

## Moving Further In

*Joshua 8:1-35*

**M**yer Harris Cohen was born to a poor family in New York city, and as he grew he earned a name for himself as a New Jersey punk and a strong arm man. His friends all called him “Mickey.” Later in life he moved to the West Coast, and became a gangster after the order of Al Capone.

By 1949, Mickey Cohen was the top man in the Los Angeles underworld. From his various gambling casinos, private gambling clubs, legalized poker games, and various other enterprises, Mickey handled one-half million dollars every day. He and his glamorous wife entertained lavishly in their luxurious home. Nothing happened in the city of Los Angeles without his approval.

Through the course of his life, numerous contracts were put out on his life, his home was bombed, and his car was riddled with bullets. He was tried a number of times for murder, armed robbery and assault, but he was never convicted. Eventually, in 1951, Cohen was sent to prison for tax evasion, where he stayed for five years.

He was searching desperately for something real in his life. A Christian layman in Los Angeles met with him to explain the way to find peace with God, and Mickey Cohen repeated a prayer asking Jesus to forgive him of his sin and enter his life. Under the influence of some friends, Mickey flew to New York, where Billy Graham was preaching a crusade in Madison Square Garden.

Graham met with Cohen, and tried to help him understand the significance of his prayer to receive Jesus. It began to appear as though gangster Mickey Cohen had committed his life to Jesus Christ!

But when Cohen returned to Los Angeles, he began once again to hang around his buddies from the underworld. A friend contacted him and told him that as a new Christian he ought to be putting as much distance between himself and his mob connections as possible.

Cohen replied, “There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster? If I have to give up all that—if that’s Christianity—count me out.” (as told by Charles Colson, in *Loving God*, HarperPaperbacks, New York, 1987, pp. 89-105)

Mickey Cohen was willing to flirt with the idea of Christianity, but when it came time to move further into his commitment to Christ, he gave up his pursuit.

God had led the Hebrew people in their march through the wilderness. He guided them as they crossed the Jordan River, and instructed them as to how they could conquer the fortified city of Jericho. When the Hebrews attacked the little town of Ai, they were humiliated in defeat. When their leader, Joshua, went to God to ask why, God told him it was because of the sinful rebellion of one man. Remove that blight from among them, and they could move on. As it was, they could not go any further in.

Some of us may have been toying with the idea of becoming firmly and deeply committed to Christ, but we have not been willing to follow the rules of commitment. As long as being a Christian means that we can live the way we want, without too much interference from God, then we're alright. Then we discover that Christ demands more of us than a casual acquaintance or an intellectual flirtation with Him—that His desire is to come into the realm of our lives and reign there as Sovereign Lord—we are often unwilling to move any further in. We are often unwilling to go any deeper in our walk with Christ because of what it will cost us.

But the Hebrew people *were* willing to go further. They knew there was so much more of Canaan than they had seen and experienced. And perhaps you are quite willing to go further into your commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ because you know that there is so much more of God than you have seen and experienced. But how do you move further in?

When the problem with Achan had been resolved, God said to Joshua, “*Go up and attack Ai; it’s time to move further in.*” And God told Joshua *how*, and in what God said to Joshua we can find some keys to our moving further into our spiritual land of Canaan. We can find out how we can advance in our walk with Christ.

## **1 We can move further in by looking to God as the source of our encouragement, v. 1a**

When Joshua took the reins of leadership from Moses, God had said to him, “*Be strong, and courageous, because you will lead these people to inhabit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous ... (Joshua 1:6-7).* Then again, “*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and*

*courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).*

I believe God said these things to him because Joshua may have had a tendency to become discouraged very easily. And why shouldn't he? These people had been wandering around in the desert for forty years! They had nothing which could help them militarily—all they had were spears and swords they perhaps had made themselves, but they had no training, no wealth. Joshua had no plan for providing any of those things they would need. Just look at the odds!

So far it had been fairly simple. Conquering Jericho was easy—all they had to do was march around the walls and blow a few trumpets as God instructed, and the walls fell by themselves! But the very first time they tried to attack a town on their own—and a much smaller town than Jericho—they suffered humiliating defeat at the expense of thirty-six Hebrew lives. Not a very good beginning for someone who aspired to fill the sandals of Moses!

So after the rebellion was removed from the camp of the Hebrews, and the responsible people punished, the very next thing God said to Joshua was **“Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”** In other words, God was saying, “Joshua, let's do this the same way we started out. You trusted in Me at the beginning when you had no plan and no resources. Trust Me now. Look to Me as your source of strength and support.”

Discouragement at that point could have hindered the entire nation of Israel. It would have kept them from moving further in, so it was vitally important that Joshua keep his eyes on God.

Oftentimes in our quest to know the heart of God, we grow discouraged. When we discover that living for Christ is not as easy as we thought it would be, we have a tendency to take our eyes off Christ, and to begin comparing ourselves with other people whom we assume have their lives all put together. But we must recognize there is only one source of true encouragement. There is a false hope based on unrealistic expectations, but there is a godly encouragement as well, one which comes only from God.

Barnabas was a man known for the way he encouraged others. He had encouraged Paul a great deal in his early months and years as a Christian. The influence of Barnabas can be seen in Paul's letters, since he wrote about encouragement and its value in nearly every one of them. And Paul recognized that encouragement

actually originates with God. Here's an example, from one of his letters to the church at Corinth: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all **encouragement**, who **encourages** us in all our troubles, so that we can **encourage** those in any trouble with the **encouragement** we ourselves have received from God"* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, my translation).

Discouragement is something which can hit any of us at any time. No one is exempt. But we must recognize that God must be the source of any encouragement we receive. He often uses other human beings to encourage us, but let us acknowledge that He is the ultimate source. When you receive that kind of nurture from God, you at the same time receive the strength you need to move a little further in.

## **2** We can move further in by involving ourselves in the Family of God, v. 1b

When the Hebrew people were operating under their own steam, when they sought their strength from elsewhere, they reasoned, "Ai is such a little place. Let's don't send all the soldiers against it; two or three thousand will do." But now God said to Joshua, **"Take the whole army with you."** This was a victory in which they would all share. It would not belong to a select group, but to all of them, because they were all going to be involved. It was vital at this stage of their moving into the land of Canaan that they learn a sense of community, of family, of unity. They had to be together if they were going one step further into Canaan.

No one can grow in his or her spiritual life without being involved in the Family of God. That is what Paul was trying to teach the Christians at Corinth. They had adopted a Lone Ranger approach to following Christ (as many today have), and as a result, they continued to struggle along in an immature faith. Paul recognized that they could not go any further in until they learned and began to practice unity and community in Christ.

So he wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 12, *"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need so special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so **that there should be no***

***division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*** (1 Corinthians 12:21-27, emphasis added).

You will never be fully committed to Christ—you will never move further in—as long as you are unwilling to be fully committed to the Bride of Christ. English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude. But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect, that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God's people.”

Our life together as Christians is such an important component of the Christian life that the New Testament devotes a great deal of space to talking about it. You can start with the birth of Christ and remember that even the announcement of the angels was not given to one shepherd, but to several.

Over and over Jesus told us to love each other. Then Paul wrote the Roman Christians that loving each other is a debt we continuously owe to each other. He also told them to “*be devoted to one another,*” to “*honor one another,*” to “*live in harmony with one another,*” and to “*stop passing judgment on each other.*”

The Scriptures further tell us to instruct one another, to “*agree with one another so that there may be no divisions*” among us, to “*serve one another in love,*” to bear with one another in love, and to “*be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave us.*” We are told to “*encourage each other and build each other up,*” and to continue meeting together because of the encouragement we each receive from being together in the proper spirit of unity.

We are told not to slander each other or grumble against each other. We are instructed to confess our sins to each other, to pray for each other, and to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. God’s Word tells us that our fellowship together is possible because we walk in the light of Jesus, and even that our participation in the Family of God is crucial to our comprehension of the things of God. (Luke 2:15; John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; Romans 13:8; Romans 12:10, 16; 14:13; Romans 15:14; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:2; Ephesians 4:32; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; Hebrews 10:25; James 4:11; 5:9, 16; 1 Peter 4:9; 1 John 1:7; Ephesians 3:18.)

The brand of Christianity we see presented to us in the New Testament is lived out in a community, not in isolation. We come to Christ as individuals—yes. But we move further into our commitment to Christ through the mutual encouragement and sharpening of spirits that occurs in the Body of Christ—the Church. There are a whole lot of people who have not gone any deeper or further into their walk with Christ because they’ve continued to make a lot of excuses as to why they are not involved in the Family of Faith. Are you one of them?

### **3 We can move further in by refusing to accept failure as final, choosing instead to accept the grace of God, vv. 1c-29**

Joshua and all the people may have been tempted to sit down and whine, “It’s no use! We can’t do this. We’ve failed God, we’ve failed our families, and we’ve failed ourselves. We should have known it was too risky anyway.”

They had failed, and they had failed miserably. Guilt could have held them back at this point, or even a passive acceptance that they would never amount to anything.

There is a very human tendency to believe that because we fail once, we can never be successful or victorious. There are many stories out there of people who seem to effortlessly succeed at everything they do, and when we compare ourselves with them, it seems hopeless. It happens to us as Christians, too. We try to establish a quiet time before God, reading His Word and praying. But when we fail to live up to the goals we set for ourselves, we often become discouraged and quit. We think to ourselves, “It’s no use! I’ll never be as close to God as So-and-So is, so I might as well not even try.”

But God said to the Hebrews, “*Go up and attack Ai.*” “You were defeated once, but that’s not the end of the story. You failed once before, but now things are different. You’ve cleansed yourselves of the evil that was among you, and now you’re ready.”

Perhaps you’ve not gone any further in because you tried to witness once, and failed. You tried to be *SuperChristian* once, and of course you failed. You tried marriage once, and perhaps the marriage fell apart in spite of everything you did to keep it together. You may have failed in business. And perhaps you sat back and refused to go any further in because you have accepted your former failure as proof that you will never do anything much.

But you will never go any further into your spiritual land of Canaan until you stubbornly refuse to accept your former failures as the final word. R. H. Macy failed seven times before his store in New York caught on. English novelist John Creasy received 753 rejection slips before he published 564 books. Babe Ruth hit 714 home runs, a record which stood for years—but he also struck out 1,330 times. Henry Aaron broke that record by hitting 755 home runs, but *he* struck out 1,383 times in the process.

If men and women of the world can fail and keep forging ahead, then surely we who know Christ have a greater reason to keep pushing forward. In fact, God uses our failures and mistakes for our ultimate good and His glory. Charles Colson, in his book *Loving God*, wrote, “My greatest humiliation—being sent to prison—was the beginning of God’s greatest use of my life.” We read in Proverbs 24:16, “*for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.*”

The Hebrews were learning something about God—that He is a gracious and loving God, who does not cast us away from Himself when we fail. He told them, “*I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. 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.*”

Some of us have not gone any further in because we have not learned to accept the grace of God, poured out on us through Jesus Christ. We tell ourselves that we’re too bad, we’ve made too many mistakes, God couldn’t possibly love us after what we’ve done, and so on. We think up excuses as to why we don’t have the blessings and rewards of God in our lives. Some of us would be much happier, I think, if God should strike us with a lightning bolt and wipe us off the face of the earth in immediate punishment.

But that is not the way our God works. Yes, there are certain essential principles by which we should order our lives as Christians, and those principles are spelled out for us in His Word. Sometimes we fail to live up to the standards God has set for us. Yet being committed to Christ is not simply a matter of meticulously following the rules. It is all a matter of God’s grace, poured out on us lavishly through Jesus. Moving further into a deeper commitment to Christ means that we refuse to give up when we fail, choosing instead to accept the grace and forgiveness of God.

## **4 We can move further in by pausing regularly to reflect on the claims of God, vv. 30-35.**

After victory was won over Ai, Joshua led the people a few miles to the north, to a valley flanked by Mount Ebal on one side and Mount Gerizim on the other. With half the people in front of one mountain, and the other half of the people in front of the other mountain, Joshua built an altar. We read in verse 31 that “*they offered to the Lord burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings,*” which was a way for the people to say “Lord, we belong to you totally and absolutely.”

There were several important things which took place there that day. But one very important event was the renewing of the covenant with God. Moses had told the people that when they came into the land of Canaan, they were to find these same two mountains and stand on the sides of the mountains facing each other. They were to read the blessings God promised to give those who followed and obeyed Him, and the curses on those who did not. They were to do this in order that they might be reminded of Whom was really in charge. Soon it would be time to do battle again, but now, it was important that they pause long enough to remember and reflect.

We all need to pause from time to time to reflect on the claims God has made on our lives. A herdsman lived alone far up in the wilderness of Montana. When he was not busy tending to his sheep, he entertained himself by playing his fiddle and listening to the radio.

One day his fiddle got out of tune, and he had no way to tune it. Then he got an idea. He wrote to the sponsor of a familiar radio program, asking him to sound to note of A over the radio so he could tune his fiddle. The sponsor saw the advertising value of complying with such an unusual request, and sent a letter to the Montana herdsman, telling him when he could hear the note A sounded over the radio for his benefit.

At the specified time, the herdsman sat next to his radio, far up in the wild solitudes of Montana. The sound of the note A came across once, and then a second time. That was all, but it was enough to enable the herdsman to bring his violin to concert pitch.

Perhaps today you need to bring your heart and spirit to concert pitch, by pausing to remember the claims of God upon your life. You did not make yourself. You did



not die on the cross. You did not save yourself. You cannot enter heaven under your own steam. And it is important for us all to stop on a regular basis and remind ourselves of exactly what God has done for us in Christ. Worship, Bible study and prayer with other Christians are key essentials in keeping us at concert pitch, but so is a private time alone with God every day. Be honest now—when was the last time you stopped long enough in your daily routine to reflect upon the greatness and majesty of God, and the claims He has made on your life? No Christian can move any further into his or her commitment to Christ without those deliberate pauses to remember God.

Los Angeles gangster Mickey Cohen merely flirted with the idea of following Christ—even though he was witnessed to personally by Billy Graham! Though you are not a gangster, you may be doing the same thing. Are you ready to move further in?

- ❖ You must look to God as the ultimate source for all encouragement.
- ❖ You must involve yourself in the Family of God, or in other words, “*take the whole army with you.*”
- ❖ You must refuse to accept failure as final, choosing instead to accept the grace of God available to you through Christ.
- ❖ And you must pause on a regular basis to reflect on the claims of God on your life.