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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
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Series: Courageous Living in a Dangerous World

8 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. **2** 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 livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city." **3** So Joshua and the whole army moved out to attack Ai. He chose thirty thousand of his best fighting men and sent them out at night **4** with these orders: "Listen carefully. You are to set an ambush behind the city. Don't go very far from it. All of you be on the alert. **5** I and all those with me will advance on the city, and when the men come out against us, as they did before, we will flee from them. **6** They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are running away from us as they did before.' So when we flee from them, **7** you are to rise up from ambush and take the city. The LORD your God will give it into your hand. **8** When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the LORD has commanded. See to it; you have my orders."

9 Then Joshua sent them off, and they went to the place of ambush and lay in wait between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai—but Joshua spent that night with the people. **10** Early the next morning Joshua mustered his army, and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai. **11** The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it. They set up camp north of Ai, with the valley between them and the city. **12** Joshua had taken about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. **13** So the soldiers took up their positions—with the main camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley. **14** When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah. But he did not know that an ambush had been set against him behind the city. **15** Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before them, and they fled toward the wilderness. **16** All the men of Ai were called to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city. **17** Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel. They left the city open and went in pursuit of Israel. **18** Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city." So Joshua held out toward the city the javelin that was in his hand. **19** As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.

20 The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising up into the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction; the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the wilderness had turned back against their pursuers. **21** For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from it, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. **22** Those in the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives. **23** But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua. **24** When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. **25** Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. **26** For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. **27** But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the LORD had instructed Joshua. **28** So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day.

Chapter 8 doesn't mean as much unless you know chapter 7. It's much like grace doesn't mean much unless you know of your own personal depravity. If God saved you, and He saved you from being a really, really nice person -- well, then it didn't take much of the blood of Jesus. Chapter 7 was a colossal failure, at every level. The Nation of Israel came through the Jordan, God parted the waters, they walked through. Not one person was harmed. Then they took on the city of Jericho, and they marched around it. They never even lifted a sword, and the city came tumbling down. They went out there with their brass ensemble and had a ball.

Now they come to this point where Joshua sends a couple thousand people against Ai, and the reason is because Ai's reputation was, these guys don't know how to fight, and they're not gonna be any kind of resistance to the Nation of Israel. And so, it was a complete and utter shock when the report came back that they ran away from the city 36 people. And Joshua discovered what is hard to discover, and that is, "the buck stops here" syndrome. What's that mean? It means that at times, you're gonna take the fall even when it's not your fault, because you're the leader. It means that when you are the leader, you have to own responsibility for every person, including yourself, and you have to own the consequences of those, and Joshua felt that, and he discovered what Moses had known for all of his life.

For 40 years, Joshua is second tier on this, and he's probably, in my mind, the best second-chair player I've ever seen. Courageous, loyal, honest. But now he's in a different seat, and it's not an easy seat to sit in. It's not an easy seat to be the one that is held accountable, that is held responsible, if you will, for all of the behavior of your soldiers. And Joshua felt that. He felt the failure. He felt the demise. He felt the difficulty of going probably to 36 different wives and telling them, "Your husband's not gonna come home. I'm sorry." And it's one thing to inform your wife of a decision, you know, "Honey -- I bought a truck and it's just lame. I mean, the thing is a lemon. Sorry." "Well okay, you know, better luck next time." Or, you know, "I bought a pig and it's sterile. It's never gonna have little piglets." "Oh, well -- bacon." The reality is, there's a lot of mistakes we may make, and it's like, you know, the net result of it is, it's not all that bad. But when you've got to knock on the door and tell a wife, "Your husband's not coming home" -- and it's you -- it's a very different story.

I was, I would have to say, almost shocked from last week. I don't normally preach and think, "This is how it's going to impact people, and this is what's gonna happen, and this is what's gonna transpire." I just don't think that way. I preach to the best of my ability and just say, "God, this is yours." And so, when God used last week's message to unearth all kinds of things in people's lives -- difficult things -- the failure was not, "I bought the wrong car." It was, "I was unfaithful." It was, "I have secrets and I haven't told you." It was, "I've lied to my bosses, and I need to tell them, and it's probably going to cost me my job." Those are different things to recover from. But if you don't have chapter 7, then you don't appreciate chapter 8. Because God is always in the business of leading us into a victorious Christian life that is a series of new beginnings.

There's not a person that's listening to me right now that's not a sinner -- a person who has sinned and failed. Lied. And my guess is, I think I'd bet a thousand that there's every person in this room that has secret sins that they've never told anyone. And once in a while, the enemy whispers, "If they knew everything about you, they wouldn't let you lead." It's when we have failed -- not made a mistake, when we have failed -- and the consequences are severe, that we need to understand how God responds to people like that. Because in my estimation, that's all of us. Some of you last week graciously, humbly, courageously shared with me on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday -- "That message was for me." I respect you more than ever, but you need to hear today's message as much as you heard last's week's. So, listen. Listen carefully.

The victorious Christian life. What's victorious? It's one that overcomes our challenges, and it's one that bears fruit. It's one that walks in alignment with the Holy Spirit. It's one that brings life and breath to people. It's a series of new beginnings. Why? Because God said that His mercies are going to be new every morning. And the reason why His mercies are new every morning is because you need them. You wake up, and there's not a day that you don't need the mercy of God. There's not a day that you don't walk in, lavish in, lap in, swim in the grace of God. There's not one of here that can step aside and say, "God, I got this on my own. Thanks for getting me here, but I'll take it." God announces, and He tells us, He says, "If you confess your sins, I'm faithful and just, and I will forgive you your sins." And He never put, "If you do it one time." He said, "If you continue to do it, if you keep coming at it, if you keep coming to me, I'll keep forgiving you." And that's why the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. New opportunities.

God comes to Joshua -- chapter 8, verse 1. "Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid.'" I love it. He had to say that, because Joshua was. Why? "Well, I had 36 men die. I responded in the wrong way. I went in and prayed. God said 'Stand up like a man,' and I wasn't." And I'm sure Joshua at this point said, "Lord, are my people gonna respect me? Are they gonna trust me? Are they gonna betray me?" And probably more importantly, "God, are you done with me?" "And the Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid and do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai.'" In a weird way, I think that's one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible. Because what God is saying to Joshua -- "Joshua, I'm not a one-and-out God. I'm not a God who says, 'If you fail me, I walk.' I'm not a God that, if you betray me, I walk. If you fail as a leader, I'm done. If you don't handle this thing perfectly, I'm outta here."

God's not that way. I know sometimes people are, but God's not that way. And that matters more than anything. It's the victorious Christian life, the one where there's life and there's joy. It's the realization that even if I blow it, God comes along and puts His arm around me. Nothing can separate God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can wedge its way. Even my fickleness, and at times unfaithfulness. "Joshua, we're gonna go at it again. I'm not done with you. You're my man -- I chose you. Let's go tackle it together." So he wrestles with this question. How do we not allow our past failures to determine our future successes? How do we do it? God says to Joshua, "I want you to listen. I want you to learn to listen. Because when you learn to listen in dependence on me, you and I are gonna accomplish a lot."

But I also don't want us to miss in this text that God's never gonna waste yesterday's defeats. Never should you in the middle of your unfaithfulness say, "Boy, God's gonna use this one when He restores me." That's presumptuous grace, and that doesn't fit well with God. But mind you -- when God restores a person, He does. He doesn't waste your mistakes. He doesn't waste your bad decisions. He doesn't waste the things that you've done -- He never does. God grabs us and sometimes He uses those things in a variety of ways with people. Number one is, sometimes God uses you as a warning to people. One time I was with a couple of men -- it was a young guy, and it was an older guy, and the older guy had a history of drug use, and

I was with him with this younger guy, and this younger guy was smoking us like you couldn't believe. He was just trying to pull the wool over our eyes. And finally, my old friend said, "You know what? Do you think you can fool an old fool?" It was the most beautiful thing in the world. "I know drug abuse and I know drug addiction when I see it, and you're high." And I was like, "Whoo! You can see that? You're, like, omniscient!" He knew it in a minute. It was a beautiful testimony of how God used a season in his life where he wrecked a lot and burned a lot of bridges. And yet it was in a moment where he was a warning to a young man -- "Don't think you can fool an old fool."

Sometimes God uses our past failures as encouragement. I was talking not long ago with a gentleman who's in prison, and I asked him, I said, "Hey, along the way, what encouraged you?" He's been there for a long time. He goes, "Well actually, what encouraged me most is, when I got in here I found a guy that had been in here ten years. And he took me under his wing, and he sobered me up, and he taught me how to live and how to get my head together. And he encouraged me. When I was looking at years and years of incarceration." And this brother was telling me how mad he was, and he was mad against the world. And this guy got ahold of him and encouraged him and set him straight and became a mentor and an encourager, and also gave him a lot of wisdom. In other words, how to make it in that place.

I think sometimes God uses your mistakes as great wisdom to other people. There is nothing better -- nothing better than a couple who has weathered difficult, difficult times to step into another couple and to look them in the eyes and say, "You can make this. This marriage doesn't have to be done. God can restore a love for each other." And when you have a person who's walked that path, overcome that betrayal -- man, I'm telling you, there is nothing more powerful than looking them in the eye and telling them, "You can make it. You can."

Maybe one of the things that happens through your failure is that you become a partner with those who are making the journey. And they need it. They need to feel your non-condemnation. They need to feel your encouragement and your love. God's not gonna waste what you've done. But He's also not gonna lead you there. Why? Because a new day is going to bring new strategies. God is always doing that. Sometimes I don't know why. I don't. The way the church looks today is very different than the way the church looked 50 years ago. The time we go to church. Saturday night -- Baptist churches never had Saturday night services. I mean, no one did. Not even the Catholics. The reality is, the church looks different. And God came to Joshua, and He said, "Joshua, we're gonna do this together, but this time it's gonna be different." There was one similarity, and that is, "For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai." It's the same thing that He said to Joshua when He said, "I will deliver into your hands the city of Jericho." And after that, everything was different. He says, "I will deliver them -- his people, his city, his land. And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except" --

Now, this "except" specified here is that there was a difference this time. Number one, "Last time, when you did Jericho, you burn everything, you don't keep anything. All the metal goes into the treasury." God said, "This time, you get to keep the plunder." That's a difference. But there was so much more. When they went to

Jericho, God said, "I want you to keep the entire nation together." So they did. They went out as a nation and they walked around -- one time. "I don't want you to carry on conversations with those in the city of Jericho -- I just want you to march around, go back home, have tea, and I'll see you tomorrow. No swords, nothing. Seventh day, I want you to march around it a number of times, blow some horns, shout a 'Hallelujah!' and Humpty Dumpy and the whole wall's coming down. By the way, I want you to do it during the day. None of this secret stuff at night -- I want you to go out during the day, bold and beautiful."

Ai -- okay, first distinction. "I want you to go at night, not during the day. I want you to split your army, and I want you to send 30,000 of them behind the city, and the rest of you, I want you to wait out front, and you're gonna go." And I'm sure Joshua's like, "Lord, why are we doing that? We got routed last time with a few people. Why are you splitting us up?" "Because I want you to be split up. And this is what I want you to do, Joshua. I want you to run up -- and you're gonna lead this different than last time. I want you to run up to the city, I want you to poke the bear, I want you to shout something offensive at the bear, like, 'We're gonna kill you!' and then I want you to turn around, and when they come at you, I want you to run." Now, I would suggest to you Joshua's never run in his life. There's never a battle he's walked away from. I think he was one of most battle-tested individuals in the Bible -- second maybe only to Caleb. And never in his life has he ever led a group of people in, tipped off the people, said something offensive to them, and turned around and run! And God said, "That's what I want you to do."

There's nothing about this strategy that was similar to Jericho. Why? I think there's a lot of reasons. I would come to one. The worst thing that you can ever do is to learn to trust and fall in love with your strategies and methodology. There's no power in methodology. There's no power in the church meeting at a particular time. There's no power of having a certain liturgy that you follow. There's nothing wrong with those, but there's no power there. There's no power in marching around a city. God could have easily said, "I want you to march around the city of Ai. It doesn't have the wall that Jericho did, but it's okay. I'm gonna tumble all of their homes on top of them right in the middle of the night when they're asleep, and they're gonna be crushed. No problem." God could have done it! Why didn't He? Because the worst thing that you and I could ever fall in love with is our methodologies.

Dr. Robinson told me years ago. He said, "Mark, the greatest threat to your future success is your current success." Soak that one in. "The greatest threat to your future success in ministry is your current success." Why? Because you fall in love with your methodologies. We fall in love with what music we sing. We fall in love with how we do it. We fall in love -- and over the years of the church, you can just see the generations. And I'm old enough now where I'm at a greater risk of this than the vast majority in this room. Why? Because I'm older. I have more experience, more methodologies that I love and cherish. The way we do church. I've always liked doing baptisms at night, and the testimonies, but the staff was like, "Hey -- more people get to witness it, and it's just better." And so -- I kinda gave in to them because they're smarter than I am. The reality is, we always have to be -- and sometimes they're really subtle and small -- but sometimes they're large. They're big. "I want you to fight this fight different, Joshua."

Warren Webster makes this comment, and I love his quote. "God changes His leaders lest we start trusting flesh and blood instead of trusting the Lord, and He changes His methods lest we start depending on our personal experience instead of on His divine promises." When I was in high school, every church I knew had a traveling church choir. Man, I'm telling you what -- I've been on buses up and down the entire west coast. I don't know of any church that has one of those today. When I was younger, Christian concerts were like "the thing." I mean, man, people that you wouldn't even know the name of could pack out an auditorium in Portland for three nights running. Now they have to put five bands together and beg you to come. Things change. They're different. And if you don't like change, you're gonna really not like walking with God. Because He's forever changing strategies and methodologies. Why? Because the moment you start trusting your strategies, you're not dependent in trusting Him. And that's the threat to the church.

A new day is always going to bring new strategies, and those new strategies are going to bring new victories. They moved in, just like they said. They went up, and they poked the bear. Now, Ai -- these guys were really, really overconfident and full of just pride and a lack of humility. And it showed. Why? Because when Joshua and his team went up, and they provoked them and said, "We're here to battle you," the Scripture says that every soldier left Ai and chased after these guys. Why? I think it's because they thought, "We defeated them in the past. We're gonna defeat them now. This is nothing but a victory parade. You wanna go? Who misses a victory parade!" And they went out, and they left behind grandma and grampa and the grandkids, and the city got torched. The soldiers got trapped in-between the two armies, and God perfectly -- though different than Jericho -- perfectly brought this city to defeat. Joshua, it says -- a little graphic -- I wouldn't read it to your kids -- but Joshua grabs the king, hangs him, lets him kind of sit out there as a testimony to everyone. And then, interestingly enough, he brings him down and he puts him on the ground and piles a heap of rocks on him. The third altar. The first altar is when they traveled out and through the Jordan. The second altar is when they were defeated in Ai, and Joshua wanted a reminder that when you don't honor God's Word, this is what can happen. The third one was a king. And Joshua wanted the nation to remind themselves -- when you learn to listen to God, this is the victory that can happen.

My friends, it's true. God can use your past mistakes, but that's not all God has for you. If that's all God is gonna use you for, is to be a reminder, to be a warning, to be somehow an anecdotal story of what not to do -- I think in some ways that's kind of a pathetic ending. God has new victories for you. When He restored David, He had new kingdoms that He wanted David to lead. When God restored Peter, He had a church that He wanted to build. When God restored John Mark from his failed ministry trips, God had something of the written word, and God had ministry on His mind. In other words, it's not just, He's gonna use you and the mistakes you've made. He has new victories for you. And He has new ministries that you're gonna lead, and He has new places of impact that you're going to take. And if you don't have that, if you don't have that conviction in your heart, then you're settling for a story that God doesn't want to write for you.

Chapter 7 is real -- you don't listen to God, and there's some big consequences. But 8 is as real -- when you learn to listen to God, and you walk in humility, and you listen to His Word, there's new victories that God wants to write for you. And when He does, Joshua does something that I find so compelling. New victories, interestingly enough, renew old commitments. They've routed Ai -- verse 30 tells us that Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord. This is the fourth altar. And where he built it I think is kind of significant. He's at a city, or a region called Shechem. It's Mount Ebal. What happened there? It's the place where Moses gave us his last message before he died and turned the reins over to Joshua. It's the place where Abraham built an altar. Why would he take people 30 miles north? Now, for you and I to drive up to Wilsonville and build an altar along the river -- nah, not much problem. We can be there in about 30 minutes. Thirty miles? It's gonna take two days to get everyone up there -- at least. Why? What happened at this place? What did Joshua do? Well, he built an altar. It's different.

The Scripture tells us that he reached back into the Scriptures, in Exodus chapter 20, where God describes the kind of altar that he wanted to build. It was an altar where no tools could be used to craft the rocks. It was an altar that was not to be decorated in any way. It was an altar that was to be plain, and it was an altar where Joshua chiseled the ten commandments into the stones. What was he doing? Why? Because the point of the altar is this -- "When you look at the altar, I do not want you to see anything of the power and the hand of a human. The power of God, the blood of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ is the only thing that is ever going to be able to purchase your freedom, or your promised land." Joshua took them back -- I would dare say probably a score of them were not around when Moses received the ten commandments. Maybe they don't even remember the last message that Moses gave. Maybe they, too, were getting so far from the history and the promise that they were running in danger of forgetting their roots.

Methodologies need to come and go. They always do for the church. But the truth about our dependence, the truth about the Scriptures -- I believe that the Bible is God's Word, completely true in every aspect of it. I believe that what it teaches about Christ is our Hope and our Salvation. It's one thing to change our methodologies, but Joshua was saying we don't change the root. We don't change the core of what we believe and who we are. And that's why, if you look at the rest of chapter 8, he describes this altar that is being built, and it's built in a way that testifies to everyone -- the sacrifices that we depended upon are not of our own hands, they're of God's.

See, every day right now, you wake up in a world that seems really, really hostile and different. I grew up in a world where we absolutely knew the difference between a man and a woman. No one even asked that question. The thing we were fighting for in my generation and my day was for all of you who had daughters, is that they could be able to compete at a national and international level on the same level as men -- women against women, men against men. Title 9 was huge -- we fought for it, and every dad that had a daughter was proud of it. But today we're confused. We're so deeply confused to the level we can't even say with confidence the difference between a man and a woman. We wake up, and there's issues, and there's wars that are going. And then we get the news that four dear friends -- I say

"friends" because they're people made in the image of God, who were sleeping in their tent last night -- got ran over and killed, just a block from us. And there's more confusion about that.

After the first service, I was just praying with a dear brother who knew one of the guys -- had a picture of him! It's not just an arbitrary individual, it was a friend, a person he knew. And he gets into this world, and this world seems really confusing to live in and it's kind of like crazy, and people are taking sides, and we don't know where to go, and it's in that moment that Joshua leads us. Where does he take us? If we want to see new victories, then there are some old commitments that we have to be willing to make. And I think these commitments are important, because what they do is, they cut through all of the garbage of people who can't figure out the difference between a man and a woman.

And Joshua took the nation back and said, "This is what I believe. I believe in a God who delivers. I believe in a God who gives us a sacrifice, who meets the very deepest needs of our life, and it's not because of our hands -- it's because of the hand of God." And he chiseled in it the law. And he was saying to the nation -- "When you honor God's word, He will honor you, and if you dishonor God's word, there's gonna be consequences." And I would say, my friends, we need to come back to the same place. We need to come back and say, "You know what -- this is the Scriptures. This is God's word, and it was given to us by God, and it is not given to us with error. God made sure that He oversaw the inspiration and the writing and the preservation of this Word. And there's a Word of life and truth for us. And it tells us God created in His own image and He made male and female. He created them." And it tells us about Christ who came and lived a sinless life, and He died on a cross so that He could forgive us in the capacity to forgive us, and to change us and to indwell us, and to transform us and to give us life eternal. And it doesn't matter where a person is at on the political spectrum -- our hope and our future is in the revealed Word of God. "Joshua, listen. Listen to what I say. Do what I say, and there will be many victories."

It is God's intention that our church regularly does what it did today. Six baptisms in the first service and six baptisms in the second service. And the only thing I regret for you is that you don't know the story behind -- the miraculous story behind each and every one of them. But God doesn't want us just to make it -- He wants us to be victorious. He wants us to bear fruit. He wants us to make a difference. He wants us to be in the middle of this city, this dark, dark city named Salem that knows so little peace. And He wants us to be victorious. But once in a while, you're gonna stumble. Some of you had the courage to admit it last week. But every defeat, every mishap, can be followed by victory when God is honored and His Word is believed. Every tragedy of even four deaths can be followed by great victory and advancement if the church will honor God and believe His Word. Do I know always how God's gonna do it? Ha. Seldom do I know how God's gonna do it. I just know He will. And I know that if we listen to Him, some days He'll say, "March around the city." Other days He'll say, "Come in the middle of the night." But what He will say to the church is, "Listen to me. And when I tell you to do something, do it. And I will give into your hands the city of Salem." Let's pray.

Lord, today there are a lot of families who are being alerted. There are police officers who have been busy all night long. There are dear friends at the mission that are struggling because they kicked one of those guys out yesterday because he wouldn't honor the rules. And today they're dealing with the tragedy of those deaths. Lord, we own this city. Not because we own it, but You've entrusted it to us. And we as shepherds and those who love Christ, we ask for this city, that we would see new victories, we would see the hand of God work in powerful and beautiful ways. And so God, would you, wherever we need to, teach us what it means to honor you and to listen to your Word. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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