers enter the city and destroy it, setting it on fire. And now the army of Ai is surrounded front and back by Israel's soldiers and Ai is devastated. God said, "I'll give it" and then says, "only... be wiser this time."

One of the treasures contained in God's word is wisdom. Faith and wisdom go together. God could have said, "it doesn't matter how you fight Ai, I'm going to give it to you." But He didn't, he laid out an incredibly wise strategy. Joshua was just following orders – as he tells his army in vs. 8 *you shall do according to the word of the Lord.*

The truth is that many of the defeats we get hit with in life are the product of foolish choices. Sometimes – and I’m speaking from experience – what burns us isn’t a lightning bolt, we stuck our finger in an electrical socket. What we did or how we did it all but guaranteed failure because we didn’t use wisdom.

Let’s say you need to speak to a friend about something they did that’s bothering you. Whenever you’ve done that in the past, it’s only made things worse. The question to bring to God and His word is, how can I do it this time with wisdom and grace? How can I avoid accusations that put the other person’s defenses up? A week ago I saw a mess and assumed I knew who made it. I mentioned to Janice that I was going to have to speak to the person and she cautioned me not to go in with guns blazing and scolding them. When I looked into it further, I found out that the person I thought was responsible had nothing to do with it. If I had gone in with accusations I could have done damage to our relationship.

Ask God for wisdom.

Or maybe you know you need to get your finances in order – go to God’s word to see what wise stewardship looks like. His word gives us wisdom.

Sometimes wisdom goes the other way – it throws up caution flags. Years ago Janice’s sister and brother in law wanted very badly to go to India but there were serious red flags going up with the denomination that was inviting them to go. Many people urged them to reconsider – Janice and I did – but they wanted to go so badly that they didn’t heed those cautions and it did not go well. Within a couple weeks they were flying back to the States, the whole trip a painful experience. They’d be the first to admit that in their eagerness to go, they ignored God’s clear warnings. God’s word to Joshua was *go for it...only this time do it wiser*. But that’s still not all God says.

3. God says go for it again...only this time work harder

God had Joshua choose 30,000 men – 10x the number of soldiers involved in the first attack. God didn't need 30,000 men to give the city to Joshua, He could have one soldier or no soldiers but God usually uses natural means to accomplish His work. Faith in God's work doesn't negate the need for our work...except when it comes to our salvation. We are saved by faith alone, not by works, lest any should boast.

God's message in the gospel is loud and clear: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. We are saved by faith in Christ alone, plus nothing! Not because work isn't needed, because Jesus did the work and there's nothing we could ever add to that work.

But in most other aspects of our lives, whether it be sanctification or relationships or whatever, we have a part to play and that part calls for us to make every effort. The story is told of a man who wanted greater victory in his life and someone told him he had to let God do it for him. So he cut out six letters spelling "Let God" and hung them on his wall as a reminder. When he came home that evening, the D had fallen off the wall so it now read "Let Go". He took that to mean he had to "let go and let God". It's a great story but it's not great theology. God said to Joshua "work hard and let God". Some failures and defeats we encounter isn't because the enemy was so strong, it's because we were so weak. We didn't prepare, didn't do our homework, didn't put much effort into it. God's word to us is often "give it all you've got and trust Me to do it!" Maximum faith and maximum effort – that's not a contradiction, it's a principle found throughout the Bible.

Message #3 – Remember that you are blessed of God

After Israel takes Ai, destroying it by fire, and they kill the king and hang his body on a tree, Joshua leads Israel in a time of worship and reflection.

Read vv. 30-35

Verse 34 says Joshua read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse. This is an emotional moment: Israel has in a short period of time experienced God's curse upon them because of Achan's sin and it was like lightning hitting them. But they got things right with God and have experienced His gracious blessing on them again. And they have a graphic reminder of blessing and curse in the king of Ai's dead body hanging all day in front of them. Deuteronomy 21:23 says cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. God's curse was on him and his people, God's blessing on Joshua and Israel.

Remember that you are blessed by God. Jesus took our curse on himself when he hung on that old rugged cross. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."* Gal. 3:13 We may fall flat on our face with failure and defeat. Lightning may hit us and floor us. But if we are trusting in Christ, if Jesus is our Savior, we don't live under God's curse, we live under His blessing. Expect blessing. Expect provision. Expect favor. Expect grace. If you get hit by lightning, get up, hear the message God has for you, and keep going! You live in God's love, His grace, His blessing! Let's let this rich passage from Ephesians 1 be our benediction.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. Eph. 1:3-6