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Restoring God's Favor

Joshua 8

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In April of 1997, members of the Peruvian army stormed the Japanese embassy in Lima, ending a four-month siege and freeing 71 hostages. In the process, all 14 terrorists were killed. At the time we were in Costa Rica, so we saw a lot of coverage of this, both in print media and on television. In all the coverage I saw, there is one enduring image. It is a middle-aged woman hugging an older gentleman for all she is worth. I would guess it was her father. On her face in that photo, I saw four months of anguish of going to bed every night wondering if her father was alive and getting up every morning wondering if she would see him today or if he was deceased. On her face I also saw joy and relief. Someone cherished, someone of great value, had just been returned. Someone she counted as lost was back in her arms.

As followers of Jesus, there is something that is even more cherished than this father to his daughter, and that is the blessing of God in our lives. Let me define the phrase “the blessing of God.” When I am talking about the blessing of God, I am talking about an intimacy with God and the fruit of that intimacy: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness.

We are going to look into the life of Israel. In their lives, we will see that the blessing of God meant taking possession of a fertile land. From a New Testament perspective, the blessing of God does not necessarily mean health, stature, prestige, success or anything else in this life. It is an intimacy with God and the fruit of that intimacy. For those of us who have had it and lost it, we know the anguish of that woman wondering if we will ever get it back again. I want us to wrestle with the question: How do we restore God's blessing in our life?

To do that, I want to look at the life of the nation of Israel as they began their quest to enter this Promised Land that God had given them. Turn with me to Joshua 8, as we look into the life of Israel and try to answer the question: How do we restore God's blessing in our life? The blessing may have looked different for them than it does for us, but I think we can learn from their example and from their life.

Let me set the stage before we get into chapter 8. In Joshua 1, God told the nation of Israel, “You will take this land if you obey Me and if you follow Me.” In Joshua 3, He miraculously parted the Jordan River so that the nation could go through. In Joshua 6, God worked supernaturally so they could conquer the city of Jericho. Up until that point, things were going great. Israel was living the blessing of God. However, after that victory at Jericho, one of the members of the nation of Israel compromised obedience by taking some of the spoil of victory for himself. As a result, in chapter 7, Israel was finally defeated by the tiny city of Ai. That brings us to our passage in Joshua chapter 8.

In verse 1, we read, “Now the Lord said to Joshua...” Joshua is in a position to hear from God. It certainly makes sense that if we are about restoring God's blessing in our life, we need to hear from God. It makes sense on paper, but I have got to tell you, sometimes in my life I do not live it out. I get frustrated. Things are not going the way I plan. I perceive God is not working for me and I don't have time for God. So I just push ahead: *I've got things to do, don't you know, and I need to make up for lost time.*

We will see in our passage that Israel has a huge numbers advantage over the army of Ai. I wonder if it entered Joshua's mind or some of his counselors' minds to say, “Let's just gather

an army and wipe this puny little city off the map. We can do it. We've got numbers." In the anger, frustration and sting of defeat, he might have said, "Let's do this right now."

But Joshua resists that temptation and hears from God. In verse 1 he gets some assurance, as God tells him not to fear:

Now the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not fear or be dismayed. Take all the people of war with you and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. (vs. 1, *NASB)

Then God gives him some instruction for a battle plan:

You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it." (vs. 2)

That is pretty straightforward, isn't it? Set an ambush. What is the problem? Joshua, just do it! Just put it into play. That is easy for us to say. We are looking at this a few thousand years after the fact. We know the result; we know how it turns out.

May I remind you that in our text they were in a time of war. And as a nation, as we are finding out in Iraq, in war people die. Maybe this ambush plan seemed a little risky to Joshua. A while back they had done the march-around plan. They had gone to Jericho. We read about it in Joshua 6. They marched around the city for seven days, and on the seventh day they shouted and the walls came tumbling down. The soldiers then rushed in and conquered the city. It worked then; why wouldn't it work now?

Whatever doubts or concerns Joshua might have had, he does not act on them. He puts God's plan into action.

So Joshua rose with all the people of war to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose 30,000 men, valiant warriors, and set them out at night. (v. 3)

These were 30,000 of the best. "God says we are going to do an ambush? We will do an ambush. We will follow that." In verses 4 through 8, he gives instruction to the soldiers.

He commanded them, saying, "See, you are going to ambush the city from behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out to meet us as at the first, we will flee before them. They will come out after us until we have drawn them away from the city, for they will say, "They are fleeing before us as at the first." So we will flee before them. And you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand. Then it will be when you have seized the city, that you shall set the city on fire. You shall do it according to the word of the LORD. See, I have commanded you." (vs. 4-8)

Now catch the end of verse 8: "You shall do it according to the word of the LORD. See, I have commanded you." I would guess Joshua has the defeat at Ai in mind. I think that is recorded for us in Joshua 7. Then he says, "Hey, we lost then; we could lose now. We are not going to leave anything to chance." What does it mean that we are not going to leave anything to chance? What it means is "you shall do it according to the word of the LORD." We are going to put God's plan into action. That is what happened.

So Joshua sent them away, and they went to the place of ambush and remained between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua spent that night among the people. (v. 9)

In verses 10 through 13 Joshua sets the bait.

Now Joshua rose early in the morning and mustered the people, and he went up with the elders of Israel before the people to Ai. Then all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near and arrived in front of the city, and camped on the north side of Ai. Now there was a valley between him and Ai. And he took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. So they stationed the people, all the army that was on the north side of the city, and its rear guard on the west side of the city, and Joshua spent that night in the midst of the valley. (vs. 10-13)

So the bait is set. What will the king of Ai do?

It came about when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the city hurried and rose up early and went out to meet Israel in battle [*He is going to take the bait*], he and all his people at the appointed place before the desert plain. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. And all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were drawn away from the city. So not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who had not gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded and pursued Israel. (vs. 14-17)

Don't miss it here. The soldiers will show themselves for battle, so Ai gathers all its soldiers and comes out. You are looking right across the way. You know, the deal with those other soldiers is you kill or be killed. They are going to kill you or they are going to die trying.

You see, usually following God and putting God's plan into action involves an element of risk. What makes it so hard? Why it is so hard is that God usually demands of us a step of faith, and a step of faith implies risk. But in spite of the faith, in spite of the risk, we are to put God's plan into action.

During the early 90s, John Sununu, the former governor of New Hampshire was Chief of Staff for President Bush. One day a reporter asked him, "Mr. Sununu, do you feel like you have a difficult job?" And he very simply answered, "No." I would think that Chief of Staff for the President of the United States would be a very difficult and stressful job. You have all the pressure of politics and you have all these lobbyists. Maybe you have your own political agenda and aspirations and you wonder how the Chief of Staff fits into that. I would think it would be a lot of pressure. It would be a difficult job. The reporter thought so, too, because he asked the question again, "Mr. Sununu, don't you feel like you have a difficult job?" This time he elaborated just a little bit more when he said, "No, I only have one constituent." You see, as Governor of New Hampshire he's got to try and please this group and this group and this. How do you balance all of that stuff? As Chief of Staff, he only needed to hear one voice. "Mr. President, what do you want?" "Okay, we got it and we put it into action. We do what the President says."

I am sure Joshua's military advisors suggested things. And he probably heard the voices from his past, military teaching and historians saying, "This is what you do." But in the end, Joshua needed to hear just one voice. He needed to hear God.

We have a lot of people speaking into our lives. At some level I would encourage you to get counsel, because I think God speaks through other people. But in the end, we need to hear one voice, and that is God's. We need to put His plan for our life into action.

Well, Joshua does that and we get the results in verses 18 through 29:

Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand." So Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city. The men in ambush rose quickly from their place, and when he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it, and they quickly set the city on fire. When the men of Ai turned back and looked, behold, the smoke of the city ascended to the sky, and they had no place to flee this way or that, for the people who had been fleeing to the wilderness turned against the pursuers. When Joshua and all Israel saw that the men in ambush had captured the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and slew the men of Ai. The others came out from the city to encounter them, so that they were trapped in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side; and they slew them until no one was left of those who survived or escaped. But they took alive the king of Ai and brought him to Joshua.

Now when Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the field in the wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them were fallen by the edge of the sword until they were destroyed, then all Israel returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword. All who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Israel took only the cattle and the spoil of that city as plunder for themselves, according to the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation until this day. He hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua gave command and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the city gate, and raised over it a great heap of stones that stands to this day. (vs. 18-29)

They capture the city of Ai. My question is this: One chapter earlier in Joshua 7, they are soundly defeated at the city of Ai, but here in chapter 8, we have a resounding victory. What is the difference? Here is the difference: In Joshua 7, there was a compromise. There was not a complete obedience of God. In Joshua 8, there is a complete obedience. "Ambush? We are going to do an ambush." They do it according to the word of the Lord.

Do you remember our question from the beginning: How do we restore God's blessing in our lives? From the nation of Israel's example, we could say that we restore God's blessing by fully obeying God. *We restore God's blessing in our life by fully obeying God.*

That seems so simple, just to obey God. But obedience usually involves faith, and faith means risk. For the soldiers like Joshua and others throughout history, the risk of obeying God was their life. For others, full obedience to God might mean risking things of this

world—popularity, prestige, people’s opinion of you, or material things. Maybe for a single, it means risking a boyfriend or girlfriend. I think it is worthwhile to consider: What risk do you face in complete obedience to God? What are the potential costs you are looking at if you don’t compromise your obedience? I think it is worth our while to weigh those out.

This week as I thought through it, I thought about the risks and the costs of obedience. For me, it was never about things, but it was about people. At the top of that list I think about my wife and our two kids. I love those people and I think I should, but not to the point that I value them more than intimacy with God. I have got to say to God, “God, work on my value system that it would be one that pleases You—that I would value You and Your blessing of intimacy with You above all else. Then give me wisdom. Teach me what it looks like to love these people in such a way that pleases You, but that I don’t value them more than intimacy with You.”

Maybe you are like me. As you do this exercise, you are going to have to say to God, “God, I need You to change my value system.” Or maybe you could say, “I know when I weigh those things, the blessing of God, intimacy with Him, and the fruit of that intimacy is far better than this other stuff that I am living for, but I can’t even live for my own value system.” Maybe you just need God to empower you to live out a value system you already espouse. I think it is worth our time to wrestle with what the risks are that keep us from fully obeying God. What are the potential costs that might make us hesitate from fully acting out God’s plan for our life? I think if we will weigh those we will understand God’s blessing outweighs anything this world has to offer.

As we see in this passage, particularly in verses 18 through 29, at God’s command Israel slays all 12,000 people in Ai. We say, “Why? What is the deal?” Well, I would say it has to do with God’s holiness, His justice and His perfection. At some point a person or a people’s rebellion grows so great and their actions related to that rebellion become so gross that God says, “I can stand no more and My justice and My holiness demands judgment now.” You say, “Andy, what about the grace of God? Isn’t He longsuffering? Isn’t He patient?” And my answer to you is, “Yes, He is!” But He is also holy and righteous and perfect and just. All of these characteristics come together perfectly in God. He waits and He waits and He waits with rebellion and gross sin, but at some point His justice says, “No more.”

A week ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. You know, Jesus came to die. Two thousand years ago, God poured out His judgment on Jesus at the cross. Today He waits and He waits and He waits, that people would repent and believe in Jesus. We would be wise not to infringe upon that patience, because there is a point where God will say, “No more” and He will judge sin—if not in this life, then in the life to come.

People look at the tsunami this week—all the devastation and the death—and say, “What is up? Why did God allow that?” Why? I don’t know. But this is a totally different deal in Joshua 8. He did not allow it; He commanded it. And God’s command here reminds us that His holiness, His righteousness and His judgment will come for sin.

At this point in the passage, you think we are about done. They have taken the city. What more could be of interest? What I think is particularly interesting is Israel’s victory celebration. You are going to notice no parade, no band, no food, and no celebration.

Verses 30 through 35 give us a very different picture. It says this:

Then Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. He wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. Then afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them. (vs. 30-35)

What is going on? What kind of celebration do we have here? What is up with Israel? Well, I'll tell you what I think is up. At least in the short-term, they are learning, *We need to continue doing what we have been doing, that God would continue to bless us.*

Often when we obey God there is always internal fruit, and at times there is external. God just gives out of His graciousness to us. The problem is you and I get so caught up in the fruit and enjoying it that we begin to compromise our obedience, just like Israel did after the victory of Jericho. "Whoo-hoo! We won"... and one person keeps spoil for himself. Israel has learned that we need to continue in our obedience. So we will have a victory party that includes offering sacrifices and reading the Lord's word.

Many of you today are experiencing God's blessing in your life. My response to you is: I rejoice with you. My plea is: Do not compromise in your obedience. Do not compromise in following God fully and putting His plan for your life into action. The trouble is we get caught up in the fruit of God's blessing and then we compromise and we lose.

In baseball one of the greatest feats for a pitcher is to throw what is known as a no-hitter. A no-hitter is where the other team, through nine innings, does not get one hit. To give you an idea of how infrequent these are, typically in a baseball season there are 2,000 games or so. During a season there might be one or two or three no-hitters, so we are talking one every 500 to one every 1,000 games when a guy pitches a no-hitter. That is quite a feat. In May of 1991, at the age of 44 (which in life is the absolute perfect age, but in baseball is a little older) most of the players have retired. Do you see that push there? Did you catch my agenda? At the age of 44, Nolan Ryan threw his seventh no-hitter of his career. Astounding! He threw 122 pitches and he averaged 93 miles per hour on his fastball throughout the game. As you can imagine, there was a crush of media after this went on. Reporters were looking for Ryan to have an interview. Do you know where they found him? He was riding his exercise bike. He was doing his customary postgame, 30-minute ride, getting ready for his next start. You see, he was not going to let a little history-making event interrupt his training routine. He was going to keep doing the things that brought him success.

Individually and corporately as a body, I think we need to take a page out of Nolan Ryan's book. I think it has been a great year at Lincoln Berean. We have experienced God's

blessing and God's favor. There are a number of reasons that I say that, but at the top are the stories of life change. From time to time, we get to hear them in here. But it is amazing to me that we get to be a part of God's working in this world. I cannot think of anything more significant.

We see other signs of God's blessing and favor. A year ago we were talking about a youth complex. Now it is open for ministry. The work in India continues to go forward. Last year in the State of the Church message, Bryan laid out the idea of the north church plant. At that time, it was just me. Now we have filled the majority of our leadership positions, and there are a number of families and individuals who are excited about this. We have reason to celebrate, but we need to continue doing what God has blessed in the first place—and that is to aggressively follow Him, putting His plan for our body's life into action.

On March 15 of this past year, Karen Watson, a Southern Baptist missionary, and four other missionaries were slain while serving the Lord in Iraq. Before she left for her assignment, she wrote a letter that was to be opened in the event of her death. I would like to read that letter to you.

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, His glory my reward.

One of the most important things to remember right now is to preserve the work...I am writing this as if I am still working with my people group.

I thank you all so much for your prayers and support. Surely your reward in heaven will be great. Thank you for investing in my life and spiritual well-being. Keep sending missionaries out. Keep raising up fine young pastors.

In regards to any service, keep it small and simple. Yes, simply, just preach the gospel...Be bold and preach the life-saving, life-changing, forever-eternal gospel. Give glory and honor to our Father.

The Missionary Heart:

Care more than some think is wise.

Risk more than some think is safe.

Dream more than some think is practical.

Expect more than some think is possible.

[Her last sentence is an amazing sentence]:

I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience...There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him. I love you two and my church family.

*In His care,
Shalom, Karen*

- from "Keep Sending Missionaries," *Baptist Press* (3-24-04)

"I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience...There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him." You see, in her life and in her death, Karen Watson reminds us that this life has nothing to offer us greater than God's love. May we be people that would pursue that above all else.

One more time, let me ask and answer our question: How do we restore God's blessing in our life. **We restore God's blessing by fully obeying God.**

As we begin 2005, most of us have high hopes for the year. A new year is typically a time when people think through the year to come and maybe make some kind of resolutions. I would like to suggest that one resolution we make is that we are going to obey God above all. If we are going to make that kind of resolution, I think there are at least a couple sets of questions that we ought to consider.

1. What will you do to make sure you are meeting regularly with God?

If we are not hearing from God, there is no way we can put His plan for our life into action. What changes do you need to make in your schedule to make sure you are hearing from God? What do you need to cut out of your life, that God can have a voice in your life?

2. What are you afraid of risking or losing to obey God?

What stands in your way of full submission to God? Are these things really more valuable than God's blessing? We have a warped value system. Let's identify those risks and costs that seem so high for us and ask God to change our value system from the inside out.

This week in my devotional time in Psalm 78 I read about a generation that did not follow God. The psalmist's comment said that this generation did not prepare its heart. I suggest now that we begin the process of preparing our heart for the year of 2005, that whatever comes we might follow God.

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Study Questions

Restoring God's Favor

Joshua 8

Opening Discussion

1. Have you ever lost something of value?
2. If so, what efforts did you make to try and recover the lost item? Did you find it? If so, what did you do once you found it?

Bible Study

1. How do you respond when things don't go according to your plan?

Especially in light of Israel's superior numbers, do you think Joshua was tempted to rally the troops to make an assault on Ai instead of meeting with God? Why or why not?

Would you have been tempted to forge ahead in that situation? Why or why not?

2. Upon getting God's assurances and battle plan in Joshua 8:1-2, do you think it was easy for Joshua to follow this plan? Why or why not?

Once you understand God's plan and direction for your life, do you find it easy to follow God? Why or why not? What are the obstacles that keep you from following God?

3. Do you think Joshua had a hard time selling the soldiers on this plan? Why or why not?

Why do you think Joshua is so emphatic in verse 8 that the soldiers follow God's direction?

What have you found helpful in encouraging other people to follow God?

4. Any time a soldier follows God into battle, there is a risk of death. What are the risks that you have incurred in following God?

Are there risks or costs that you consider too high to follow God? If so, how do you grow in your willingness to accept the risks and costs that come from following God?

5. What is your response to the fact that God ordered the death of all of the people in Ai?

What does this tell us about God?

6. Are you surprised by Israel's "celebration" in verses 30-35? Why or why not?

How do you respond when you experience God's blessing in your life?

Application

1. What changes to your schedule do you need to make in order to make sure you are meeting with God regularly?

What steps do you need to take to be sure you are implementing God's plan for your life and not taking things into your own hands?

2. Honestly, right now, what risks or costs are too high for you to bear in order to follow God?

How can you grow to the point that you are willing to accept those risks and costs?

3. If you are experiencing God's blessing, based on Israel's example, what is a right response to God?