

Given Into Your Hand – Joshua 8:1-35

Five Points Community Church (8/14/16) Brett Toney

Identity Crisis & the Promises of God

Last week likely none of us knew who David Boudia was—and maybe you still don't. He won the silver medal on Monday in a synchronized diving event. In the nationally televised interview afterwards he was asked about the significance of his accomplishment. He replied,

“It's just an identity crisis. When my mind is on [diving], and I'm thinking I'm defined by this, then my mind goes crazy. But we both know that our identity is in Christ, and we're thankful for this opportunity to be able to dive in front of Brazil and in front of the United States.”

David understands the pitfalls of hoping in the promises of an Olympic medal. If your identity is all wrapped up in winning gold, you are crushed when you fail or when the luster of the Games passes in a few weeks. The promises of the Olympics are fleeting. He has obviously wrestled with the question, “What promises will you believe?” Will you look to temporary fame and victory ... or will you look to the eternal promises God has made in Christ?

What we see in Joshua 8 is not just the Battle of Ai. It is a battle for the hearts of God's people. Will they believe the promises of God? Or will their hope be in themselves and their ability to conquer the land? Their previous defeat at Ai makes clear that this is where the struggle is. In the first battle, they didn't even consult the LORD. They just moved ahead thinking Ai was this little town they could easily take. They had presumed upon God and need to be reminded of the promises that *he* guarantees. They need to know that their hope *must* be in God alone and that *he* will accomplish his purposes. That is where this whole book is moving toward. We see in Joshua 21:45 that not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Israel is having a bit of an identity crisis here. When their minds are on military victory, and they think they are defined by *that*, things get crazy. They need to know their identity is in

their covenant God, and their hope is in his promises. They need to know that trusting God in his meticulous sovereignty to accomplish all of his promises requires faith-filled obedience. They don't just go out and do their own thing.

The LORD's Imminent Sovereignty (v.1-2)

So where do things pick up after their disorienting defeat and addressing the sin in the camp? Now what are they supposed to do? This is where God shows his steadfast love, his covenant love. The LORD takes the initiative to draw near to his people, namely Joshua, to strengthen and encourage them to persevere. Despite the judgment on Israel for Achan's sin, the LORD has not forsaken his people. God takes the initiative and says, "Do not fear and do not be dismayed" (v.1). This is how God has always acted in regards to his people. Adam sinned, and God initiated the restoration of the relationship. Israel was enslaved, and God initiated redemption. We were dead in our sin, and God made us alive again. He pursues his people. He draws near. "[Joshua,] do not fear and do not be dismayed" (v.1).

God is using the whole interaction with Ai to demonstrate his sovereignty over all things, even sin. He used Israel's defeat at Ai in chapter 7 to bring judgment *against sin* on the people and Achan. And he is using Israel's defeat at Ai now in chapter 8 to reveal the pride of Ai and bring judgment *against sin* on them. God knows that the army of Ai will confidently pursue Israel yet again and will use that against them in setting the ambush. This whole ordeal has been orchestrated under God's meticulous sovereignty to accomplish all of his promises. He is underscoring his hatred for sin and the necessity of his people to act in faith-filled obedience. And he does so not from a distance, lobbing decrees and commands over the wall. He does so imminently, drawing near, being a refuge and strength, a very present help in their time of need (cf. Psalm 46:1).

We also see that Achan's sin was really a matter of wrong timing. He had over-realized the promise of God. For God had promised that he was bringing Israel into the land to give it to them to possess (cf. 1:11). But Achan failed to trust in God by prematurely taking the bounty of the land. It is faithlessness to take it *not* in God's timing. Jericho *alone* was completely devoted to the LORD. In v.2 God promises the plunder of Ai to the people. If Achan waited just a few days longer, he would have had his helping to the loot of Ai (and every other city they would go on to conquer).

How quick we can be to rush our timing! If only I could drive. If only I were married. If only I got that promotion. If only I had more income. If only my kids were older. If only I were retired. Trusting in God's promises includes trusting in God's timing. If you are fearful as you wait, it is an indicator that you might be doubting God's promises and *power*. The present situation doesn't look like God is *able* to accomplish his promises. So fear rises in your heart, and you tremble. If you are anxious as you wait, it is an indicator that you might be doubting God's promises and *providence*. The present situation doesn't look like God is *going to accomplish* his promises. What if he doesn't do what he says? So anxiety grips your mind like a vise.

What do you do when fear and anxiety rise? You've got to push pause and evaluate what is going on. You're responding sinfully to the situation, and you need to reorient on what is true. You are believing false promises; you're getting snared in the identity crisis. Who is God and what has he said? This is what the LORD does for Joshua. Who is God? He is one who draws near, who does not forsake his people. Do not fear, God is the one who splits seas and raises the dead. Do not be dismayed, God is the one who will make every one of his good promises come to pass. We are helped in persevering, just like Joshua, when we cling to the LORD our God like

this. Reorienting on what is true—on who God is and what he has said—does a lot to silence the fear and anxiety.

Did you see that God gives Joshua another promise here in v.1? “See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land.” The promise is so sure that God says it as though it has already been completed. So do not be afraid, and do not be dismayed. Not one word of all the good promises of the LORD will fail. The LORD’s imminent sovereignty orients Joshua and Israel back on their identity as his people.

The LORD’s Promise for Victory (v.3-29)

As the battle narrative unfolds, and Joshua mobilizes the troops and carries out the clever battle plan, the promise is repeated two more times. Verse 7, “You shall rise up from the ambush and seize the city, *for the LORD your God will give it into your hand.*” Verse 18, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai,” the LORD says, “*for I will give it into your hand.*” Victory is not a result of Joshua being this expert military strategist or field general. The ambush wasn’t even *his* idea. Victory is guaranteed by the word of the LORD.

When reading historical narrative like this, pay attention to what is *said* and not as much to what *happens*. It is through speech that authors writing this kind of history draw out the main point of what they are trying to communicate. Dale Ralph Davis captures this idea well when he encourages us to ask, “What is the writer *preaching about* when he tells me this story? He is not telling you the story only to inform you (although that is part of it); he has a message to proclaim, a God to press upon you.”¹ As a good illustration of this, consider the story of David and Goliath. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not about five smooth stones or the “Goliaths” in your life. It is about what David *says*, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel,

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*. (Christian Focus: Scotland, 2000), 12.

whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand” (1 Samuel 17:45). David and Goliath is about the glory of God and his power to deliver his people.

So you can go through the bulk of Joshua 8 and look at the details of the battle—it is interesting and is a great story. The plan works perfectly. But we have to see what the author is mainly wanting us to understand. The LORD, in his meticulous sovereignty, accomplished his promise *through* Israel’s faith-filled obedience. God said the city was Israel’s for the taking, and they need only to trust God and obey.

Note the interplay of God’s sovereignty and Israel’s responsibility in this chapter. It isn’t explicitly taught on, but it is implied. God could have just made the walls fall down like at Jericho. But instead he calls on Israel to obey his command and trust in his promise. Just because God is meticulously sovereign over all things does not mean that we are not called to faith-filled, obedient action. In God’s providence, he intended to accomplish his promise of giving the city into Israel’s hand *through* their faithful action. If Joshua would have said, “Nah, we totally outnumber them. We’ll just march up and take the city,” they would have lost *again*.

God continues to operate this way, weaving together his sovereignty and our responsibility to act in faith. After all, God has promised that he will redeem a people from every tribe, language, tongue, and nation (cf. Genesis 12:1-3, Revelation 7:9) ... yet he says, “Go! Make disciples!” (cf. Matthew 28:19). God’s sovereignty should not make us uncertain about what we are to do, and it sure does not make us lazy. We don’t waffle, asking, “What is God’s will for me in this situation?” We look to his Word, we pray, we consult wise counselors, and we make a decision. You will not thwart God’s sovereign purposes. Act in faith and hope in God’s promises. And we must act—the nations will not be evangelized if we do not go as missionaries. Our neighbors will continue in the deception of the American Dream or nominal Christianity or

outright humanism if we do not share the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection on behalf of sinners.

We can go to the nations or our neighbors with confidence that God will save sinners because he is sovereign over salvation (cf. Ephesians 1:3-10). Such confidence in God's promises frees us from a preoccupation on ourselves or from the fear and anxiety of going to difficult places. After all, if we die, it is gain (cf. Philippians 1:21), and the mission continues. Joshua and Israel had such freedom in this battle. They had confidence in the promise of God, and if they perished, they perished. But God would get glory over sin and the people of Ai. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made would fail.

The LORD's People Renew Their Covenant Commitment (v.30-35)

Victory was theirs. The ambush was successful. They raised a monument testifying to the holiness of God as they razed the city. As they stacked stones after crossing the Jordan, they make Ai a stack of stones, a reminder of God's hatred for sin and the certainty of his promise to give this land into the hand of his people. God had moved towards his people in covenant faithfulness, commending his imminent sovereignty. But Israel had broken faith and needed to be reminded of God's promises.

We see in v.30 that the scene has changed. Joshua and all of Israel are now twenty miles north of Ai at Mount Ebal. There they make a sacrifice for sin and a peace offering to communicate their renewed commitment to the covenant God had made with them at Sinai. As part of this covenant renewal ceremony, Joshua writes out in full and reads aloud for all of Israel the law of Moses, which scholars say probably refers just to what we know as the book of Deuteronomy. And make no mistake, *all* were present for this. Half of the nation on Mount Ebal and half the nation on Mount Gerizim, which is just a mile or so across from Mount Ebal. Joshua

stood in the valley, this natural amphitheater, with the ark of the covenant to remind the nation—even the little ones—of all of God’s promises. He reminded them of the good promises, the blessings, and he reminded them of the bad promises, the curses.

But doesn’t this strike you as, I don’t know, a little odd? You are in hostile territory, in the midst of a military campaign. And you go camp on some mountains for a big tent revival?? Chapter 9 begins by saying six peoples living in the Land—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites—are now coming together to make a super army to fight Israel. And they’re having a worship service in the woods?? Yes, because faith-filled obedience is more important than the wisdom of man. This is exactly what God had told them to do. Deuteronomy 11:29ff,

“And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal ... For you are to cross over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving you. And when you possess it and live in it, you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the rules that I am setting before you today.”

It seems foolish to move the whole nation twenty miles out of the way at a time when they are still exposed to their enemies. But Joshua knew that it was far more foolish to disobey the clear command of the LORD God. Just like the nationwide circumcision on the eve of entering the Land, this was to ensure that all Israel understood that the LORD is their God and they are his people. Their identity is in him. He is fulfilling every word of his good promises toward them.

But couldn’t they have done this at Ai or back near Jericho, somewhere a little more convenient, somewhere a little safer? No, this place is significant. In this valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim is the ancient city of Shechem. In Genesis 12 we read how Abraham came to this very place after receiving the call of God to leave his home and go to the country the Lord would show him. It was at this very place that the LORD said to him, “To your offspring I will

give this land” (Genesis 12:7). God spoke a promise to a childless seventy-five-year-old, and some five-hundred years later it came to pass.

Imagine standing there with Joshua on that mountaintop, looking out over the Land. As you look at the vista, you’re flooded with emotion as you consider the sojourning of your people, the centuries of slavery, the decades in the Wilderness, and all of the promises of God passed down from generation to generation. All you have known your whole life is camping in tents, moving from campsite to campsite, eating manna three times a day, seven days a week. You watched family member after family member die in the Wilderness. You recall your grandfather telling you stories around the campfire as a kid of how he toiled in Egyptian fields, carrying on only by singing psalms that speak of the Land of Promise. The Land of Promise ... here it is. This mountain ... God spoke a word of promise to a man right here. O, the astounding faithfulness of God.

You can see this place. You can see the altar on Mt. Ebal where this took place. You can see in the 3D mode on Google Maps this valley and how the promises of God could be heralded for all Israel to hear. Nearly 3,500 years ago men and women and children stood and worshiped God because he was fulfilling every word of promise made to them. Because God had set his covenant love on a childless seventy-five-year-old pagan and made him into a great nation. Because the LORD had brought God’s people into God’s place according to God’s promise. And they were reminded on that day that the sovereign Lord whose word never fails calls them to faith-filled obedience. Can you fathom how powerful this time was for the nation? The worldly risk of pausing the invasion was nothing in comparison to gaining greater degrees of faithfulness.

Friends, we have been given a far better covenant with far better promises. Our covenant does not secure a temporary inheritance like Israel's. We have not been promised a little strip of land in the Middle East. For,

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more (Hebrews 8:6-12).

We who are united with Jesus by faith have been promised the enjoyment of God's very presence—we all *know* him. We will enjoy his presence in a new creation all through the redemption of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And all because he chooses to remember our sins no more. We would do well to remember the promises of God and pursue faith-filled obedience. We have better promises because now in Christ we actually *can* obey. Israel walks away from this covenant renewal and falters again. But because of God's indwelling presence, we truly can obey by faith. Consider the immeasurable faithfulness of God to accomplish his promises and be stirred up to faith-filled obedience.

We too face an identity crisis every day. Are we going to believe the empty promises this world offers or will we consider the promises of God in Christ as far more worthy? Will we look to the things of this world to tell us who we are or will we look to Jesus to know who we are and

what we have been called to be? The Lord has made good promises and not one word will fail;
all will come to pass.