

# Receiving Your Inheritance

## Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 7

*First Failure*  
Joshua 7:1-26

### *Introduction*

Last week we saw the Israelites achieve a great victory – an incredible victory! This was their first battle in Canaan, and they completely destroyed the impregnable city of Jericho. Man, woman, and child – as well as all the livestock – were totally wiped out. The only inhabitants of Jericho who escaped were Rahab, the prostitute who came over to the Israelite side, along with her family. The text doesn't tell us, but surely the Israelites enthusiastically celebrated their victory. It was so amazing – like the rabble from farms out in the American wilderness who defeated the most powerful army on earth in the American Revolution. It would be equivalent to Lehigh winning the NCAA basketball tournament! You know if that happened there would be a huge party on campus. Israel defeated a major power with no training and little experience – and they were excited!

### *The Story*

It's natural to feel confident after you experience a major victory, and it's easy to feel overconfident. But you can hardly accuse the Israelites of overconfidence as they approached their next battle. They didn't rush into it impulsively, but again they sent spies to check out the city of Ai. The spies brought back an accurate report that Ai was a small city. It was so small that several thousand men would be plenty to conquer it. Joshua took no chances. The spies suggested two or three thousand men, and Joshua chose to send the larger number.

It should have been a rout – and indeed it was! This battle also was a big upset. The tiny city of Ai soundly defeated the overwhelming Israelite army. Now despair replaced euphoria in the Israelite camp. How could it have happened? What went wrong? The plan and the execution were right for defeating the men of Ai. It just didn't work! Furthermore, 36 Israelites died. The families and the nation mourned the loss of their comrades and loved ones. To add to their distress and confusion, God was supposed to be fighting for them. What happened? Where did He go? Why did He allow those men to get killed?

### *Crisis Response*

I suppose you have experienced some devastating loss in your life. Perhaps you were all set to go to MIT. Your SAT scores were very high and everything was in order. Finally you got the letter that you were accepted! What joy! What a relief! But then you discover that the financial aid offered was far too little. And now you are here at Lehigh. Perhaps you lost a big game or competition. My second son Peter was on a soccer team this fall that won all but one or two regular season games and was positioned to do well in post-season play. Then suddenly they lost to a team that was much inferior to them and it was all over. They lost their chance for a District championship, and it wasn't even a good loss. It was a terrible blow, a bitter pill. Perhaps you got a terrible grade in one of your courses. Your GPA is going to take a big hit, and your chances of getting a fifth year at Lehigh free are fading into the sunset.

What do you do what disaster strikes? Do you rage and cry and lash out? Or withdraw? Do you follow the suggestion of Job's wife – curse God and hope to die? Or do you turn to friends and family for comfort? Friends and family should be some comfort in disaster, but they ought not to be the first place you turn. Joshua should be our example. In that face of this devastating loss he did not explode in anger, he did not blame his officers or the spies, he didn't complain to his friends, he didn't even hold a review session.

No, the first thing he did was turn to God.

Notice how Joshua prayed. This wasn't a quick word on the way to an important meeting. This was serious prayer! Joshua got physically involved in his prayer. He tore his clothes, lay on the ground, and put dirt in his hair as a sign of his distress. And look at his language. "Alas, O Lord God!" This is an emotional outburst. Joshua lets loose with the full force of his confusion, despair, and anguish. "O that we had been content with the land Moses conquered for us!" Of course this is a rather pointless statement. It was God's idea, not theirs, to conquer Canaan. Obviously Joshua is so upset he isn't making complete sense. But he is doing the right thing. He bringing his problems to God. Furthermore, Joshua kept at it. The text says he prayed until evening – no doubt a total of several hours. And he involved others. This was no solitary prayer. Scripture has examples of men and women who prayed alone, and that is commendable. But this was a public matter and all the leaders prayed together.

### ***The Practice of Prayer***

Folks there is a simple and obvious lesson here. It's when the going gets tough, the godly get praying. When disaster strikes our first response should be prayer. The problem is that it's very difficult to think clearly in the turmoil of crisis. It's practically impossible to carefully reason the right response. We are limited to impulsive reactions. Our behavior tends to be instinctive rather than planned. This means that if we are going to pray in calamity, we need to learn to pray in times of peace. Joshua is our example in this also. Go back to Exodus 24. God had just given the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites had agreed to live by them. Now let's read what happened next.

*Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them." So Moses arose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up to the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Indeed Aaron and Hur are with you. If any man has a difficulty, let him go to them." Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

Exodus 24:9-18

God and the leaders of Israel had a meal to celebrate the covenant they had just ratified. Then Moses went up into Mt. Sinai to receive the rest of the laws for Israel, and he stayed 40 days. The important thing to note, however, is that Joshua went with him. The succeeding chapters record Moses' interaction with God. Joshua is not mentioned. Yet he was somewhere on the mountain, too. Surely Joshua spent the 40 days and nights praying to God.

If you turn over to Exodus 33 you will find another instance of Joshua's devotional life.

*Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all*

*the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.*

Exodus 33:7-11

You see, this is a picture of Moses, God's special servant. God revealed Himself to the Israelites in the fire and smoke, trumpet and earthquake on Mt. Sinai – and the people were terrified. They said to Moses, “You speak to God and tell us what He says, but please don't make us talk to Him!” So this is what Moses did. This passage gives us some details about how this worked, and the role of the tent of meeting. And those of us who remember this story picture Moses going into the tent alone, speaking to God, and coming out alone. But if that is your memory, you are wrong. Moses did not meet God alone. Joshua was with him. And furthermore, when it was time for Moses to leave and go tell the people what God had said, Joshua remained in the tent with God.

What comes to mind when you think of piety? Nuns at prayer? Monks silently padding along the monastery walkway? A mystic in religious ecstasy? Don't we tend to think that pious people are sort of weak, otherworldly creatures much unlike ourselves? Real men may have faith and do great exploits, but they don't waste themselves on prayer. Prayer is for women, battle is for men!

Such a mentality is common, even today. But scripture is radically at odds with this view. The Bible is full of tough, manly men (and strong, womanly women, too) who had a deep prayer life. Moses, Caleb, David, and Joshua were a few of the warrior saints of the Bible – men you did *not* want to mess with – who had an amazing prayer life. In fact, you almost get the idea that the stronger their prayer life, the tougher these guys were. These guys practiced warfare so that in the heat of battle they would respond instinctively with deadly force. Similarly, they practiced prayer so that they could bring the heavy artillery of God's power into crisis situations.

You are here at Lehigh to learn engineering or English or music. Some of you are also training your bodies by frequent physical workouts. But are you training yourself spiritually? Are you in danger of graduating from Lehigh vocationally and physically mature, but spiritually retarded? Maybe this is a wake-up call for you. Prayer is an essential part of life, and if it is not instinctive and natural – if it's not part of your everyday thoughts all day long, you need to develop this aspect of your life. RUF is committed to helping you improve your prayer life. Prayer here on Tuesday night is one way this happens. We have also launched noon prayer meetings everyday. We meet for only 15 minutes so that you have ample time to get lunch. I urge you to join us once or twice a week. This might be the most significant step in making prayer a natural part of your life.

### ***Too Much Prayer***

Joshua is a great example to us in turning to God when calamity strikes. But this passage has an ironic twist to it. You would think that God was impressed by Joshua's devotion. He prayed fervently, he prayed all day, he even tore his clothes and rolled around in the dirt to show his seriousness. God should have admired Joshua's commitment. But He didn't. Instead of commendation God rebuked Joshua. “Get up!” God said. “Why are you carrying on like this? There is work to be done. Now cut out this nonsense and get to it!” I don't know about you, but I see no way to put a better face on this scene. Joshua blew it, and God came to straighten him out. But why was God so annoyed? We just finished showing the importance

of prayer, and that is what Joshua was doing. Furthermore, an afternoon is hardly too long compared to 40 days on Mt. Sinai.

The problem here is not prayer, but using prayer as an excuse for disobedience. The gist of Joshua's prayer is, "Why?" "Why did we fail? What shall I tell the people?" When you are confused and need an answer, you *ought* to ask God for insight. But after you get the insight and know what to do, it's time for obedience! Suppose you are confused about your assignment and go to the professor for help. He patiently and clearly explains what you should do. It's a miserable project and will require a lot of work, but there is no problem understanding it. Then what? Do you hang around in his office for a couple more hours? What would your prof do if you tried? He would send you out, I'm sure! He doesn't want you getting in his way. So you wouldn't do this, would you?

Joshua spent the whole afternoon asking God why they had such a terrible defeat at Ai, but he already knew the answer – or should have. God gave them the battle plan, but they didn't follow it. They did *most* of what they were supposed to do. They did the silly march around Jericho, they shouted and blew their trumpets on the last day, they rescued Rahab and her family, they killed all the inhabitants, and they put the gold and silver vessels into God's temple. But they were defeated at Ai – in spite of the fact that God *specifically* said that He would go with them and give them success. Did God break His promise? Did He forget to help at Ai? Was tiny Ai too strong for God and the Israelites? Of course not! If the Israelites failed, clearly it was because God *chose* not to help them – and that would be due only to failure to obey Him. This is not too hard to figure out. So why did Joshua pray all afternoon for insight? One question would have been exactly how it was that they disobeyed.

Now, sin is part of the basic condition of man. Even at our best, even when we are most godly, we are still tinged with sin. We daily, hourly fail to measure up to God's perfect standard, but God does not zap us for each infraction of His law. In this case, however, God specifically singled out one sin which would bring a curse on Israel. Look back to chapter 6, verses 17 and 18. "Now the city shall be doomed by the LORD to destruction, it and all who *are* in it...And you, by all means abstain from the accursed things, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it." Isn't this simple? Taking the riches of Jericho for one's personal possession would bring a curse on the nation. What's there to figure out? What is the big problem here?

Perhaps Joshua just didn't put all this together. He was upset. We can understand if he missed the obvious conclusion. Or perhaps Joshua's problem is that he *did* realize what had happened. Perhaps he understood very well that someone had stolen something from Jericho, and dreaded facing the consequences. Think, Joshua was an old man. He *knew* the people of Israel. He had assisted Moses in leading them for 40 years. Do you think he really wanted to face the prospect of executing someone he had known from childhood? Who in his right mind *wants* to execute people? Perhaps Joshua knew that someone had stolen something from Jericho, and couldn't bring himself to accept it.

I hope there is no one here tonight who has trouble understanding what Joshua was going through. But Joshua was the leader, and although we sympathize with him, there was no way he could escape his responsibility. No matter how long he procrastinated, eventually he would have to execute justice. And as long as he delays, he is disobedient himself. Remember back in chapter one how Joshua wasted no time in obeying God? We noted then that he followed the example of Moses, Abraham, and other Old Testament saints who did not hesitate, but quickly did what God commanded. This was Joshua's pattern all through this book – until now. Now, faced with a wrenching task, he flinches. Out of love for his people, he delays obeying God. And prayer is the greatest excuse for obedience.

You see, the point here – what God said clearly in the following verses, is that Joshua did not need

to pray right then. He did not need to ask God what to do. He needed to get up and get going. He needed to find the person who took the stuff and deal with him. Joshua needed to obey what he already knew to be God's will.

Do you see yourself in Joshua? How often have you delayed doing what you knew God wanted you to do? You know you have a calculus assignment due tomorrow, but instead of getting right on it, you fritter away your time with your hallmates – then scramble to finish it at 1:00 am. You know you haven't read your Bible yet today, but you go watch TV with your friends. You need to apologize to someone, but you keep putting it off. You know what God wants you to do, but you delay and delay because you really don't want to obey. And the way to really make this work for you is to mask it with some false piety – like prayer. If you are really godly, you excuse your disobedience by saying you are praying about it.

Folks, there are things you never need to pray about – things which will irritate God if you pray about them. Like whether to keep your word. If you make a promise, don't anger God by asking Him if you should keep it. You may tell Him your problems, but don't pray for guidance to break your word. How about honoring your parents? While you are still under their care, this ordinarily means obeying them, even if they are unbelievers. This can be real tough. You might need to pray for strength to obey, or wisdom about how to do it – but don't pray for permission to disobey them. Some of your friends are wondering whether to fornicate with their boyfriends or girlfriends. This is not a subject for prayer. Scripture gives us the answer, and it is "no". I *would* pray for help to remain sexually pure, however. Along with this is the question of a choice of mate. God is unambiguous in requiring Christians to marry only other believers. If you are praying about whether an unbeliever would make a good spouse, save your breath. And since dating is preparation for marriage, dating an unbeliever is prohibited as well.

I am amazed at how often the Holy Spirit is made an accessory to sin. People tell me they are praying about this or that, and then announce that the Spirit said to do this or that. The Holy Spirit is the trump card in such conversations – the atomic bomb in spiritual discussion. Once it is announced that the Spirit has led a certain way, discussion is supposed to cease. Well, you aren't the only one who has the Holy Spirit, and your opinions are not necessarily God's – no matter how deeply, or how spiritually you feel about it.

Joshua knew what to do, but it was so painful, he delayed. But even so worthy a practice as prayer could not conceal the fact that he was essentially disobedient. Jeremiah says, "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9) You and I deceive ourselves all the time. Let's allow the scripture to show us true obedience, and strive to follow it.

### ***The Deadliness of Sin***

Perhaps the clearest lesson in this chapter is the deadliness of sin. We take sin far too lightly. Sin kills. Drunkenness coupled with driving is a deadly peril on our highways. Promiscuous sex can lead to painful or lethal sexual diseases, such as AIDS. Dishonesty kills trust and destroys friendships and careers. Look around you. All that is wrong with this world is the result of sin. Even our ecological problems are primarily a result of sinful use of the earth's natural resources. And ultimately, if you live a life of sin, you will perish forever in hell.

Sin killed at Ai. Thirty six Israelites died in the battle because of Achan's sin. When we remember that, we are less shocked that Achan was executed for stealing. It seemed so small. The few items he took would never be noticed. And stealing is not one of the really bad sins like murdering your mother or enslaving black people. It's sort of like under-reporting your income on your tax return, or getting a paper off the internet. Or downloading songs and movies that don't belong to you. It's such a small thing,

something God wouldn't really care about, would He?

God does care, not because He hates to lose His stuff, or to keep you from having fun. God cares because sin kills, and because it is rebellion against Him. God means it when He says He expect us to obey His word. Adam and Eve discovered this in the Garden, when they stole a little fruit – and we have been living with the consequences of their failure ever since.

But the biggest proof that God overlooks not even the tiniest sin is the death of Christ. If sin were a small matter, it would have been monstrously cruel for God to put Christ to death on the cross. It is only in the face of the awfulness of sin that Christ's death makes any sense. But Christ's death is also the remedy. Not only is no sin too small to escape God's notice, neither is any sin too large to exceed Christ's payment. Knowing that Christ died for all our sin, we can look sin boldly in the face and claim it for what it is.

Christ died for our sin, and then He sent the Spirit to give us power to obey. This message tonight has been tough, but God's power is great enough to enable you to obey. Joshua got up, found the criminal, and carried out the sad task of executing him. Through God's Spirit you also have the power to obey Him. Do you believe that? If so, let's get going!

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