

Sermon preached by Rev. R. Van Overloop on July 12, 2020 in Grace Protestant Reformed Church, entitled "The Conquest of Ai."

[There was no theme and divisions given in the sermon.]

Our reading from the word of God this evening comes from Joshua chapter 8:1–29, and they serve as the text tonight. Notice that the last verse of chapter 7 says, "So the LORD turned from the fierceness of his anger."

After God turned from the fierceness of his anger, he came and appeared to Joshua, and Joshua transmitted what Jehovah said to him to the children of Israel. But he came to Joshua with encouragement and instructions *and with promised victory*, with promised victory: "I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land" [v. 1]. But he told Joshua to arise, arise, not just get off your chair, but arise we may believe from a position of being prostrated before God's throne. And the idea that we may take of that is because God had told Joshua something that he did not do in their previous attempt to attack Ai. He took the advice of the spies that said, "Take three thousand and go." This time he followed the directives that God gave to him in Numbers 27. He told Joshua at that time, "Stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for [you] after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation" [v. 21]. He took that word and followed that directive. He was asking God's guidance and God's blessing and God's answer.

What Joshua ended up telling the children of Israel about how to attack Ai, we may believe is what God told Joshua. We only read very briefly in verse 2 at the end: "Lay thee an ambush for the city behind it." So we only have a little bit of what God said to Joshua, but we may believe that all the details that were worked out were also what God told Joshua. So now Joshua proceeds.

They had learned.

He learned what he forgot the first time. We have to seek God's guidance. It has to be by God's will that we go forth and do this. They learned this the hard way. They learned this after being chastened. Their defeat at Ai resulted in thirty-six deaths. We may say only, but thirty-six deaths resulted of their hasty effort. And now God comes and say no. And he taught them through that defeat that they had to do it his way.

Now God again says the same thing. So when they seek his wisdom and seek his guidance, he responds just the same way he had responded at Jericho. "I have given them; they will be yours; yours is already the victory." And he assured them now, too, and again it is past tense. They have been given to you. They are already defeated as it were. Go forth before a defeated foe.

And is not that the way we are to live?

The world rises up in its wickedness. Instead of being fearful, they're already defeated. They are already lost. The devil may rage, and his power may be strong to lead us into temptations at times. He is defeated and all his host. They have not the prevailing strength to survive. We may believe they're defeated. That may be and is to be our perspective.

That does not relieve us of responsibilities, and we will look at that a bit more as we go on. But God makes it obvious when he says, "See, I have given into thy hand. See, look, look with faith. Now you hear, but thus you see that I have already given them to you. See by faith."

God's promise warrants on the part of Joshua and the children of Israel a confidence about a successful outcome. But then they don't sit back and say, "Okay, make it happen," because God proceeds and he says, "Now set an ambush. This is how you are to approach them. This is how you are to fulfil your responsibility and calling." He commands them at the same time to utterly destroy everyone that's in the city. He had done that at Ai.

Now why?

Remind ourselves. The armies of Israel are performing that judgment of God that is just as powerful and as clear as the flood, which destroyed all the living except eight souls, and just as the fire and brimstone destroyed all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. And it did because their iniquity had; they had filled the cup of iniquity; they had filled the measure. Their wickedness, and because the king is emphasized at the very end of chapter, the king must have been notorious in leading the way in sinful activity. He was a king; he was the leader; and he was also the leader in iniquity. And thus the calling of God was destroy every man, woman, and child—twelve thousand deaths—twelve thousand deaths, babies, old, frail people, everyone because God's, because the horror of sin is to be understood as the reason why judgment must be executed.

Now, set an ambush. God commands, God assures them of victory, but then at the very same time he commands them, "Lay thee an ambush for the city behind it." He's going to give victory, *but he is going to give victory in the way of and in the use of their obedience, their faith-induced obedience. Victory is theirs in the way of their obeying God, obeying by faith.* Obedience is that which God works within us, but that obedience required on their part diligence and self-denial. Diligence and self-denial.

God is sovereign. If the five points of Calvinism are summarized in one statement, it's that. When we profess total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints, they all flow from the sovereignty of God.

*But the sovereignty of God uses means.* The sovereignty of God uses means.

Not as a diversion, but as an explanation, we take the time to read the seventeen article of the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt: "As the almighty operation of God [there's the sovereignty], whereby he prolongs and supports this our natural life, does not exclude, but requires the use of means."

What are the means whereby God prolongs and supports our natural life? Eating properly, resting, exercising. Those are the normal means that God uses, does not exclude, but he uses them for prolonging and supporting natural life. So just as God has means to do that in nature, in natural life, by which God in his, but God requires the use of those means

by which God in his infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert his influence, so also the before mentioned supernatural operation of God [the spiritual operations of God], by which we are regenerated, in no wise excludes, or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration, and food of the soul. Wherefore, as the apostles, and teachers who succeeded them [the apostles], piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to his glory, and the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments and discipline [so just as they did, so now today]; so even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what he of his good pleasure hath most intimately joined together. For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily [the more readily] we perform our duty, the more [readily] eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is his work advanced; to whom alone all the glory both of means, and of their saving fruit and efficacy is forever due.

So God says to the children of Israel, "I have given Ai and all of the king and all of this land. Now you—I'm going to use the means of your diligence and self-denial. You go forth, and you set an ambush."

The first attempt, three thousand men, two, three thousand, that is all you need. Joshua sent three thousand.

God says, "Take all the people." This almost makes me smile: Do you know how many people that was in the army then? The last numbering that Moses did showed that the number of the children of Israel in the army from twenty years old and upward who were ready to fight numbered six hundred, one thousand, seven hundred, thirty. The spies said, "Three thousand." God says, "All. Nobody sits back; nobody is excluded." Six hundred, one thousand, seven hundred, thirty go to war. Everybody. Thirty thousand special men of valor. You go and you hide on the west side of the city. He says, "Behind." If they came from the north, the spies were hiding, the ambush was hiding on the west side between Ai and Bethel. Now we read that the men of Bethel also came out and fought with the men of Ai.

Now, if we would say, "Three thousand to defeat twelve thousand that was foolish." But do you know what we are going to say? "Six hundred, one thousand, seven hundred—almost six hundred, two thousand men to kill twelve thousand men, women, and children. That's a little excessive."

God said, "No, all the people. Nobody is to be lazy. Everybody is to put forth an effort. The whole of the army is to be involved."

The ambush. That's a humble way to defeat a foe, a small foe. Pride says, "I'll take you on toe to toe, and I'll beat you. Let's slug it out."

God says, "No, you're not going to slug it out. You're going to have an ambush."

Pretty humble. Because what it's going to take is that thirty thousand men are going to have to lose a night of sleep in order to put themselves in a position. They're going to have to be there quietly; they're going to sleep on the cold ground if they are going to get any rest at all—behind bushes, in valleys, in ditches. They may not be detected; they have to be absolutely still and quiet. Self-denial. Humble. Diligent.

Then we'll take the remaining five hundred, seventy thousand men of war, and we will come at them from the north. But we're going to travel through the night, hide behind the valley, behind the hill, and then appear in the valley and come down. And they will see us there in the morning. So the five hundred, seventy thousand had to be just as diligent, just as, practicing just as much self-denial. Elaborate instructions that are given. That frontal attack, that frontal approach, was to tempt the men of Ai to come out. That kind of a plan required cooperation, agreement, concord. no discord, no jealousy—I want to be among the ambush because they're going to get in the city, and maybe they're going to take more spoil.

No, they all had to work together each one in their own place with their task, required to do their work faithfully. That's God's instruction as to how his *sovereignty is to be executed. And that's the way in which the victory, the promised victory, was realized.*

It wasn't too humbling for Joshua and all the people. They tasted the chastening hand of God. They learned. And what they learned was we will do what God tells us to do. That's the right way. And so they conduct themselves. Joshua, it's noted. We could have been told that Joshua did it. But we're told very specifically he arose, and he arose up early. He set as it where his alarm clock early. He was going to get out there; he was going to do what he was supposed to do, and he was going to be an example of the kind of diligence and zeal and earnestness that God requires of us when we obey him. What does God want me to do? How does God want me to do it? That's what I want to do. I want to do it God's way in every sense not only *what* he tells me to do but also *how* he tells me to do it.

So the whole fighting force, five hundred, seventy thousand men went out, camped, came over the hill in the morning in the dark of night, waiting for the battle the next day.

*Faith-induced obedience complied with God's command.*

Without faith it's impossible to please him.

A miracle occurred. And the miracle we sometimes would overlook. How thirty thousand men could not be detected. The city wasn't that large. But how thirty thousand men could be hiding and not detected was as much a miracle as the sun standing still.

But here's the sovereignty of God. He sets out the command of obedience: this is what you must do. They comply, but God is still sovereign in his control of all things, just as God withheld Abimelech from Sarah when Abraham said, "That's my sister." Just as God withheld Laban from fighting against and taking Jacob back; just as the fear of God kept the men of the other cities around Shechem from going after Jacob and his sons after they avenged Shechem. Just as God had made a promise—and here's a promise that I confess I often have not even thought of—God had told the children of Israel, "There are three feasts where you all are to go to Jerusalem." And during those feasts days everybody in the whole country is to go to Jerusalem to celebrate those feasts. In Exodus 34:24. Let me read 23 and 24: "Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord GOD, the God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before thee, and enlarge thy borders: neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the LORD thy God thrice in the year." If any king or enemy of Israel knew what the practice of the children of Israel was, they would say, "Hey, that's the time when we can really ravage the land. All of the men are going to be in Jerusalem." God says, "When you go to appear before me, I will watch out for you." That kind of miracle took place, so that those thirty thousand men were not detected. The king of Ai did not send out spies ahead of time; no lookout on the city wall saw them. And in the morning the king of Ai gathered and said, "Let's do it again. Just as Joshua predicted, go after them." And they organized and ran out after the larger army of Israel.

Now they knew they had the victory, but they knew that that victory was going to come not only by way of ambush but by making believe that they were afraid, and they would run away. They had to show fear before that much smaller army of Ai. They showed that fear, and they fled. They were obedient to the plan that God had given to them. They were obeying God.

The king and the men of Ai were infatuated with their previous success. We did it before; we can do it again. Go after them. And they went out and left the gates of the city wide open. Just like Pharaoh saw the children of Israel through the Red Sea. I am going to get them, and they followed.

Jehovah commanded Joshua to give a signal. The signal that Joshua was to give was verse 18: "Stretch out the spear that is in thy hand toward Ai; for I will give it into thine hand. And Joshua stretched out the spear that he had in his hand toward the city." Now he's running away. He's fleeing, making believe, feigning, fear, but he stretches out that spear. That is signal that the thirty thousand were waiting for. But that stretched-out spear is to be connected with what God said in verse 26: "Joshua drew not his hand back, wherewith he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai." He held that spear out. The first time he held it out was a signal for all of the thirty thousand to rise up, rush into the city, and to set it on fire. The black smoke begins to arise. Joshua's stretched-out spear again tells the army that is with him to stop, turn around, and fight.

The men of Ai turn around, and they see the smoke. And the smoke is a signal to them of defeat, but it's signal to the children of Israel of victory.

Then they went in, and the Bible makes it clear that they killed every living person. The fire was not destructive enough for those five hundred and seventy once they had defeated all of the army of Ai to continue to go in and destroy all of the other people that were remaining alive in the city of Ai.

But again, just like in Jericho, fire, fire. Fire, whether it's the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah, whether it is the fire of Jericho and now of Ai, that fire is to represent hell. But don't think just physically, fire. Think that's a demonstration and a picture of the wrath of God, the just wrath of God against sin. Wait a minute, against that which is a violation of the person of God. He himself must respond and does with vengeance, with a holy vengeance, with a righteous anger, punishing those who think they're getting away with all their violent violations of him. He responds and demonstrates his response with fire, hell, the wrath of God. No mercy, no truce because every one of them, the oldest and the babies, all together had filled the cup of iniquity. God said, "It is just that right now at this time in their history that my wrath is exercised upon them." God shows us very clearly how greatly he detests sin.

And the men of the army had to be convinced equally.

We must detest sin—theirs and mine. It is not difficult for us to watch some of the riots that were taking place and to condemn them and rightly so. But also see how sometimes authority is what we also despise. It's in us as well, and we must respond just like those men of Israel, convinced of the calling that is ours to stand up against our sin.

The king was purposefully kept alive, captured, set before Joshua. We don't know the details of his execution, but he was obviously killed. And his body hung until night because that was God's command, "At dusk you take the body down." But then they laid it before the gates of city, and according to Joshua's command here's another memorial, another memorial. Jericho was a memorial. The man who wants to rebuild the city will rebuild it in the death of his firstborn and his youngest. Here is a memorial again. This is how horribly wrong sin is. Now we go back to what we had this morning. Abhor and loath all that would violently violate our heavenly Father, not only by others but also by ourselves. Hate it, nail it, destroy it.

Israel is learning; God is teaching them that he uses them as his instruments. Humbly.

To be an instrument of God in the execution of the ungodly requires a high level of spiritual discernment. Would we so hate sin that we would do that, starting with ourselves? Do we learn when God chastens, as he did in that first defeat of Israel at Ai? Learn that we have to follow his will and do it his way? If we experience victory, then we must do it not as if we accomplished it but humbly—God did it. Somebody has a birthday, some people get to be quite old. Just the same thing, this is not because I'm better; this is a God-given opportunity to acknowledge God's mercy. And that mercy endures forever.

So just as we began, give praise to God for God is good, for his mercy endureth forever.

Amen.

We thank thee, Father, for again this powerful lesson that we are to do things thy way. We honor thee with the obedience that thou didst work in the children of Israel and in Joshua.

And we may leave here more committed in our family life and in our work and in our play and in all of our activity to give honor and praise by doings things not our way but thy way.

Be our teacher. May we stand before thee like Joshua did and learn how thou wilt have us to respond to thy hand and thy work.

Hear us and bless us for Christ's sake.

Amen.