

Blindsided - Joshua 7:1-9
Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis
Union Baptist Church – 9/17/2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had an experience in your life where things were going really well, you were feeling strong and confident, you were focused on the goal and just about to achieve it; and then suddenly you were blindsided by something you hadn't noticed because you were so fixated on the goal and confident you were going to achieve it? You got so focused on the goal and overconfident that you lost sight of the big picture and ended up crashing and burning when something you should have seen crept up on you and stole away the victory!

Well, I've certainly had some experiences like this in my life and I'll share one of them with you this morning. It was my Senior year of high school and my final Track season. As a Junior I had placed 4th at state in the 800 Meter Run and I was about to have my last chance at being the state champion in the 800. Unfortunately I had a bit of senioritis and I wasn't quite as disciplined in my Track training program that spring. We were also having frequent volcanic eruptions of Mt. Augustine in Alaska that year and there was a lot ash in the air and on the ground. That being the case, practice was canceled several times and I excused myself from training as hard for fear of breathing in too much ash. And then there was the Senior trip. We had raised money for a trip to Hawaii. Were we spoiled or what? I still can't believe that really happened! And I'm pretty sure they toned down the Senior trips after that year. But nonetheless, the trip was right in the middle of Track season and somehow it was just really hard to get serious about running everyday while I was on vacation in Hawaii.

Of course, this all added up to the fact that as regionals and state approached, I was just not in as good of shape as the previous year and as I tried to train harder to make up for lost time in the last few weeks, I also got a really bad case of shin splints. Somehow, I still managed to qualify for state in both the mile and the 800 meter, but at state I opted to put all my efforts into the 800 Meter Run. It was my best chance for victory and I didn't want to waste any of my limited energy by running the mile, which was always run before the 800. So the qualifying run was

on Friday at Palmer High School, north of Anchorage, and I had no problem qualifying for the final. My Dad flew me back to Soldotna that evening for my graduation ceremony and then back up on Saturday morning for the state final.

The moment had finally arrived. This was it!...my last running race of high school and my last chance to be the state champion in the 800. We lined up. The gun fired and we were off. There was one runner who took off way too fast and was running about 20 or 30 yards in front of the rest of the pack for the first lap and a half, but I was quite happy with my position leading the rest of the pack. I was feeling good and strong and confident and running right on the pace I had planned to run as we slowly closed in on the front runner. I was focused. I could taste victory. Things couldn't have looked better at this point.

As we neared the final turn I was ready to pass the front runner, but just as I went to pass him, the entire pack of runners behind me began passing me on my right. I had made the classic running mistake! The rest of the runners had made their move about $\frac{1}{2}$ a second sooner than me, while in my overconfidence and tasting of victory I had missed a very crucial part of the big picture...the fact that I needed to move into the second lane on that backstretch well before I caught up with the front runner. Now I was stuck right behind the quickly fading front runner, having to slow down to his pace as all the other runners passed us in the second lane.

In my full my focus on victory and running my race, I had lost sight of the big picture and been blindsided by something very simple but crucial I should have known about. And now I was boxed in, losing all my momentum, and by the time I was finally able to pass there was just no possible way to catch up with the other runners who were now far ahead and giving everything they had to finish out the race at top speed. I ended up my High School Track career having made the biggest mistake I'd made in all my years of running and finishing in a disappointing 7th place. And to really drive the knife into the wound, I found out that if I had just run the same time I had run in my 4th place finish the previous year, I would have won that year's race.

This was just one of those moments in life that come back to haunt you later as you contemplate the "if only's," and wish there was some way to re-do it all. But alas, it's just not possible. All you can do is learn from it and move on. My brother, Nate, whom many of you met last summer, has been a Track coach off

and on throughout his life and he has made sure ever since that all his runners learn from my mistake as he makes them watch the video of my final Track race of high school. Thanks, Nate!

I tell you this story today, because our friend Joshua had a similar experience in the passage of Scripture we're studying today, although the stakes were much higher than mine were in a simple running race. Joshua was blindsided as well and learned a powerful lesson through the experience. Turn with me in your Bibles, if you would, to Joshua chapter 7, where we'll be focusing today on verses 1 through 9.

II. FROM POWERFUL VICTORY TO BREAKING FAITH – The Lord's anger burns against the whole nation for one man's sin (v. 1)

Let's begin our study by reading verse 1, a section I've summed up with the phrase: *"From Powerful Victory to Breaking Faith:"*

1 But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel.

If you'll remember where we ended last week in chapter 6, the last sentence said this: ***So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.*** Things were looking really good. The Lord was empowering Joshua to lead his people to victory and all the other nations were hearing about it. And yet chapter 7 begins with that ominous word, "But." Powerful and unequalled victory by the Lord's strength had just been had by God's people in Jericho and you can imagine how confident and energized and optimistic they were feeling at this moment about the continued conquest of the Promised Land. God was on their side and nothing and no one would be able to stand in their way! The rest of the Promised Land would certainly be a slam-dunk from here!

But there was a dark cloud gathering over the nation of Israel as they celebrated their powerful victory over Jericho. There was a terrible, secret sin that a man named Achan was hiding, and it was about to have a devastating and visible effect on the whole nation of God's people. As we mentioned last week, sin is never

private and its destructive and damaging effects always spread to other people like the destruction and smoke from a forest fire. This is one of the reasons why God takes it so seriously. As a result of Achan's hidden sin, the Lord's anger began to burn against the whole nation of Israel. And if there's one thing you don't want to experience, it's the burning anger of the Lord! A time of celebration and victory was about to turn into a time of mourning and despair and great fear.

Now this man, Achan, was from the tribe of Judah, of the clan of Zerahites. Zerah, if you're wondering, was one of the sons of Judah, meaning Judah was Achan's great-great grandfather and Jacob was his great-great-great grandfather. Interestingly, according to verse 17, Achan's grandfather Zabdi, who was the son of Zerah, was still alive at this time. Achan's father, Carmi, however, would have been dead since he was one of the men of war from the previous generation, all of whom had died during the 40 years in the wilderness. This means that Achan's grandfather Zabdi must have already been past the age of serving in the army at the time when Israel had refused to enter the Promised Land, otherwise he would have died in the wilderness as well.

Well, the text tells us that Achan had broken faith with God and with his fellow Israelites by taking some of the things that had been set aside or devoted by the Lord to be used only for his purposes. If you'll remember from last week, all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron in the city of Jericho had been devoted by the Lord to be used in his treasury, while all the living beings in the city (except Rahab and her family) had been devoted by the Lord to destruction. Everything else in Jericho was to be burned with fire. And in the moments just before God had caused the walls of Jericho to fall flat so the men of war could enter the city, Joshua had loudly proclaimed to everyone that they were to take NOTHING in this city for themselves, and he outlined the terrible consequences for the entire nation of Israel that would result if anyone broke this life and death command from the Lord.

Joshua warned them all in chapter 6, verse 18, saying: ***“But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it.”*** The warning had been given. The command and the consequences were clear. And the consequences for breaking God's command here would affect not just the person breaking the

commandment, but the entire camp of Israel, bringing destruction and trouble upon it. Achan had heard this command and he knew the consequences for breaking it as he entered the city, and yet the temptation that Satan held out to him blinded his eyes and his brain and he fell into the deadly trap Satan had laid for him and the nation of Israel. And now the anger of the Lord was burning against all the people because of one man's sin.

III. UNADVISED WARFARE UNDER UNRESOLVED SIN – Israel experiences death, defeat and melting hearts by going unadvised to war with unresolved sin (vs. 2-5)

Well, Joshua was evidently unaware that anything was amiss in the camp, and fresh off the victory in Jericho he confidently sent out spies to the place he saw as their natural next target. Let's read the second section of our text today, verses 2 through 5, which I've labeled: "*Unadvised Warfare under Unresolved Sin:*"

2 Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, "Go up and spy out the land." And the men went up and spied out Ai. 3 And they returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not have all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are few." 4 So about 3,000 men went up there from the people. And they fled before the men of Ai, 5 and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six of their men and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

In these verses we see definite signs of overconfidence that were likely flowing from Israel's astounding victory at Jericho. The spies came back from their ascent to the city of Ai and their conclusion was that it was quite insignificant and weak in comparison with the fortified city of Jericho they had just utterly destroyed. As such, they advised Joshua that only 3,000 men at most would be needed to take the small city of Ai. He shouldn't bother expending the energy of the other warriors when it would be such an easy victory.

But beyond the overconfidence, there seems to be another big problem here: *There's no indication that Joshua inquired of the Lord or received the Lord's direction to go to the city of Ai, or that he confirmed with the Lord that the spies'*

recommendation of 3,000 warriors would be sufficient. Had Joshua diligently inquired of the Lord, the Lord very likely would have revealed the sin problem ahead of time, sparing 36 lives and avoiding a humiliating and devastating defeat. Of course, only God knows for sure what was going on in Joshua's mind here and whether or not he was seeking the Lord's input on the battle of Ai, but it does seem conspicuous that no direction from the Lord is reported here; especially considering that up to this point in Joshua, the Lord's direction has constantly been front and center. And it becomes front and center again in chapter 8 when the lesson is learned and the 2nd attack on Ai is carried out successfully. The absence of seeking the Lord's direction after the powerful victory in Jericho seems significant.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience in your walk with the Lord where you experienced his powerful work through you and started thinking you finally had things figured out and it was going to be up and up from here on out? I certainly have. And it can be so easy in such experiences to get overconfident, maybe a bit prideful, and start moving forward in our own wisdom and strength, losing that desperate and continual sense of dependence on God that brought about God's powerful work through us in the first place. And it's at these moments, often in the wake of a powerful victory, that we're primed and ready for a big fall that will remind us of our inadequacy and weakness apart from God and bring us back to humble dependence on him. Because whenever we lose our connection with and dependence on God, even battles that seem small and insignificant will end up in humiliating defeat.

Our only path to sure victory is through seeking of and continual dependence on our great God. Only he has perfect insight into all aspects of the big picture and can keep us from being blindsided and making foolish mistakes that flow out of our extremely limited human perspective. May we learn this lesson and learn it very well! Joshua and the people of Israel had to learn this lesson the hard way as we often do, and it took more than one time as we'll find out later in the book of Joshua. But here at the city of Ai, a seemingly insignificant battle against a very small city ended up in humiliating and shameful defeat and even the death of 36 men. And when it was over, the hearts of the people of Israel, which just days before had been strong as ice, courageous and confident and ready to conquer the world; were now melting down to running water, fearful, despairing and

ready to run, or swim if necessary, back to the other side of the Jordan River. Things can change so quickly, can't they?

IV. DEATH AND DEFEAT LEADS TO DESPAIR AND QUESTIONING – Death and defeat at Ai causes Joshua to fall into despair and question God's motives and plan (vs. 6-9)

Well, after this humiliating defeat at Ai and the devastating death of 36 men, Joshua found himself in a desperate mental and spiritual battle...a place we've all found ourselves in from time to time in our lives. Let's see how this looked for Joshua in verses 6 through 9 of Joshua chapter 7, which I've summed up with the phrase: *"Death and Defeat Leads to Despair and Questioning."* Picking up in verse 6, we find Joshua in agony, but at least back to seeking the Lord again:

6 Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, he and the elders of Israel. And they put dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord God, why have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! 8 O Lord, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! 9 For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name?"

Joshua and the elders of Israel were in deep mourning and despair over what had happened at Ai, and they were dealing with it in the customary Hebrew way...tearing their clothes and putting dust on their heads. This is obviously not something we do today. I don't think I've ever seen any of you guys tearing your clothes or putting dust on your heads lately! Well, the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* provides some helpful insight on what these Hebrew cultural practices were about.

It tells us that:

"Mourning practices [in the Hebrew culture] generally included tearing one's robe, weeping, putting dust and ashes in one's hair, and wearing sackcloth. Sackcloth is made of goat or camel hair and was coarse and

uncomfortable. In many cases the sackcloth was only a loin covering. The official period of mourning was thirty days, but it could continue as long as the mourner chose to grieve.”

The essence of these practices was to show in a tangible way the depth of sadness and grief and turmoil over a tragedy or perhaps the sincerity of repentance over a grave sin.

So Joshua and the elders here were certainly mourning over the death of 36 men and the humiliating defeat, but as we look at what Joshua said to the Lord as he spent the entire day on his face before the ark of the covenant, we notice that in Joshua’s mourning there was some serious despair and questioning of God’s motives and plan taking place. The extreme high of powerful victory over Jericho had descended to the extreme low of despair and questioning of God in about 5 seconds flat. Have you ever had this type of experience in your life? One minute you’re feeling strong and ready to conquer the world by God’s power, and the next minute you’re in the depths of despair wondering if you can even take one more step. One minute, you’re trusting and breathing in God’s Word and power, and the next you’re doubting and questioning God’s motives and intentions, asking “Why God?” and second-guessing what he’s done in the past.

Notice Joshua asking, “Why God?” Why did you bring us over the Jordan River just to hand us over to the Amorites for destruction? Notice Joshua is now so focused on the defeat at Ai that the recent victory at Jericho isn’t even on the radar anymore. God certainly didn’t hand them over to the Amorites in Jericho for destruction, and yet Joshua in his despair can no longer see the big picture and has put all his focus on the recent defeat, forgetting how the minor defeat at Ai pales in comparison to the grand victory over the Amorites in Jericho. Then Joshua’s turns to, “If only...” We’ve all done that, haven’t we? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan and be satisfied with the great victory you gave us over there. Never mind that God is the One who clearly directed Joshua and the Israelites to miraculously cross the Jordan River, and who had been promising for over 400 years that the land on the west side of the Jordan was their true inheritance.

And then Joshua turns to fear and worry about what might happen from here. He becomes focused on the “what if’s.” Now that Israel had been defeated at Ai,

certainly all the nations would hear of it, gather together, surround the Israelites and wipe them off the face of the earth. He immediately rushes to worrying about the worst case scenario. Doesn't this sound a lot like what we do in our lives when faced with failure and defeat or when we become focused on our fears and what might happen?

We can't be too hard on Joshua here, because we know that every single one of us have reacted this way many times in our lives in the face of failure, defeat or tragedy. We so easily slip from mountaintop faith to valley fear and despair, forgetting about what God has done in the past and how faithfully he's sustained and carried us and led us to where we are now. We so easily allow worry and fear about the "what if's" to unsettle us, distract us and paralyze us, rather than following God's path so beautifully outlined for us in those powerful verses of Philippians 4:5-7:

...The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

If only we would believe God's Word and use his perfect path to peace every time! That's a good "if only," to focus on and figure out how to put into practice!

Well, the good news is that even though Joshua was experiencing the human weakness and fear and worry and erroneous thinking that we all face from time to time, he was on the right track for getting it resolved and returning to peace and confidence in God. He was on his face before the Lord in honest, diligent seeking of him. His despair and desperation had called him back to diligent and desperate seeking of the Lord and dependence on him.

And Joshua also displays one of the marks of a mature follower of God: even in the anxiety and questioning and struggles with fear and doubt, his primary concern was for God's glory and purposes. He ends his prayer to God by asking him, "And what will you do for your great name?" Despite the frightening and foreboding outlook for himself personally and for the people of Israel, Joshua was most concerned with God's glory and how his great name would be mocked and ridiculed if the people he had chosen and promised to bring into the land were

utterly defeated and wiped off the face of the earth. What would people say about God if that happened?

V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

So how would God respond to Joshua on his face and his struggle with doubt and questioning of God's motives and plan? How would God instruct him to move forward from here? We'll find out next week as we finish up chapter 7. And I think you'll find it quite interesting how God responds to Joshua. But as we wrap up today's message, let's remind ourselves of the truths and applications we've learned through these 9 powerful verses of God's Word.

First of all, we need to be careful in our lives to guard against overconfidence and tunnel vision...against allowing God's powerful work in our lives or our own personal successes to go to our head and subtly lead us away from continual dependence on him and seeking of his direction and plan in all we do. Joshua was riding the tide of great victory and in his eagerness to keep the momentum going and conquer the next city, he seems to have forgotten to seek and follow the Captain and make sure he debriefed with him about any issues needing addressed and where he wanted them to go next. In the same way, when we become so overconfident and busy and focused on trying to do things for God and lose our close connection with and dependence on him, even battles that seem small and insignificant in our lives will end up in humiliating defeat. Our only path to sure victory, like Joshua's, is through continual of seeking of and dependence on our great God. This needs to become like breathing for us, so that we feel naked and vulnerable whenever we don't keep that continual communication with the Lord going and whenever we don't seek his input in our lives and the battles we face.

Secondly, when we do experience failure and defeat or get blindsided as we try to rush ahead of God, it's so important that we don't ride the tide of our emotions and immediately rush to questioning God and doubting his intentions, forgetting about all he's done for us and through us in the past and where he's faithfully led us in our lives. We need to remember first of all that the Lord is near and he's faithful and he's always working for our good. And secondly, that he knows exactly what the problem is and can show us the way forward as we seek him and trust him. These are truths about God and his intentions toward us that are rock-solid and unchanging...truths that we can build our lives on and that can sustain

us through the defeat and failure and difficulties of life, as we challenge ourselves to believe them and as we draw near to the Lord in diligent seeking of his guidance and wisdom.

Let's not allow ourselves to so easily slip from mountaintop faith to valley fear and despair, forgetting about what God has done in the past and how faithfully he's sustained and carried us and led us to where we are now. Let's not allow worry or fear about the "what if's" of life to unsettle us, distract us and paralyze us. Let's draw near to God in full assurance of faith and quietly wait for what we need to move forward. Let's follow the time-tested advice and example of the writer of Lamentations, who provides this path in chapter 3, verses 21 through 26, for maintaining hope when things seem to be falling apart. He says:

***21 But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
26 It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.***

Memorize these verses, my friends. These are timeless, powerful, God-breathed truths that all of us are going to need in the future...Lamentations 3:21-26.

Keep your eyes on the truths of God and who he is, remember the big picture, and walk forward in hope, refusing to fall prey to Satan's efforts to keep you paralyzed, stuck and living in fear. And never forget the unchanging reality that no matter how we feel or how dark life seems, God is always working for our good and for his glory. And the best way to avoid the pitfalls and blind-siding of life is to keep that close connection with him and be sure in all you do you're walking in step with his purposes by his power and giving him all the glory. This is how you will keep from getting boxed in in the race of life and from missing key

details of the big picture you must know in order to win the race and avoid getting tripped up by Satan.

The Lord wasn't done with Joshua after this humiliating defeat, though Joshua was feeling that way at the moment. Big and powerful victories were still ahead and we'll see God reveal the problem and show Joshua the way to move forward next week.