

THE PAST IS PRESENT **(Joshua 8:1-35)**

When I was a student at OBU, we had chapel every Wednesday morning. Chapel attendance was compulsory. You had to attend a certain number of chapel services each semester. Unlike cramming for a semester final, you couldn't pull an all-nighter and attend eight chapel services the night before the end of the semester. They were held once a week, and your attendance was electronically kept. Each student handed in a punch card as he or she left chapel. Do you remember the hanging chads of the 2000 Presidential Election? That was the kind of punch card we used. I'm sure it is much higher tech now than it was then.

I usually enjoyed chapel and could probably count on one hand the number of times I missed during my four years there. Many years have passed between then and now, and there aren't many chapel services I still remember, but a few do stand out.

I still remember the outline one man used for his message. I don't remember his name or where he was from, but I remember his outline. He used several grammatical terms for his three points. He said, the Past is Present; the Present is Tense; the Future is Perfect.

What he said then is as true today as it ever was. Our present is undeniably tense. I don't have to argue that point or prove that is so. We are looking forward to the perfect future God has promised.

Today, I am going to borrow the wording of his first point for the title of my message: "The Past Is Present." You and I are who we are due in large measure to our past experiences, both good and bad. How we respond to problems and pressures is governed to a great degree by the coping mechanisms we learned when we were young. How we view present reality is colored by our history. The past is present.

The truth of that statement was played out in the lives of Joshua and the people of God in Joshua 8. As you turn to that chapter, let me remind you that in Joshua 7, Achan's secret sin removed the blessing of God upon the people. They went up to fight against the city of Ai, and they lost the battle. What should have been an easy victory became a shameful defeat. Achan's name meant "trouble," and he brought trouble upon the people because he did exactly what he and the other soldiers were warned not to do. In the battle against Jericho, they were told not to take any spoil for themselves. Achan did so, and he hid what he took. He couldn't hide that sin from God. Eventually that sin was uncovered, both figuratively and literally. Achan was judged. In the chapter before us we will see that God's blessing upon His people returns.

Past Failure Enables Present Victory

Failure is never final for the people of God. In fact, it is our failure that often helps us learn how to be victorious. Joshua and the people learned from their former failure, and God used that to bring victory to His people.

I want you to note that prior to that first battle, there is no evidence that Joshua prayed to God before sending his troops against Ai. Notice also the counsel that Joshua's men

gave to him prior to the disastrous first attempt to take Ai. Look at 7:3-4. We have evidence here of two sins—presumption and pride. When we fail to pray, we are presuming that God is going to be there for us or worse that we really don't need His help. "We got this," is what we are communicating.

The second time around, Joshua didn't act until he had a word from God. Look at 8:1-2. This time, God directed the attack. And this time, Joshua was not to send just a small contingent. God said, "Take all the fighting men with you."

That is what God said to do; so, that is what they did. Look at v. 3a.

We have been in Joshua since October 8th, which was only one day after Hamas attacked Israel. The only other time I have preached through Joshua was in 1990, two weeks after Sadaam Hussein invaded the neighboring country of Kuwait. Hussein's Iraqi forces moved against Kuwait on August 2nd. Five days later, President Bush authorized Desert Shield. He assembled an international force from 35 nations to oppose Sadaam Hussein.

At its peak, there were 600,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia sent there to defend that nation and to establish a base of operations from which they would eventually push Iraqi forces out of Kuwait.

That happened when Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm in January of 1991. By this time, there was a coalition of 39 countries, and 697,000 American troops were stationed in the Gulf.

In the first 100 hours of hostilities, coalition troops led by General Norman Schwarzkopf (Stormin' Norman), succeeded in destroying over 3,000 tanks, 1,400 armored personnel carriers, and 2,200 artillery pieces along with countless other vehicles. Iraqi forces were overwhelmed with the speed and ferocity of the American-led coalition.

Back in 1990, when I preached through Joshua, I referred to Joshua's attack against Ai as Operation Ambush. The battle plan God gave Joshua was genius.

Joshua stationed 5,000 of his troops on the west side of Ai. The rest of the soldiers hid themselves north of the city. They took their positions at night under the cover of darkness. In the morning, the King of Ai saw the Israeli soldiers stationed on the west side. He mustered his forces, and they went out to meet the Hebrew soldiers whom they had recently routed. When Ai attacked, the Israelite troops turned tail and began to run. It seemed like the same song, second verse. The troops of Ai ran after them. Look at 8:14-17.

At that point, the rest of Israel's army stormed Ai. There were no soldiers left there to defend it. Israel set fire to the city. The army of Ai looked back to see their city literally going up in smoke. Then, the soldiers who had been fleeing suddenly turned, fought, and destroyed the shocked army of Ai. Look at 8:20-22.

God turned past failure into present victory. He did that for Israel 3400 years ago. He will do that for you today.

People routinely learn from past failure.

- A football team views game film soon after each game to learn what worked and more importantly what didn't as they prepare for their next game.

- After student exams have been graded, they are returned to the students so they can learn from the mistakes they made.
- Elections are held every two years so voters can correct they mistakes they made in the last one two years ago, four years ago, or six years prior.

An accomplished man was once asked the secret of his success. He replied, “Good judgment.” When asked where he learned good judgment, he answered, “From experience.” When asked where he got his experience, he admitted, “From poor judgment.”

All of us have exercised poor judgment from time-to-time. That poor judgment has put us into the position of getting some valuable experience.

Proverbs 24:16 reads, “For the righteous falls seven times and rises again.” Because you have fallen, because you have failed does not disqualify you from the ranks of the righteous. The important thing is that you get up again and learn from your failure.

Will you fail? Yes. Will you get up again? Only you can answer that question.

The past impacts the present. Past failure enables present victory.

Past Commands Require Present Obedience

Look with me at Joshua 8:30-35. Before his death, Moses prescribed a service that was to be held. We read about it in Deuteronomy 27. Moses gave the people clear commands as to what they were to do after they entered the land.

They were to go to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. These are two small mountains that stand opposite one another. Gerizim is just under 2900 feet above sea level and Ebal is just under 3000 feet. Both stand about 700 feet above the valley between the two. The location formed a natural amphitheater with incredible acoustics. The top of each mountain is about a mile apart, and yet people on either side could hear one another as well as people in valley and vice versa. At the time, there was a small village in the valley known as Shechem.

Today, there is a large Muslim city known as Nablus that is situated in the valley between the two mounts. The city boasts a population of almost 157,000 people. These two mounts and the valley are part of the West Bank today. With the presence of such a large city, the acoustics, obviously, have changed.

In Joshua’s day, however, the natural amphitheater was the perfect setting for what Moses commanded the people to do. Six of the tribes were to assemble on Mount Gerizim, and six of the tribes were to gather on Mount Ebal.

In Deuteronomy chapters 27-28 we have a list of curses and a list of blessings. The curses will come upon those who disobey God in certain ways, and the blessings will be bestowed on those who obey God. Joshua read those curses and blessings in the hearing of all the people.

Before doing so, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal. It was made of uncut stone. No man had worked the stone with tools. Not only were animal offerings made at the altar, but the words of had God given to Moses were written on the uncut stones. Joshua made

sure that everything was done in accordance with what Moses had commanded before the people crossed over into the Promised Land.

What I find both interesting and instructive is that the people had just won two significant victories—first over the city of Jericho and then the city of Ai. They were on a roll. They had momentum working on their behalf. You might think they were anxious to take on the next city, and they probably were. Instead of doing that, however, they took a pause in their military campaign. It wasn't a humanitarian pause for certain. It wasn't a military pause to resupply. If anything, it was a religious pause. They traveled 25 miles out of their way to the north and a few miles west to Mount Ebal, Mount Gerizim, and the valley between the two. They went there for the specific purpose of obeying in the present what they had been commanded in the past.

Obedying God in the present is always the proper course of action. Postponing obedience to a later time in the future is always the wrong course of action. Delayed obedience is simply disobedience.

It is not uncommon for young adults to say to themselves, "I'm really busy right now with college or with getting my career started. I'll get serious with God again after things start to slow down." I've got news for you. Things never slow down.

- There is never a good time to stop worshiping in the company of other believers.
- There is never a good time to stop reading your Bible.
- There is never a good time to stop praying.
- There is never a good time to stop encouraging others in their faith and letting them encourage you in yours.

The Procrastinator's Club of America was founded in 1956. It is still in existence. Their home office is in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Les Waas, their founding president said in 1987 that the club has "about a half-million members in the United States, although only about 5,000 have gotten around to joining." In 1995 you could join for \$20, and once you did you would receive in the mail what was called "Last Month's Newsletter."

Back when the club started, they decided to have a Christmas Party, but they postponed it to April.

In 1966 the club held an anti-war demonstration against the War of 1812. About a month afterwards the club's newsletter claimed their protest worked because a treaty had been signed.

In 1991, the club picketed a seafood restaurant because it offered an early bird special. Waas held a blank sign because he hadn't gotten around to writing anything on it.

The motto of the club is, "Behind You All the Way." It is reported that one man got kicked out of the club because he mailed his Christmas Cards on time.

Don't put off obedience. Obedience is what God blesses.

Past Sin Can Receive Present Forgiveness

As I mentioned, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal, and that is where he offered

burnt sacrifices. Why?

When God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, He also gave regulations regarding those sacrifices. It was as if God was saying, “Thou shalt not . . . but I know you will; so, here is the way to escape condemnation for your sin and disobedience.”

Sin brings judgment, but the animal sacrifices showed that it was possible for an innocent victim to die in the place of the sinner. That is what we can an atoning sacrifice. In such a case the innocent victim would receive the sinner’s punishment.

The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament point forward to the one supreme and only sufficient sacrifice for sin—the death of Jesus on the cross. The author of Hebrews addresses this at length in Hebrews 9 and 10. Listen to Hebrews 9:27-28; 10:11-14.

Joshua constructed the altar on Mount Ebal. Why Mount Ebal? That is where the curses were to be read. The sacrifice of forgiveness is for those who are under the curse of sin. The Bible claims, “All have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). It also teaches, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). It further tells us, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Because Jesus died for you, if you receive Him as your Savior and Lord, you will receive what only He offers, forgiveness of sin. Who else can succeed in doing that? No one else.

There was an interesting thing about this altar. No human tool was to be used in its construction. The point is that man can’t add anything to the work of God to achieve salvation. Salvation is out of your hands.

When Moravian missionaries went to the Eskimos, they were unable to find a word in their language for *forgiveness*. They overcame that problem by stringing together a few words to make a new word. The new word is 24 letters long. It is: “Is-sum-agi-jou-jung-nai-ner-mik.” The word literally means, “Not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore.” When Jesus forgives you, you are separated from your sin as far as the east is from the west. He remembers it no more.

The past is present. How so? Past failure enables present victory. Past commands require present obedience. Past sin can receive forgiveness.

Past Promises Guide Present Behavior

At that special service at the special location, Joshua read the entire book of the Law to the people. Look again at vv. 34-35. We must remember that the people didn’t each own a copy of Scripture. There were no book stores. There were no copiers or printers.

Joshua knew the people needed to be reminded of what God’s word said. They needed to be familiar with God’s promises which contained both His curses and His blessings. The curses were a result of disobedience while the blessings came in response to the obedience of the people. God’s word was meant to guide the people’s behavior.

Nothing has changed. That is still true today. Truthfully, we have a greater advantage than did the people of Joshua’s day. If you can read, raise your hand. If you own a Bible, raise your hand. If you own a smart phone, you can put an ap on your phone, and you can read the entire Bible in multiple versions. If you remember just portion of a verse, but you don’t know where it is found, in a matter of seconds you can type what you do

remember, and the passage you were looking for pop up just like that.

Despite our technological sophistication and the many helps we have to study God's word, as a nation, we are more ignorant of God's word today than we have ever been.

Our ignorance of the Bible has had a devastating effect on our behavior. Morality may be at an all-time low in our nation. Although the framers of our constitution had great respect for the Bible, some judges today interpret the constitution in ways that are antithetical to what the Bible teaches.

Have you purchased a Bible recently? It can be confusing. There are literally hundreds of printed English translations and paraphrases of the Bible. People often ask, "What is the best translation of the Bible?"

The best translation of the Bible is the truth of the Bible translated into how you live your life. Instead of asking someone, "Do you possess a Bible?" a better question would be, "Does the Bible possess you?"

We have been looking at how the past is present. Many people have a problem with past. They have regrets and hurts that are associated with the past.

As much as we might like to, we are unable to go back and change the past. You can't change yesterday. You just can't. Let me tell you what you can do. While you can't change your yesterday, you can start today and change your tomorrow.

That chapel speaker I heard long ago got it right. The past is present. And yes, the present is tense. Just turn on the news, and you quickly get a sense as to how tense the present is. But, if you make some good choices today, God will give you a future that is perfect. Your forever future will be perfect if you trust Jesus today as your Savior and Lord.