

PM Joshua 7 Sudden Reversal

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 September 2025

Preacher: Dr Neil Macdonald

[0 : 00] Amen. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Joshua. Joshua chapter 7.

Joshua chapter 7. 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. Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-Avon, east of Bethel, and said to them, Go up and spy out the land.

And the men went up and spied out Ai. 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.

[1 : 21] Do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are few. So about three thousand men went up there from the people.

And they fled before the men of Ai. 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. 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. 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. O Lord, what can I say when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies?

[2 : 38] 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? The Lord said to Joshua, Get up.

Why have you fallen on your face? Israel has sinned. They have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them. They have taken some of the devoted things.

They have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies.

They turn their backs before their enemies because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more. Unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.

[3 : 42] Get up. Consecrate the people and say, Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel.

You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you. In the morning, therefore, you shall be brought near by your tribes.

And the tribe that the Lord takes by lot shall come near by clans. And the clan that the Lord takes shall come near by households.

And the household that the Lord takes shall come near man by man. And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire.

He and all that he has. Because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord. And because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel.

[4 : 46] So Joshua arose early in the morning and brought Israel near tribe by tribe. And the tribe of Judah was taken.

And he brought near the clans of Judah. And the clan of the Zerahites was taken. And he brought near the clan of the Zerahites man by man.

And Zerahites man by man. And Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zerah, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

Then Joshua said to Achan, My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him.

And tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me. And Achan answered, Joshua, Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel.

[5 : 56] And this is what I did. When I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar. And two hundred shekels of silver.

And a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels. Then I coveted them and took them. And see they are hidden in the earth inside my tent.

With the silver underneath. So Joshua sent messengers and they ran to the tent. And behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath.

And they took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the people of Israel. And they laid them down before the Lord. And Joshua and all Israel with them took Achan the son of Zerah.

And the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold. And his sons and daughters and his oxen and donkeys and sheep. And his tent and all that he had. And they brought them up to the valley of Ahor.

[7 : 06] And Joshua said, Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today.

And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day.

Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore to this day, the name of that place is called the Valley of Ahor.

Amen. And may God bless to us that reading from his word and to his name be the praise. Please turn back in your Bibles to the passage we read in the Old Testament Scriptures Joshua chapter 7. Joshua chapter 7. Sudden reversal is an experience that is not uncommon in life.

[8 : 32] It happens very often, for example, in sport. A football team may be one goal up with five minutes to go when their opponents unexpectedly score two goals in quick succession and the game is lost.

in tennis. In tennis, a tennis player may win the first two sets of the match comfortably only to see his opponent win the next three sets in succession and win the match.

We recently saw an example of sudden reversal in public life when the deputy prime minister had to resign over a tax matter.

she had previously exercised influence at the very top of government and she suddenly found herself once again just an ordinary member of parliament.

Well, here in Joshua chapter 7 the people of Israel experience a sudden reversal the chapter begins rather ominously with the word but 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.

[10 : 38] That opening verse sets up the situation which the rest of the narrative explains and exposes.

let's look at verses 2 to 5 under the heading an unexpected defeat an unexpected defeat it's worth recalling the context just a short time before the people of Israel had arrived at the river Jordan at a time when the river was in flood but the Lord performed an amazing miracle he parted the waters and enabled the people to cross the bed of the Jordan as on dry land their leader Joshua pointed out to them that this miraculous crossing was proof that the Lord was with them and that he was committed to giving them the land of Canaan as he had promised.

the first major challenge the people faced on the west side of the Jordan was the mighty city of Jericho but that city fell to the Israelites without a fight.

The old spiritual says that Joshua fought the battle of Jericho but actually there was no battle Joshua didn't have to fight instead all the Israelites had to do was to walk round the city once for six days in succession and then on the seventh day they walked round the city seven times and when the priests blew on the ram's horn and the people gave a great shout the walls of the city collapsed the city was shorn of its defenses and it was easy for the Israelites to take it what more proof could the Israelites have needed that the Lord was with them how could they doubt that he would fulfill all his promises to them chapter six ends on a very positive note the closing words are so the Lord was with Joshua and his fame was in all the land so far so good but then we come to Joshua chapter seven Ai was the next city to be taken not unreasonably Joshua sent spies to gauge what needed to be done and they came back with a very optimistic report they said the population of Ai

was small that there was no need for all the fighting men to go up against the city that it would be sufficient to send two or three thousand men there was just the whiff of complacency about that report and there is no indication that Joshua and the other leaders consulted the [14 : 37] Lord about their plans as far as we know they acted solely on the basis of what the spy said and so an army of about three thousand men went up against Ai but Ai proved not to be Jericho Mark 2 far from it it was a rout the men of Ai set upon the Israelites and they put them to flight and 36 Israelites were killed the Israelites had been confident that attacking Ai would be a walk in the park but that's not how it turned out and the psychological impact of this defeat was devastating verse 7 comments that the hearts of the people melted and became like water up until then it was the peoples of the land who had been quaking in their boots before the Israelites but now it was the Israelites who were afraid and bewildered as they came to terms with what by any standard was a totally unexpected defeat secondly in verses 6 to 9 we have unvarnished dismay unvarnished dismay here we see how

Joshua and the other leaders of Israel reacted to the defeat as a sign of distress and mourning they tore their clothes and put dust on their heads and lay prostrate in front of the ark the symbol of God's presence for the rest of the day but when Joshua spoke to the Lord and articulated his thoughts he didn't express repentance indeed he didn't realize there was anything that called for repentance his words reflect just how confused and twisted his thinking was so what do we learn from what he says let's read verses 7 and 8 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 O Lord what can I say when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies 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 but there's a somewhat petulant and accusatory tone to Joshua's words Lord why have you brought us here wouldn't we have been better off if we'd stayed where we were now we've been disgraced and our enemies are likely to destroy us completely and then what will happen to your great name and reputation it's a mixture of grief and petulance perplexity and accusation the clear implication is that the Lord has let his people down done it's all his fault now before we sit in judgment on Joshua we should remember that what Joshua says here is very similar to the sort of complaints the Lord had heard from the people of Israel on many occasions nations in the wilderness as they made their way from Egypt to the promised land and perhaps even more pertinently isn't Joshua's prayer here an echo of the kind of prayer we may find ourselves praying when we're in a fix it's a powerful reflection of our human hearts and the default position to which we so often return when things aren't going our way because he didn't understand what lay behind

Israel's unexpected defeat Joshua panicked and he allowed himself to question God's gracious purposes for Israel in general as if the Lord would casually forget the people he had redeemed from slavery in Egypt when we face unexpected setbacks we too can all too easily lose our spiritual bearings and doubt the things of which we were previously sure Joshua didn't come to the Lord with the right words he didn't come with the right diagnosis but at least he came to the Lord and that's something we ought to do whenever we are in distress whenever we are bewildered by circumstances the Lord may have to correct our thinking he may have to point out to us where we are going wrong but if we come to him in prayer if we open the door of our need to him he can begin to give us a proper perspective on things he can begin to put things right and that's what happened here because in verses 10 to 15 we have what I've called an unerring diagnosis an unerring diagnosis when the

[22 : 01] Lord speaks to Joshua he begins with a rebuke get up he says why have you fallen on your face you see Joshua has misread the situation instead of implying that the Lord has been unfaithful to his promises and let his people down he needs to see that the reason for the defeat lies much closer to home Israel has sinned they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them it isn't the Lord who's been unfaithful to the covenant he made with Israel it's they who haven't kept their covenant obligations in the covenant made at Mount Sinai the

Lord promised to be Israel's God and the people in turn promised to be his people but that involved obedience the Lord said to them if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples and what did the people say in response they said all that the Lord has spoken we will do all that the Lord has spoken we will do but they hadn't lived up to

what they had said they had been disobedient that's what lay behind the unexpected defeat at Ai the Lord spells out for

Joshua the specific sin that had been committed they have taken some of the devoted things they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies they turn their backs before their enemies because they have become devoted for destruction before the Israelites took Jericho the Lord instructed them through Joshua but everything in the city was to be destroyed it was devoted to the Lord and was to be destroyed only Rahab the woman who had sheltered the spies that had been sent out to spy the land only Rahab and her family were to be spared we find it hard to come to terms with this kind of total destruction but it's worth remembering two things one this was not something which set a precedent for warfare in general the

Bible makes clear that the Israelites occupation of Canaan was a specific judgment on the Canaanite peoples for their gross sins the Israelites were acting as agents of God's judgment and two the Lord was giving the land of Canaan to his own people to the people he had chosen and set apart for his worship and service and there was a real risk that lingering pockets of paganism would threaten their devotion to the Lord but the problem was that the Israelites had not carried out the Lord's instructions to the letter some plunder from

Jericho had not been destroyed instead it had been stolen and it had been retained for personal use there was theft and deceit in the mix because they had appropriated the devoted things and not offered them to the Lord to whom they belonged the Israelites were now themselves devoted to destruction that's what the Lord says you see by disobeying the Lord the people had made themselves liable to his judgment covenant privileges depended on keeping covenant obligations and so the

[27 : 43] Lord says to Joshua I will be with you no more except that he goes on to say I will be with you no more unless you destroy the devoted things from among you there's a glimmer of hope there's the possibility of a way forward and so Joshua is told again to get up this time he has work to do he is to tell the people to consecrate themselves for coming before the Lord the following morning on the following day the guilty party will be publicly identified and dealt with the Israelites need to renounce the sin that has been committed they need to re-consecrate themselves to the service of their covenant

Lord unexpected defeat unvarnished dismay unerring diagnosis then in verses 16 to 21 we have unstoppable disclosure unstoppable disclosure God could have told Joshua the name of the person who had stolen the devoted things but he didn't instead he asked him to gather all the people together and determine by lot who the culprit was I suspect a main reason for that was that what had been done had affected

Israel as a whole there was corporate responsibility in the covenant community and the entire camp of Israel had been defiled by the sin that had been committed it needed to be dealt with publicly and the people needed to realize just how seriously their God viewed disobedience and so in accordance with the Lord's instructions Joshua rose early the following morning and gathered the people together you can feel the growing tension in the way the narrative is set out the tension builds up as the net closes in on the guilty party Joshua gets the people to come forward tribe by tribe and the tribe of

Judah is taken then clan by clan comes forward and the clan of the Zerah Heights is taken then household head by household head comes forward and Zabdi is taken then each member of Zabdi's household comes forward and Achan is taken Achan sees the inevitability of the process and when he is challenged by Joshua he admits his sin truly truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel and this is what I did when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar and 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels then I coveted them and took them and see they are hidden in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath faith

Achan's words here are instructive he acknowledges that he has sinned against the Lord his sin had major consequences for the people of Israel but Achan recognizes that fundamentally he had sinned against God himself he admits his responsibility this is what I did he says and note what he says I saw I coveted!

[32 : 58] I took they are hidden! to God does that remind you of anything does it remind you of the description of the fall in Genesis chapter 3 when the woman saw that the tree was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise she took of its fruit and ate and she also

gave to her gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord seeing coveting taking covering up that's really the anatomy of sin in a nutshell at the root of

Achan's problem was the sin of covetousness Achan broke the eighth commandment because he had already broken the tenth I don't think any of us can point the finger of moral superiority at Achan at this point we all know what it's like when God's law says no but our hearts say but I want it no wonder Paul uses the tenth commandment the commandment against covetousness to illustrate the tyranny of sin in our lives I would not have known writes Paul what it is to covet if the law had not said you shall not covet but sin seizing opportunity through the commandment produced in me all kinds of covetousness this is where the battle is joined against the world the flesh and the devil when we what we desire is contrary to

God's revealed will in scripture Achan's issue becomes our issue are we prepared to obey the Lord are we prepared to let God be God in our lives at this precise point for Achan the answer was no for him a Babylonian robe and silver and gold mattered more than God's word and God's glory and what of us what things do we have hidden under our tents unstoppable disclosure finally in verses 22 to 26 we have unsparing destruction unsparing destruction unexpected defeat unvarnished dismay unerring diagnosis unstoppable disclosure and it all comes to a climax in these final verses unsparing destruction

Joshua sent messengers to Achan's tent and they found things just as he said the stolen goods were located they were hidden they were buried under the tent and the judicial sentence is carried out on everything Achan had starting with the silver and gold but including his family and livestock they are all devoted to destruction in the valley of Ahor the trouble Achan has visited on Israel is visited on him and his line is blotted out from Israel a great heap of stones is piled up over those who have been destroyed to remind

Israel of the dreadful consequences of sin I'm sure we all find this deeply unsettling but we should find it even more unsettling at a spiritual level you see the wages sin pays is always death that's as true of our sin as it was of Achan's we need to remember what our sin did to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ the story of Achan should drive us to the cross for there we see the spotless sinless Son of God nailed to our Roman cross as our representative and substitute because of our sins there he died in our place so that we might not have to experience the destruction

[39 : 16] Achan knew but rather be forgiven and restored our sins merit not just stoning and burning with fire but the eternal punishment which the scriptures call hell but the good news of the gospel is this but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus what a wonderful saviour and what a wonderful salvation the

Israelites needed to learn the lesson of Ai they needed to learn that God was ruthless about sin and when we see God's wrath falling on his own beloved son to secure our soul's redemption salvation that should move us to thankfulness for such a great salvation it should also move us to say no by his grace to the sin that so easily entangles may we root out our greed our envy our complacency our self indulgence our deceit and disobedience!

The defeat at Ai that unexpected defeat that sudden reversal was a salutary lesson for the people of Israel may it be so for us too shall we pray O Lord this is by any standard a solemn passage of your word may we acknowledge our sin and may we flee from the wrath to come taking advantage of that salvation which you have provided so generously in your son we thank you that he died the just in place of the unjust that in him we have life and forgiveness cleansing and pardon we pray this in his name

Amen