

Date: March 8, 2020

Series: *Joshua: A Call to Faith*

Title: *The Danger of Walking by Sight*

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Scripture: Joshua 9:1-27

In my opinion, one of the interesting things about teens is the way they come up with their own new words. I mean every generation comes up with its own unique slang language. Here's a sampling from down through the decades, if you remember any of these from your own days as an adolescent, raise your hand:

"daddy-o" "cool" "you're the ginchiest" "chrome dome" "bummer" "gag me with a spoon" "beat the feet" "gnarly" "don't have a cow" "rad" "all that and a bag of chips" "word" "duh" "kick me to the curb" "talk to the hand" "booyah" "phat," and "bad" - as in better than good.

I could go on all day. Well, believe it or not back in the 1970's when I was a teen, I invented my own slang expression. It didn't catch on like other teen slang but I'm kind of proud of it. Would you like to hear it? It's this word: *"numby-headed."* It's sort of an adjective form of the expression, *"numb skull."*

Back when I wasn't a *"chrome dome"* I used it to describe a person whose actions indicated they weren't getting enough blood flow to the brain, which would make them *"numby-headed."* And I confess, I've done a lot of *"numby-headed"* --- foolish --- things in my time. I imagine you have as well. PLEASE someone say, *"Amen"* or if you want to use teen slang, say, *"word!"*

Sure, we all have. As Joseph Conrad put it, *"It's only those who do nothing that make no mistakes."* The only good thing about our numby-headed mistakes is that we can learn from them and hopefully not make the same blunder in the future. Of course, a less painful way is to learn from the blunders of others, and this is one reason I appreciate the honesty and candor of the Bible. You see, God didn't white-wash the stories of His heroes. No. He included detailed accounts of their foolish mistakes---even the numby-headed ones!

Well, this morning's text is a perfect example of what I'm talking about because it contains one of Joshua's biggest blunders. If you were with us last week then you should remember that after the conquest of Jericho, Joshua sent 3,000 troops to attack the little city of Ai. But the Jews were soundly defeated in that attack, because of the sin of Achan. God had told them that if anyone broke His ban by taking the treasures of Jericho for himself, all of Israel would suffer. And that is exactly what happened. Well, after Achan's arrest, trial, and execution, God told Joshua exactly how to defeat Ai, just as He had told them exactly how to bring down the impregnable walls of Jericho.

So, following God's instructions, the armies of Israel set up a trap. Part of the army made a frontal attack on the city and when they did the King of Ai and all his soldiers went out to fight them, leaving the city undefended. Then the attacking Israelites pretended to run, and the soldiers of Ai chased them, no doubt thinking they would do to them what they had done to the Hebrews who attacked the last time. But, when they did 30,000 Hebrew troops that Joshua had hidden behind the city beforehand entered it and burned it to the ground. Then they attacked the soldiers of Ai from the rear and the Hebrews who had been fleeing stopped, turned, and fought; catching the troops from Ai in a trap, totally annihilating them. After this victory Joshua led the people on a march some 25 miles north until they came to a valley that is dissected by two mountains: Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim. Here the people of God followed Moses' prior instructions and renewed their covenant with the Lord. An altar to God was built on Mt. Ebal and sacrifices were offered in worship. (Deut. 27) This was followed by a reading of all the law of God. Look at verses 34-35 of chapter 8:

“Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law---the blessings and the curses---just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.”

Here is how it was done. The Curses of the Law were read from Mount Ebal and the Blessings of the Covenant were read from Mount Gerazim. As you can see the two mounts face each other and the valley between is a natural amphitheater. Now this was undoubtedly a high point in the experience of God’s people. Think of it. With God’s help they had just turned an embarrassing defeat into a complete victory. Then they followed this up with a huge open-air worship service in which everyone rededicated themselves to God. I’m sure this was a time of high worship. I imagine tears were flowing freely and emotions were high. It was a time of renewal and re-commitment. Have you ever been in a worship service like that where you felt close to God, a service in which you got serious about your sin and made a renewed commitment to follow Jesus more closely?

By the way, in 1984 archeologists found this altar that Joshua built on Mt. Ebal. Here’s a pic. It’s made of large uncut fieldstones, just as the Bible describes. Burned animal bones were found in layers, bones of the exact animals listed in Leviticus as sacrificial animals. As you can see, there are no stairs but rather a narrow ramp just as God had commanded in Exodus 20:26 where He said, ***“Do not go up to my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed.”*** It’s one more in a long line of archeological finds that remind us that everything that we read in this Book of books really happened.

Well, Joshua 9:1-2 tells us that while the Israelites were worshiping at the foot of this altar several of the Canaanite city-states determined to band together and attack the Hebrews. They had heard of the defeats at Jericho and Ai and decided they weren’t going to give up without a fight. It was time to go on the offensive and drive these invaders from their land.

Now, I want to point out two things here. First, this part of the story shows that when we have an experience of great spiritual victory and blessing, we should be especially vigilant for an attack by the enemy. I say this because it is often after these mountaintop experiences with God that Satan attacks. I remember, more than once at the end of a mission trip or a youth camp how things came apart on the way home, as Satan attacked in one form or other in an attempt to short-circuit the benefits of our experience.

We must remember that we DO have an adversary and he will not sit by and just let us succeed. He will do everything he can to thwart the purposes of God. And he loves to attack when we least expect it, like after an experience of confession and renewal, so beware! The second thing I want you to note is that this alliance of the Canaanites was in itself another consequence of Achan’s sin. You see these enemies heard how the men of Ai had at first routed the Hebrew armies. This rout told them it was possible to beat the Jewish soldiers; that they were flesh and blood men after all. This gave them courage to attack. Before this all of Israel’s enemies’ ***“hearts were melting in fear”*** because of their terror of the power of Israel’s God. Remember, this is what Rahab reported in chapter 2. But now, thanks to their defeat at Ai, the surrounding nations got brave and believed they just might be able to defeat the Israelites after all---that their God was not in fact all-powerful. And so, verses 1-2 tell us that these kings, who until this time only fought each other, formed an alliance and prepared to wage war against the Jewish invaders.

I don’t know about you, but it makes me wonder what might have happened if Achan had not sinned--if the reputation of the God of Israel had remained as it was in the beginning. I mean, would the people of Canaan resist, or would they have recognized that the battle was futile and thus given themselves up to Israel; perhaps even to the point of recognizing the supremacy of Israel’s God, and then choosing to worship Him. Of course, we don’t know, but it makes me wonder. Perhaps if Achan had never sinned there would have been more “Rahabs” in other city-states who decided to worship the God of Israel.

Well, not all the tribes who heard of the defeat at Ai chose to band together in this attack. One nation, the city-state of Gibeon, did indeed respond much like Rahab in that they were wise enough to know that God's people could NOT be beaten for long. So, they reasoned, *"if we can't beat them we should join them"* and that's what they did, but in an underhanded kind of way. Take your Bibles now and turn to Joshua 9 and let's read this account. We'll look at verses 3-16 and if able, I would ask you to stand in respect for God's Word as it is read:

3 – *When the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai,*

4 – *they resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended.*

5 – *The men put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy.*

6 – *Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us."*

7 – *The men of Israel said to the Hivites, "But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?"*

8 – *"We are your servants," they said to Joshua. But Joshua asked, "Who are you and where do you come from?"*

9 – *They answered: "Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God. For we have heard reports of Him: all that He did in Egypt,*

10 – *and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan-Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth.*

11 – *And our elders and all those living in our country said to us, "Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, "We are your servants; make a treaty with us." ' "*

12 – *This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is.*

13 – *And these wineskins that we filled were new but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey."*

14 – *The men of Israel sampled their provisions---but did not inquire of the LORD.*

15 – *Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath.*

16 – *Three days after they made the treaty with the Gibeonites, the Israelites heard that they were neighbors, living near them.*

Now these Gibeonites really did their homework didn't they!? For example, they knew that in Deuteronomy 20 God had said that all the city-states of Canaan were to be destroyed to prevent pagan cultures from negatively influencing God's chosen people. But the Gibeonites also knew that God had said the Hebrews could make peace with cities OUTSIDE the Promised Land. With this in mind they came up with a very clever plan. They assembled a group of men and disguised them to look like a delegation from a foreign city. Their clothing, food, and equipment were all designed to give the impression that they had been on a long and difficult journey from a distant country. Please note that they wisely did not mention the defeats of Ai and Jericho, things that had happened only a few days ago, news far away nations would not yet have heard. I mean they were sharp! They were very clever, very tricky.

This should remind us that not only do we have an enemy, but we have one that is very skilled at deceit. Remember, like the Gibeonites, Satan knows the Word of God. And the deceiver is good at twisting its teachings. As he demonstrated in the temptation of Jesus, Satan has often taken Scripture out of context. He often uses the Word of God to trick the people of God into foolish, sinful behavior. So, as Jesus said in Matthew 10:16, we must be wary. We must be, ***"shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves."*** And one thing we

must be shrewd about is the Word of God. We need to know our Bibles! We need to have a firm grip on the essential truths of the faith because when we neglect our study of the Bible our spiritual vision gets dim and we can very easily be led astray by the tricks and traps of the enemy--as the Hebrews did here.

Moses had warned them back in Exodus 34:12, ***“Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.”*** But in their haste they forgot this warning; a warning they had heard read the day before in that outdoor worship service. Because they forgot, they were deceived; tricked into making a compromise with the enemy. God had told them that all of Canaan belonged to them, not just parts of it. So, when they mistakenly allowed these pagan people to keep their land, they were in essence giving the enemy a foothold.

Now, let me chase a little rabbit here and use this as an opportunity to remind you that Satan loves to use this tactic with us as well. He loves to lead us to compromise, because by doing so, he gains inroads into our lives. For example, he tells us, *“That popular mini-series is not that bad---I know everyone sleeps with everyone else--but it teaches some good life lessons!”* or *“It’s okay to buy that magazine. I know the pictures are a bit racy, but it’s got some great stories.”* Or *“It’s okay to cheat a little on your tax return. Everyone else does!”* and so on and so on. We have to remember that the devil is never satisfied with compromises like these; he always wants more. So, when we give him a foothold; we can count on him using it to drag us deeper into sin. As someone once put it, *“If Satan has an inroad into your life you can be sure he will come back again and again to admire his property.”* We need to resist compromise with the adversary. We must follow the admonition of verses like Ephesians 4:27 where it plainly says, ***“Do not give a place to the devil—”*** because we always lose out when we try to compromise with the devil. He will lead us to sin that will consume us in the end.

Now, I must give the Israelites a little credit because they were at least suspicious. They asked a few questions. But in the end, they were taken in. The Gibeonites played on their sympathies by appearing as weary travelers who had been on a long journey. And they also appealed to their vanity. The Hebrews no doubt heard the Gibeonites talking about how strong they thought the Israelites were and how all they wanted was to be their servants and it went to their head. They probably said to each other, *“Hey, did you hear these guys? It’s not just the locals who are terrified of us. It’s the whole world!”*

Now, as I said, the Gibeonites remind me of Rahab.

- I mean, just like Rahab, they used the covenant name for God: ***“YAHWEH.”***
- Like her they knew the history of Israel’s deliverance through the Exodus forty years earlier.
- Like her they had heard the reports from caravans about the Israelites’ movement on the east side of the Jordan River and the victories over the kings there.
- The Gibeonites had also heard about how the Hebrews had wiped out the neighboring cities of Jericho and Ai.

So, they were somewhat like Rahab. But they were also DIFFERENT in that she had opened her heart in faith to the God of Israel whereas they merely acknowledged that God was there and that He was powerful, a realization that terrified them. They were willing to do anything to save their necks, so they resorted to lying. This reminds me of something Adlai Stephenson said, *“A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble.”*

Well, Stephenson was clever---but wrong---for lies only help postpone the inevitable. Remember what we learned last week? Our sins are sure to find us out and that’s what happened in this case. In fact, it only took three days for the Gibeonites’ trick to be discovered.

Now, I don't know how they were found out. Perhaps after Joshua signed the peace treaty with them, and then knowing they were safe, they admitted everything. Maybe they were overheard rejoicing about their success. I don't know. But we DO know that according to verse 18, when their true identity was discovered, the Jews were FURIOUS. And we can understand. Aren't you mad when you find you have been tricked? No doubt their anger was intensified when it hit them that this treaty meant they would get no spoils from the Gibeonite city. In fact, many people took it a step further and said that since this treaty had been entered in under false pretenses it should not be honored. But the leaders disagreed, reminding them that they had pledged in the name of God. Look at verse 19-20: ***"We have given them our oath by the LORD, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now. This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them."***

However, the Gibeonites didn't get off scot-free, by any means. I mean, because of HER honesty, Rahab was welcomed into the nation of Israel. But due to THEIR deception, Joshua pronounced a curse on them and condemned the nation to service to the nation of Israel. The Gibeonites were spared but they were still punished. They were to gather wood and water for the Hebrews, specifically for the tabernacle. And the tabernacle required a lot of wood for sacrifices and a lot of water for the ritual washings. Okay, what can we learn from Joshua's blunder? I want to point out three things.

(1) First, we must PRAY---especially when we face a big decision.

In my mind Joshua's lack of prayer here is especially "numby-headed" because he made the same mistake in the first battle with Ai. Once again Joshua and his leaders failed to ask for God's input. As verse 14 says, ***"The men of Israel sampled their provisions*** [they checked out the moldy bread and the worn wine skins] ***but they did not inquire of the LORD."*** In other words, as they had done when they first faced Ai, they made a decision based on sight instead of faith.

After listening to the strangers' speech and examining the evidence, Joshua and his leaders concluded that the men were telling the truth and decided, on their own, to make a treaty. They depended on their own senses, examined the "facts," but left God out of the decision. Now think of it. Joshua had just read the entire law of God but he neglected to ask God's input as to what to do here. Then as verse 19 tells us they proceeded to swear an oath with the Gibeonites in God's name---but they left Him out of the decision-making process. In a sense God was asked to be a part of what they were doing without being asked His opinion on it; very numby-headed behavior indeed!

But let's be honest. How often do we make the same kind of mistake! I mean, as Christians we say we have a personal relationship with God, but we don't act that way. We don't talk to God as we would a close personal friend, someone we talk to about everything, someone whose advice we always seek. I mean, don't you agree that a personal relationship with God should include our seeking His advice on everything?

Francois Fenelon a seventeenth century Roman Catholic Frenchman said this about prayer, *"Tell God all that is in your heart, its pleasures and its pains, as to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; Tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them"*

But too few of us relate to God like this. I mean the truth is, for many of us our relationship with God is very impersonal, because time and time again we make decisions without asking His input. In fact, we usually don't consult Him until what we've tried has failed because we relied on our own limited wisdom. Allan Redpath writes, *"It seems to take us a long time to learn the lesson that neglect of prayer always leads to trouble, and destroys the spirit of discernment. Neglect of prayer always suggests pride in our own judgment which is fatal."*

We would be wise to learn from Joshua's mistake. This unvarnished chapter in the history of his life can teach us that we must not neglect to pray whenever we face a decision because God knows things we don't know--- things we need to know, things He stands ready to tell us. As James 1:5 ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, Who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."*** Ephesians 5:15-17 says, ***"Be very careful, then, how you live---not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."*** Proverbs 3:5-6 says, ***"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in ALL YOUR WAYS acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths."*** The plain truth is that God sees our paths better than we do so it makes sense to ask His input.

When I was a kid, I got a glass fishbowl, filled it with dirt, along with some ants I found in our backyard, and entered my "ant farm" in the 6th grade science fair. I was surprised, when after only this modest amount of work, I actually won the blue ribbon. But I was also surprised at how entertaining it was to look through the glass and see the ants tunneling all over the place, leaving a maze of trails clearly visible from my perspective. I mean, I could clearly see an obstacle like a pebble in the dirt before their tunnel even reached it. I could see when two ant's tunnels were about to intersect before they did. My knowledge of their paths was superior to theirs. Well, in a similar fashion, God scrutinizes our paths. From where we are, tunneling along, all we see is the "sand" immediately ahead, behind, and beside us. But from God's omniscient vantage point, He can see exactly where we've been and precisely where we're going. As Psalm 139 says, ***"God is intimately acquainted with all our ways. Behold O Lord, Thou dost know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before."***

Well, do you make Joshua's mistake? Do you neglect to pray--to ask for God's input because you are either rushed for time or you think He doesn't care about that decision, or doesn't know what your life is really like? Those are the thoughts of a fool. Wise people always pray. They ask God about everything! Remember, as John Bunyan said, ***"You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed."***

(2) A second lesson we can learn from Joshua's blunder is this---we must keep our Promises.

In other words when we make a foolish decision, we mustn't compound it with a lack of integrity. As I said a moment ago, once the people realized they had been duped they pressured Joshua to attack the Gibeonites but he wisely said, ***"No---we have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now."***

Sure, the Gibeonites lied, but that is what pagan people do. As one of God's chosen people Joshua knew better than to break his word so he lived up to his treaty. You know, we live in a society where promises are all too easily and quickly broken. We can see this in many different realms. We see it in marriage where spouses do not keep their vows. We see it in parenting where moms and dads only discipline their kids when it's convenient or easy to do so. We see it in churches when Christians say Jesus is Lord but act otherwise.

We need to repent of this and remember that as Psalm 15:4 says, ***"[The Lord] honors those who fear Him, those who keep their oath, even when it hurts."*** We must remember that as Ecclesiastes 5:5 says, ***"It is better not to make a promise than to make a promise and not keep it."*** Living with integrity--keeping our promises is so very important! I mean, consider the power of a promise kept.

- It defines you as a true neighbor.
- It makes a wonderful marriage possible--one that will bless you all your days.
- It makes a friendship genuine--one that you can rely on no matter what happens.
- It gives your children an anchor to hold on to amidst the storms of life.

- And it also validates our identity as Children of God because our Heavenly Father always keeps His promises!

Lewis Smeades writes, *“Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God.”*

I believe that the fact that Joshua kept his promise to the deceitful Gibeonites moved them. They knew how they deserved to be treated. I believe the fact that Joshua treated them with grace-filled integrity pushed them toward belief in the one true God. So, Joshua’s experience teaches us the importance of praying before every decision and of always keeping our promises, and then it also teaches us that:

(3) We must trust in God’s PROVIDENCE.

As I said earlier, the Gibeonites did not escape punishment for their deceit. They were given the huge task of carrying water and providing wood for the tabernacle, and in later years the temple.

Well, the Bible tells us that the Gibeonites worked hard to meet those daily needs of worship. I mean, never once in the record of that long conquest, do we hear of any Gibeonite slacking in these duties or defecting to the side of Israel’s enemies. No, over the years the Gibeonites were at the altar day in and day out.

And because they were, they saw the sacrifices. They observed true worship of the true God and the Biblical record makes it clear that these people were eventually fully incorporated into the congregation of Israel. Despite a deceitful beginning, they came to know and serve the God of Israel. It’s a great reminder that as Joel 2:32 says, ***“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*** Over the years this menial activity on behalf of the worship of the living God gave the Gibeonites a place of religious honor in the nation of Israel. I say this for many reasons.

- When the land was divided at the end of Joshua, Gibeon was one of the cities that was given to the line of Aaron. It became a special place where God was known.
- About 400 years later, David put the tabernacle at Gibeon. The altar and the priesthood were there.
- At least one of David’s military advisors, his mighty men, was a Gibeonite.
- Then, much later, when the Jews returned to the land after the Babylonian captivity, the Bible tells us that there were 500 Gibeonites among them.
- In his writings after the captivity Ezra tells us they were totally committed to the Lord and His house.
- Nehemiah says that there were Gibeonites involved in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

So, history shows that in His sovereign providence God blessed these people and that the nation of Israel was blessed by their presence and their contribution. This should prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that God does work in all things for our good. As Warren Wiersbe puts it, *“The mistakes we make embarrass us, especially those mistakes that are caused by our running ahead of the Lord and not seeking His will. But we need to remember no mistake is final for the dedicated Christian. God can use even our blunders to accomplish His purposes.”*

Let’s pray