

13th September 2020 6pm Being Present in His Presence

Service led by Anthony Manning, talk by Sam Whiteside

Bible readings by Hanne Manning and Felicity Hawke

This transcription is only of the readings and the talk.

Reading: Proverbs 8:27-31 [NIVUK 1984]

[Hanne Manning:]

Wisdom is speaking about the Lord God.

²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so that the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰ Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹ rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Reading: Joshua 8:1-8 [NIVUK 1984]

[Felicity Hawke:]

The second reading is from the book of Joshua chapter 8, verses 1 to 8.

Ai destroyed.

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.’

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Talk

And now, over to Sam.

[Sam Whiteside:]

Good evening. I wonder how excited you are about this evening, and the rest of this week? I wonder, as we look at our subject for tonight, 'being present in His presence', whose presence? The presence of God. Our first reading can be called 'the call of wisdom'. "I was there!" Imagine actually being present in the mind of God at the beginning of the universe! "I was there" (Proverbs 8:27) There at the creation of the world! Watching as plans were carried out on such an awe-inspiring scale. Nothing in a film or on television or at the Olympic Games or a firework display or the World Cup could compare with being present at creation. Amazing spectacles! Sounds! Then going on in the story, how God applies the mind of humans to the wonder of inventions. Technology as we see it tonight on our screens. Science, aviation, medicine, the appreciation of art and music. Being there, being present when all these things are happening. Being there in a much more important way, perhaps, with the disciples and Jesus' ministry. There at the feeding of the 5,000 men (besides women and children). Seeing the lame walk and the blind see, being present at the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, or, going back a little, to the many battles in the Old Testament, and to see what we in 2020 can learn from those battles, especially as we face battles in our lives today: COVID, viruses, problems with sickness, and so on, and so on.

So I'm going to do my best to help you visualise a battle that took place for a little-known city built on a heap of stones. Now I learned a lot from evaluating what we can learn from our wise God, and so increase our wisdom. I hope I can take you there now. I leave you to follow in the Bible, Joshua [chapters] 7 and 8, but you don't necessarily have to read it now, but do promise to read it sometime this week. To set the picture, Joshua is now the leader of the children of Israel, Moses having been called home by God on the other side of the river Jordan. The Israelites have crossed over and taken the heavily fortified city of Jericho, we all know the story: the walls fell down flat and all that. But as the children of Israel advanced into the promised land, their next objective was the city of Ai. It was in the area of quarries, and was at a higher elevation than the land around. Do you see the picture, as if you were there? Joshua in his wisdom sends a recon party to investigate the defences - how the land lies (chapter 7 verse 2), and they report back: "Don't bother all the people, Joshua, there are in fact no worthwhile defences. Just send two or three thousand guys up there (chapter 7 verse 3). We would say today 'easy easy'.

Here we see Joshua's first mistake. Even though Ai seemed a very small problem to overcome, he didn't consult God about it. He listened to man and decided himself what he should do. Sounds familiar? At least he took the best insurance option and decided to send the highest estimate of the number of men needed, 3,000 (chapter 7 verse 4). Surprise, surprise, they were defeated, chased down from the higher ground and in the process lost 36 killed (chapter 7, verse 5). Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. And as we watch, guess what happened next? Joshua blames God! (chapter 7 verse 7). What has happened to this Premier League team (if you're football fans) who have been beaten by a minnow, not even in the league! What a humiliation. Why didn't Joshua stay on the other side, in the other division: on the other side of Jordan, instead of bringing us here? Then, as if to question God further, he says, "What will happen to your great Name?" (chapter 7 and verse 9), and the defeated leader sinks into despair in the dust of the ground (chapter 7 verse 6). "Stand up!" says God (verse 10). At least Joshua was listening!

Do you see the picture, as if you were present? And have you ever been in a similar situation? Joshua, of course, gets up and listens to the wisdom that God imparts to him.

- Number one: why, oh why were they defeated? Well, we all know, looking back to the story of Jericho, that Achan committed the sin of actually stealing from God and hiding his treasure under his tent.
- And secondly, God imparts to Joshua, how to be an overcomer: clear, clear instructions as to how to overcome the enemy, get rid of the sin, which he did (rather strictly, rather severely), and then see the way ahead. He tells Joshua to involve all the people. You remember, the spy said "two or three thousand will do"? Oh, no. God says to Joshua "involve *all* the people, the whole army" (chapter 8 verse 1 and verse 3 as well). Now that's a lesson to us as well, as a family of believers, the body of Christ, that we should all be involved in the service of God as disciples of Jesus. God intends us all to be involved in the battles of life.

Then Joshua chose - Listen! 30,000 of his best fighting men (chapter 8 verse 3). Note that that was 10 times the number of the 3,000 Joshua had been advised to send by his spies. You know, God always knows the strength of the enemy we face. Then we have something rather wonderful: the first record of the ambush strategy. There's a lesson for us to learn here as well. Don't be afraid of new ways that God chooses for us, His followers, to overcome. You know, sometimes He says, "I want you to do it this way." Sometimes it is the old way. But sometimes He sees a new approach, which will be more successful. His wisdom, His wisdom tells us to send like Joshua, "Put your crack troops, the best fighting men, behind the city and tell them to wait for your signal." Gripping stuff now! See the picture? Still see the picture? God told Joshua to place the ambush also to the west of Ai with another 5,000 men to cut off any help which the men of Bethel might think about providing. After all, the men of Bethel were probably watching and covering the Israeli advance into the promised land, and they thought "If Ai falls, we're next." The wisdom of God, you see, was imparted to Joshua, and he obeyed.

I often wonder what Joshua would have thought of protecting his position from the rear from a possible ally, the men of Bethel. You know, Satan has many allies in this world. And we must listen to God's wisdom imparted to us to safeguard us as we follow to the promised land, to our inheritance, Heaven, as Jesus has made it possible. The plan, of course, was for the rest of the troops to approach Ai as before, then to retreat and draw the men of Ai out of the city. Then at the signal from Joshua, the ambush troops would move in and take the city. The wisdom of God in action - I like that! The wisdom of God in action. "Do what the Lord has commanded. See to it." And Felicity emphasised that when she read it, at the end there. "Do what the Lord has commanded. See to it." It worked! It worked! Of course it worked. God's plans always worked, and always will work. They always will.

Now at the beginning, we had a reading from Proverbs, whose author was Solomon of course. When God asked him what he wanted, when he could have asked for anything, he chose wisdom. God gave Solomon wisdom, and very great insight and breadth of understanding (recorded in 1 Kings 4 verse 29). God's Word says, "He who lacks wisdom only has to ask for it. And I will give it to him or her." (James 1:5). Now Joshua at least got some things right. He listened to God when he had a problem. He obeyed God when he was in trouble. He encouraged and defeated everything in his path in the end. But he also encouraged those who were downcast. Because it says in chapter 8 and verse 9, the next verse of our reading if we read on, "He spent the night before the battle with the people". And when he had victory, based on God's wisdom and plans, he gave the glory to God (chapter 8 verse 30). He gave the glory to God: in fact he built an altar. He gave the glory to God, when he could have taken the adulation himself: "Look what I have done, look what we did!" No: "what God did."

So what can we learn from all this?

- Number one, always talk to God about our problems, however small they might be, or we might think they are. Ai was a small city, compared with Jericho.
- Listen to God's wisdom. Even if we think we know the answer.
- Be an encourager. I said that earlier: be an encourager to those who are finding life hard. Some of the people who were there, that Joshua met with and stayed with the night. may have been in the previous battle when they were defeated. And so, he was there to encourage them. He stayed with them.
- Then see the bigger picture, see the bigger picture. Being there, in His presence, being there, seeing the bigger picture.
- And give Him the glory for all the victories, the glory for what His wisdom achieves.

Then you and I can say as Solomon said in that reading from Proverbs. "Then I was a craftsman¹ at His side." Whose side? God's side. "I was filled with delight, day after day, rejoicing in His whole world, and delighting in mankind." (Proverbs 8:30-31). I can be present in His presence. I can be there, and witness the wisdom of our Creator God, of our sustaining God, of our victorious God every day, or as the Word says, day by day².

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, as we thank You that we are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus, because we are forgiven people. But we have to go on. Please help us to be more Christ-like as we move forward in our lives. And by Your wisdom, extend Your Kingdom by the love and power of Your Holy Spirit living in us. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is within You." Father, we thank You for Jesus tonight. But we also thank You for Your wisdom that You impart to us, so that we can be on the victory side.
Thank You, Father. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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1 Berean Study Bible [BSB] translation

2 BSB translation again