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THE RIGHT QUARTERBACK Joshua 8

Laurie and I looked forward to going to one of our favorite restaurants in the world. Kimo's is primarily a seafood restaurant that has terrific fresh fish and it has a priceless setting. It's expensive so it is a rare event for us to go there but we had our hearts set on it. Each entrée comes with a Caesar salad that is the best. They also have sourdough rolls that are to die for. But the thing we most looked forward to was the fresh fish with their orange ginger glaze. It is spectacular.

So we had our hearts set on that orange ginger fish with the Caesar salad. When we were seated at the restaurant we opened our menus. The first thing we discovered was that you now have to order and pay for the salad separately. The second thing we noticed was that they had changed their fish preparations. They no longer had the orange ginger glaze. Well, wait, they had an herb citrus glaze. Ginger is sort of an herb and orange is citrus, so it's probably the same thing, right? We both ordered fish with the herb citrus glaze. They brought our bread. The sourdough rolls weren't the same. They were good, but not what they used to be. Then we got our salads. Uh oh. They weren't the same either. They were good, but not as good as they used to be. Well, that's all right. The food was good and we looked forward to our fish. Our waiter brought our entrees, set our plates in front of us and I immediately had an inkling that there might be a problem. Our fish was covered with a thick green sauce that looked like something out of a science fiction movie. It was not the least bit appetizing in appearance. At that point I had some trepidation, but Kimo's is consistently good, so I assumed though I didn't like the looks of this dish it would still be quite tasty. I took one bite and realized that was all I would be able to stomach of this sauce. It was awful! It tasted like liquefied cilantro. I began trying to figure if I could clear the sauce off the fish. We had our heart set on a great meal there but what we got was a big disappointment.

What do you have your heart set on? Our hearts were set on some food at Kimo's and we experienced disappointment. Fortunately we didn't have much invested in that. But there's an awful lot you can set your heart on in this world that can result not just in disappointment but in disaster. We need to think carefully about what we set our hearts on. Today we are going to look at a story from Joshua 8 that raises that issue. You may not see it at first, but you will get it as we go through this story.

THE INCIDENT

Israel failed on its first attempt to conquer the town of Ai due to the loss of God's power working on their behalf. They have dealt with the cause of that loss and are now ready to take a second whack at Ai. What happens in this chapter is quite simple. God gives Joshua a plan of attack.

The attack plan would still be excellent strategy today in modern warfare. Under cover of darkness Joshua was to send one group of soldiers around behind Ai. They were to go to ground and stay in hiding so the Aisters wouldn't be aware of them. Then Joshua would lead a frontal attack on the city that was exactly like the previous failed attempt. As soon as they made contact and met resistance the Israelis were then to withdraw in seeming panic. Confident that they were going to rout the Israelis again the Aisters would leave the city and their defensive positions to pursue them. That's when Joshua was to spring the trap. The ambush force was to invade the city at that point and put it to the torch. When the Aisters realized something was amiss they would turn to run back to town. Right then Joshua would give the signal and his troops, who were not running in panic at all but were following the plan, would turn and drive back toward the enemy. The forces of Ai would be caught in the open between two forces.

The plan worked like a charm and the people of Ai were wiped out. Israel had its second major victory in the Canaan Campaign. Afterward Joshua set up an altar on Mount Ebal where they offered sacrifices to God. Then, as we see in verses 34-35, "Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses---just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel."

IMPLICATIONS

GOD IS NOT LIMITED IN HIS WAYS

Did you notice the difference in the two victories Israel has now had in its campaign to gain possession of the Promised Land? The conquest of Jericho required divine intervention. God miraculously knocked down Jericho's defenses when Israel had no way to get through them. But the win over Ai took no such divine power. God simply gave Joshua a good strategy and the Israelis' superior numbers took care of the rest. So the first battle involved a miracle, the second nothing more than a good plan.

We can learn something from this. God is not dependent on methods. He doesn't always do things in just one way or by one method. Do you think that Joshua at this point is asking, "All right, Lord, if we're going to conquer Canaan what

method are we supposed to use?” God has now demonstrated that he can and does use different methods because the method is not what brings success. What brings success is the power and presence of God, and that cannot be formulized. The Spirit of God, Jesus said, is like the wind. In John 3:8 he said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” God’s actions are always directed and bounded by his character. There are things we know God will and won’t do because of his character. He will never lie or deceive. He will never act in an evil or unrighteous manner. He will always love. But his actions are not determined by methodology.

This has some implications for us in the church. God is not dependent on particular methods to accomplish his will. One of the things that I marvel at is the insistence of so many in the church that what we need to do is find the right methods for helping people grow in their faith and for winning people to Christ. People are constantly casting about, running to conferences, reading books by the latest popular pastor to find out what his method for success is. Or churches insist on a particular path for growth as though God is consigned to one method. We need to recognize that God is not confined to methods. He can and does act in many different ways. What we need to depend on is not methodology but the power of the Spirit of God to work in a variety of ways.

This also reminds us that we should not try to put God in a box and expect that we will always know his ways and his methods. We sometimes hear that the Lord works in mysterious ways. They are not mysterious to him, but they will often be incomprehensible to us. We won’t always understand what he is doing, but we can know that in his wisdom he has a perfect plan. Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Right now we have Carissa’s rabbit, Lily Belle, living with us. This is a temporary situation as we will soon be transporting Lily to Mississippi. We are going to fly to Atlanta, taking Lily with us. Now when we do that Lily is going to have a bad day. Carissa has given us a soft carrying cage that is approved by our airline. She also had to buy a rabbit ticket for her. We have to fly to Houston, change planes then fly from Houston to Atlanta. Then we get in a car for a 90 minute drive to Michael’s family home in LaGrange, Georgia. That means that Lily is going to be kept in that small case for many hours. But even worse she is going to be on an

airplane where she will be subjected to significant changes in air pressure that she is not used to, plus with her big ears will suffer from hearing jet noise for hours.

We have heard that rabbits do not tolerate commercial air travel particularly well. She will likely think that these large beings that she sees daily and who provide her food have suddenly turned evil. She might think these mysterious beings are trying to kill her, or at the very least make her life miserable. But we are not. Our ways are much higher than her ways. Her owner, who loves her, has determined that this is the best way to get her to her new home where she will finally be very happy. But her owner's thoughts are far higher than her thoughts, the owner's ways greater than Lily's ways. So it is with our Lord. He operates in ways that are not always transparent to us, but they are always wise and good.

This has implications for us as we go through the ups and downs of our lives. There will be times when I might be tempted to think that God has turned on me because I don't see any way what is happening in my life could be part of a good plan, or part of any plan at all. It might just feel random and chaotic. That's when we need to remember we're like Lily in the airplane. It is disorienting, unpleasant, frightening, but the fact is just as we are caring for that rabbit and doing what is best for her so God is still caring for us in his own mysterious way.

I want to point out one more interesting thought about the second battle of Ai. In his great wisdom God used Israel's failure to bring about victory. The failure of the Israelites in the first battle of Ai was what set up the ambush in the second battle. Isn't it amazing how God can even take our failures and weave them into his mysterious good plan?

The late Chuck Colson was a powerful, highly successful lawyer who had risen to serve in the White House. There he experienced his greatest failure, being convicted as part of the infamous Watergate mess and sent to prison. He could never have imagined being a convicted felon serving time in a federal prison. It was a devastating experience. Yet it was through that experience that he became a follower of Jesus and was used by God to accomplish the central work of his life, reaching those in prison with the message of hope. He later said, "The thing God has chosen to use in my life...is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That's not what God's using in my life. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my greatest defeat, the only thing in my life I didn't succeed in." God used his failure for his great plan!

This means that there is always hope for us. No matter how we may have failed or feel like we have failed, God can not only overcome the failure but actually use it as a key component of his plan for us.

GOD IS NOT LIMITED IN WHAT HE PROVIDES

There is a little instruction from the Lord in this chapter that is another reminder that God does things differently than we do. If you've been with us in our study of the book of Joshua you might have noticed something that happens in this chapter that seems jarring. It is a small comment you might not catch if you're not paying attention. In verse 2 God tells Joshua, "You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, *except that you may carry off their plunder and their livestock for yourselves.*"

Wait a minute! That's a huge "except"! Do remember what happened in Joshua 7? God warned Israel not to take any of the plunder of Jericho for themselves. One guy, Achan, disregarded God's command and snuck some Jericho gold and silver into his tent. God made a big deal of that. He quit helping Israel in their fight so that they lost the first battle of Ai and 36 men were killed. Then Achan and his entire family were executed because he disobeyed God. After more than 40 people died because Achan took some plunder God says, "Okay, this time help yourself to whatever you want." Did God think maybe he'd been too harsh and backed off? Did he realize he'd kind of flown off the handle and was way over the top? Who could worship someone who is that arbitrary and capricious? Was there something bad about taking Canaanite plunder or not? If there was, why is it now all right? If there wasn't anything wrong with it then why did all those people have to die?

Either God is arbitrary and capricious in his commands, or there is a reason why God first banned the plunder of Jericho then allowed them to take the loot of Ai. I believe that there was a reason. God was sending a message to his people. Go back to 7:22. When Achan was confronted he admitted what he had done. He said, "When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them." The crucial words there were "I coveted them."

We thought about this some when we looked at that incident. The problem was that Achan saw something he wanted badly. The word translated "covet" was the Hebrew word *chamadh*. This was the word used in the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17 when the Lord said "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You

shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The Hebrew word means to desire or delight in as well as to covet. In fact a noun form of the word *chemeth*, means "a desirable or good thing." So Achan really said, "I saw the robe, the gold and the silver and I desired them." In other words, "I wanted them." Achan's problem started with coveting, with desiring those things. So is God telling us it is wrong to desire things?

There have been people going back to the ancient Greek Stoic philosophers and continuing with some eastern religions today who say that at the heart of the human problem is desire. They say it is our desire for various things, whether they be possessions, some position, some circumstance in life, or anything else, that disrupts our lives. Our desires, we are told, cause us to lose our sense of peace, to violate our own standards, to do damage to other people in our pursuit of our desires. So the answer is that somehow we must deaden our desires. If we can finally silence them then we can live the peaceful life at one with all around us.

However I find some problems with this kind of thinking. For one thing, it is our desires that cause us to improve our lives. They are the things that motivate us. If we desire nothing, we will do nothing. Another problem is that our desires are an expression of who we are. If you take away all desire from a person you will only have the shell of a person left. In his book, *Journey of Desire* (p. 23), John Eldredge wrote, "to kill desire is to kill my heart altogether." He said (p. 13), "We abandon the most important journey of our lives when we abandon desire."

So it seems our desires are crucial to our lives and our heart. But there is another problem with this idea of just getting rid of desire, and that is it isn't possible. In Romans 7:7-8 Paul wrote, "Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire."

Paul was religious in the extreme. His was a religion on steroids. It dominated his entire being. He lived for his religion. It possessed his imagination and fired his soul with passion. It consumed him. It was his whole life. He had lived trying to scrupulously keep the law of God for as long he could remember. His earliest childhood memories were of knowing and trying to obey God's Law. And in his blazing zeal for his religion he endeavored with every ounce of his strength, every

moment of his day, to keep the laws of Moses. And he was good at it. He was better than almost anyone else on the planet. He worshiped only the God of Israel. He abhorred idols and false gods. He never stole even the tiniest thing. He had never committed adultery and never would. He always told the truth, he scrupulously gave 10% of every little thing that came his way to the Lord and he observed the Sabbath rules like a fiend.

Then the Law came along and said, “Don’t desire what someone else has.” I suspect this passage reflects something that bothered Paul for some time until he finally came to grips with it as a result of being radically changed by Jesus Christ. He had tried, but to his shock discovered that he couldn’t stop himself from wanting what others had. He did desire things other people had. He found that he could commit to not doing that, he could absolutely refuse to desire what someone else had, and then to his shock and dismay a desire would still show up anyway. It happened without a conscious decision. It was just there and no matter what he did he could not keep that from happening. He could decide to reject the desire and not think it, but he couldn’t stop the thought from suddenly popping into his head.

He could will himself to keep all the other laws, but he couldn’t will this one away. His problem was that most of the other laws as he understood them had to do with actions. He had no trouble controlling his actions so that he did not steal or lie or worship idols. But coveting isn’t a physical action. It is a thought. It is something totally internal. And that’s where Paul hit a wall. He couldn’t stop covetous thoughts from happening.

What did Paul covet? He doesn’t tell us, so we don’t know. My guess is that he didn’t covet money or possessions. If I had to guess I would look at what mattered to him most. That was religion. It is not hard to imagine what could have happened in his head. Suppose that he was in a conversation with a group of people in which a couple of them praised another Pharisee for his great knowledge of scripture and for his devotion and spirituality. It’s not hard to imagine Paul instantly having the “what about me?” thought. He might well have felt the desire to receive that same notice and praise from others. It was what he lived for. In feeling that he realized that he was desiring something that someone else had, in other words he was coveting, and he couldn’t help it. He could choose to ignore the thought, but he could not stop the desire from showing up. No amount of law could do that.

The point I want to make here is that you can try all you like to somehow rid yourself of desires but you’re never going to be able to do it completely or even mostly. We all covet. All of us know the twinge of coveting. Maybe it’s the

success another athlete has that you want, or the business that goes public and makes its creator a bundle in the IPO, or maybe it's just when someone else gets a compliment that you wish someone would pay you.

What does all of this talk about coveting have to do with the battle of Ai? The fact that God seems to have reversed his field in Joshua 8:2 says something very important. What is the message? It has two prongs. The first prong is that if you in fact covet, if you focus on what is not given you by God and determine that you must have it, the result will be much worse than when Laurie and I set our hearts on monchong fish with orange ginger glaze. We only got disappointment, which if you covet you are absolutely guaranteed you will end up with, but far worse you are going to get death. You'll get it in abundance and you'll also cause death for others. That's the message of Achan. His physical death and that of others depicted the spiritual death that we will experience inevitably when we covet. What you are desiring is actually bait, and if you take the bait, like a fish you will end up flopping around in the bottom of the boat until you die.

The second prong of the message has to do with what all the Israelis who resisted the temptation that Achan yielded to in Joshua 7 experienced. They said, "All right, the plunder looks good, I wish I could have it, and after all, that's how things normally work in the world. Nevertheless, if God says leave it alone or destroy it, then I want nothing to do with it." They chose to obey what God had told them. What was the result for those people? God gave them what Achan had desired, but refused to trust God for. God supplied all they needed and desired. The message would have been profoundly clear to Israel. Covet and you get death. Trust God and he will supply what you need. In other words, what God supplies is enough.

This message comes across clearly in Psalm 37:4. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." That could be the caption on a picture of the victory at Ai. When the people delighted in the Lord and his will, God provided what they desired.

Some people have construed that verse to be the formula for getting the stuff that you really desire. Just delight in the Lord and he'll give you whatever you want. In other words, if you'll be good enough and religious enough God will bless you with all the stuff you dream of in this world. After all, most of Israel decided to obey God at Jericho and the result was God gave them what they desired, the plunder of Ai.

Psalm 37:4 is not a get rich, get famous or get successful promise. It is actually a statement at the heart of the gospel of grace. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." In other words if we will truly love God, have him as the focus of our desires and our lives, then he will provide what we need. He will give us what we really desire. Our problem is that we get focused on things that aren't what we really desire but we think are a method of getting what we desire.

What we really desire is to have peace, to have an unshakable sense that we are loved and approved, to have joy, to have a life that means something and makes a difference, and to have hope that won't die. Our problem is that instead of recognizing that these things are what we really desire we lock in on things that we think will produce those things. For Eve it was a particular piece of fruit, for Achan it was some Jericho loot, for us it might be fame, money, success, power or any other of a number of things. The message here is delight in the Lord and what he provides will be enough. He can produce the life of meaning, peace, joy and hope that you want, with or without the stuff this world offers. So delight in him, serve him, and that's what will produce what you really desire.

The past 4 years I have participated in a fantasy football league that David Drake organized. If you are not familiar with this particular form of football madness, each member of the league at the beginning of the season drafts players in the NFL. Those players accumulate points based on their performance in actual NFL games. Quarterbacks get points for yards passing and touchdown passes, for example, running backs for yards gained rushing and so on. Then the points of your players are totaled and compared with whoever you are matched up against in a given week. Quarterbacks, as in the NFL, are key players. I have two quarterbacks, Drew Brees and Tony Romo, on my roster, but I can only play one each week. Brees is usually terrific, but earlier this year he had a down week and Tony Romo's Cowboys were playing a really weak team. I had to make a choice. Who would give me the most points and the best chance to win? I couldn't play both. I went with Romo. I lost.

I tell you that because I want you to envision a choice that we must all make on a continuing basis every day of our lives. We desire something. We desire this life I described. That is the desire of our hearts. Never forget that is the real desire. So now the question is what will give us the desire of our heart. Imagine yourself debating this point the way I had to debate with myself over which quarterback to play because you must make a choice. On one hand you have delighting in the Lord, seeking his kingdom, seeking to do his will above all else. On the other you

have getting something you think you desire because it will produce the life you want. If you choose the wrong quarterback you will end up flopping around like the fish in the boat, but if you choose the right quarterback, to believe what God supplies is enough, you will get life.

APPLICATION

REJOICE IN GRACE

This issue of coveting can and should have the same effect on us that it had on Paul. It should rivet our attention on the fact that we have a problem that we cannot overcome and that we need help big time.

What Paul learned from that issue of coveting was the nature of real goodness. Real goodness, righteousness, which is what we must have if we wish to earn God's approval by our own merit, is not ever tainted by even a hint of evil. That means that we don't even have evil thoughts. Every now and then you'll hear people talk about things like lust and say fleeting thoughts of lust or, as in this instance coveting, are like birds. I can't stop them from flying over my head but I can keep them from nesting in my hair. The problem is real goodness doesn't even have them flying over our heads. God doesn't have covetous or evil thoughts of any form. If we were to be truly completely good neither would we. I won't even have lustful or coveting thoughts. I won't have anything but pure, noble, good thoughts. There will not be thoughts of revenge, bitterness, envy, greed or the rest of it.

When we realize this is what true goodness is we are confronted with the reality of how far from it we are and how impossible is the task of reforming ourselves so we are now good and acceptable to God. But what God supplies is enough. God, in his goodness, love, and mercy, has found a way to make up for our failings through Jesus Christ. He has paid the penalty for our failings and has earned God's approval on our behalf. So every day of our lives we should be giving thanks for what Jesus has done for us and rejoicing that God loves us as we are.

REMEMBER THE REALITY OF THE CHOICE

The battles of Jericho and Ai present to us a stark choice. There are things you may desire, but if you pursue them rather than trust what God supplies the end result will be death for you and for other people. But if you will delight yourself in the Lord he will give you the desires of your heart. He will provide enough. He will supply what you need and will give you the life inside you that you desire and were designed for.

This is hard for us to accept. We are so certain that there are just some things that we must have, that we desire because we could never be at peace, never be joyful without them. In other words we must have them and we will get them. Jericho and Ai tell us to choose the right quarterback. They call on us to delight in the Lord and trust that he will give us the desire of our heart, whatever we truly need to have joy and peace.

RECOGNIZE COVETING

We all have a ton of desires. Some of them are legitimate, some of them are not. Some of the more blatant ones we can see because they are so obvious. If I am upset because someone else has something that I want but don't have, that obviously is coveting and is deadly. But what about the more subtle places coveting slips into our hearts? How do we recognize that? Here is a quick test that will give you an indication of whether a desire is legitimate or not. A legitimate desire will sacrifice the desired object for people or a higher priority such as obeying God. A covetous desire will sacrifice people or the higher priority to obtain the desired object.

In other words, if I use or abuse another person, somewhere I'm coveting. If I choose to disobey God, if I know what God calls on me to be or do and choose not to heed him, I am pursuing something more than delighting in God.

We have a sound system that we were given 2 years ago that has a wireless subwoofer and rear speakers. Those wireless speakers suddenly stopped working recently. The speakers are fine we think, but they aren't communicating with the system. So I was on the phone with the company's tech support people this week. We spent a long time with one person who clearly had a script to follow to try to help us fix the problem. It didn't work. So the person gave us a number for someone we could call that we could pay to fix the problem. The odyssey began. We called that number but it was disconnected. Then I called the company back to ask if we could just replace the misbehaving subwoofer. No one knew. I had to go through several departments until I finally got the parts department who said it wasn't possible. Then I called back and went through the whole story again only to be given another number to call for help repairing the problem. I called that number and the person said, "We don't work on systems like the one you have." I called the company back and I was ticked off. I was ready to blister the tech support person for their poor product and worse support. Then I had to ask myself, "What do I desire?" I desire to have my sound system work. But do I desire it to the point where I will abuse another person, where I will ignore God's command to always love, in order to get satisfaction? At that point I decided to choose the right

quarterback, to delight in the Lord and be patient and kind even if those people are useless. We will face choices like that multiple times every day. Which path will we choose to follow?

ROUSE A GRATEFUL HEART

The best way to battle our tendencies to covet is to become a giver. First become a giver of thanks. A heart that is full of gratitude for what it has been given will be less focused on what it doesn't have and thinks it needs.

Second become a great giver to others. Give encouragement, give support, give financially, give praise, give love. One man said, "Nothing breaks the stranglehold of uncontrolled desire like giving things away."