



HOW TO WIN A WAR

Last time we thought about how to lose a war: this time we're thinking about how to win one – i.e. how to be successful.

What do you think it takes? What is 'success'?

There's a Gary Larson cartoon I found the other day: history and the snake! The message being: sometimes small decisions, small degrees of change, can make an enormous difference to the outcome. It's true at home; it's true at work; it's true at school; it's true in church.

And as we'll see, it's true in this chapter of Joshua.

Joshua 8:1-29

OK, in contrast to last time, the attack works. But what makes it successful? The answers (there are more than one) are all there in the first 8 verses. But a good summary can be found in the Book of Proverbs, 16:1-3.

A literal translation of vs3 says this:

*Roll to Yahveh whatever you do,
And your intentions will be successful.*

Now we need to remember that proverbs are just that – proverbs: sayings that are generally true most of the time, though there are exceptions to that rule (which is why you get proverbs that seem to contradict each other, sometimes).

But we also need to understand that God's definition of success and our definition of success may not look the same.

E.g. who would you regard as more successful:

- Someone who leads 10 people to faith in Jesus in their lifetime?
- Someone who leads thousands of people to faith in Jesus in their lifetime?
- Someone who leads no-one to faith in Jesus in their lifetime, but has been involved in people becoming Christians somewhere down the line, without ever knowing about it?

The answer is: they're as successful as each other, because they're each playing a part in whatever God is doing. The principle is a simple one: commit to God whatever you do ... and leave the results to Him.

But what does 'committing to God' look like, in practice?

1) It's in the prayers we offer. In Scripture, there are 2 equally valid ways of discerning God's will: if you have no idea what to do, ask God; and if you have every idea what to do, ask God. That's the point that Proverbs is making, I think. And it's exactly what Joshua does here.

But praying is about more than us talking - it's about us *listening*. Message repeat: to be in a place where we can hear God's voice, we have to make time and space for it. To meditate on God's word; to reflect on our situation; to consult other people who know this God, too. This is something that Joshua had failed to do when they attacked Ai the first time, and it's one of the reasons for their defeat. There's no doubt about it: I am at my most discouraged and disheartened (yes, it does happen) when I am not spending time with God and listening to what He has to say to me.

As it says in the Psalms (34:19): "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them ..."

I'm sure I'm not the only one.

2) It's in the plans we make. Whose plan was the attack on Ai? It was God's plan, right? Yes. But was that it? No: it was Joshua's plan, too. Joshua made his intentions known; God gives him some guidance ("set an ambush"); then He leaves Joshua to work out the rest for himself. In fact, the approach Joshua takes was an already-established Egyptian siege tactic, 2nd millennium BC.

There's an idea going round amongst some Christians today. It goes like this: "To walk by the Spirit is to forsake planning." Where is that in the Bible? Answer: nowhere. In fact, Jesus commands us to "love the LORD your God with all your? Mind" (Matthew 22:37). Imagine: you're heading off on holiday, you've boarded the plane, you've found your seat, and the pilot's voice suddenly rings out over the speaker: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. It's a beautiful morning and flight conditions today appear to be excellent. There's just one problem: I have no flight plan, and no way of knowing where I'm going. But I fully expect us to get there anyway. Please enjoy the flight." Might you be worried?

Yes, we need to pray. Yes, we need to avoid relying solely on our own abilities. But we need to use the grey matter, too. You could say it's a waste of God-given talent if we don't.

In fact, you could call it laziness.

3) It's in the lessons we learn. How easy might it have been for the Israelites to hang their heads and say, "Well, that's it: we failed. Ai is too much for us: time to march back to the other side of the Jordan." And maybe there was a bit of that going on, hence the repeat of God's words in ch1: "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

Giving up may be an easy option; but it's rarely the best one. Joshua clearly agreed – hence what he does next. He'd underestimated the enemy: so, instead of sending a small force, he sends the whole Israelite army. There are 3 ways of dealing with our blunders: 1) deny it; 2) beat ourselves up over it; or 3) look to God, make a 'note to self', and take a different approach. Joshua does the last one. He evaluates the situation, makes corrections, and tries again. And this time, the city is taken.

Life is a place of constant education (as the saying goes, 'every day's a school day!'). Every experience provides the opportunity to learn.

Question is: are we taking it?

Success As God Sees It

Let's go back to Proverbs 16 again, and the question I started with. For some, success might look like amazing grades, a beautiful / hunky spouse, well-behaved children, a pay-rise every year, a 4-bedroom house (or just 'a house!'), a church of 3000+ people with new converts every week, etc.

That's the world's definition.

But it may not be God's.

The Israelites might have thought this way, too: success might have been destroying Ai. But I don't think Proverbs would agree. The real success was in them being the people God had called them to be. "And your intentions will be successful" is another way of saying, "Your desires will be in line with His." It's about committing your way to God, not on how successful your life or work or ministry is.

Your job is to pray God's way, plan God's way, and learn as you go. The rest is down to Him.

That's how to win a war.