

INTRODUCTION

This is the first message in a series called “Go for the Gold! How to be a Champion for God.” The title of this message is “A Champion Conquers Fear!” and it is taken from 2 Samuel 23.

The opening ceremonies of 29th Olympic Games begin this Friday in Beijing, featuring Celine Dion. Let’s start with a little Olympic trivia to see how much you know about the games.

(1) How many Olympic Games have been held?

There are two answers because there were the ancient Olympics and the modern Olympics. The Ancient Olympics were held in Greece every four years from 776 B.C. until 393 A.D. There weren’t any Olympics for 1,500 years until the Modern Olympics games were revived in 1896 in Athens.

(2) Who was the youngest Olympian to compete?

Dimitrios Loundras, a Greek gymnast was 10 years old when he competed in the 1896 Athens Olympics. The International Olympic Committee has since established 16 as the youngest age for competitors.

(3) Who was the oldest Olympian to compete?

Oscar Swahn, a Swedish shooter, was 72 years 280 days old when he won his 6th medal at the 1920 Antwerp games.

(4) What do the Olympic Rings symbolize?

The five interconnected rings represent the five continents from which athletes come to compete. (Of course, there are 7 continents, but Antarctica hasn’t fielded an Olympic team yet, so most Olympic historians believe the designers combined Europe and Asia as one land mass.) The colors are basic to represent at least one color that appears in the flags of all the competing nations.

As we watch the Olympics for the first time in high definition, we’re going to be introduced to some new champions—many of whom we’ve never heard of before. As I prepared for this series, I decided to introduce you to some unsung champions in the Bible as well. When you think of Biblical champions most people think of David and Goliath, Joshua, Samson, or Daniel in the lion’s den. But the pages of the Bible are filled with everyday champions whose names are relatively unknown but whose impact is undeniable. In the process of meeting these forgotten Biblical heroes, we’re going to discover that in these pews, and the homes in East Texas are many potential champions for God as well.

Here are the champions we’re going to meet in this series—how many of them do you already know? Today we’ll meet Benaiah, a lion chaser. Next week we’re going to learn that “A Champion Takes Risks” as we meet Abigail: She’s the first super-model. On August 17 our focus is on how “A Champion Does the Right Thing” as we meet two amazing women, Puah and Shiphrah—blessed criminals. On August 24 our lesson is “A Champion Can Stand Alone” and we’ll meet a brazen man named Micaiah, who got a bloody nose for speaking the truth. Then on August 31 we’ll learn how “A Champion turns adversity into advantage” as we meet Ehud—the

southpaw stealth warrior.

These champions may be unknown, but they certainly aren't insignificant! Now, let's meet our champion for the day—Benaiah. We name our sons David, Daniel, and Joshua, but there aren't many Benaiah's in the church nursery! But after this message, those of you who are prospective parents may want to consider this name for your next son, because we need some more champions like Benaiah! The summary of Benaiah's exploits can be found in 2 Samuel 23:20.

“Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant fighter from Kabzeel, who performed great exploits. He struck down two of Moab's best men. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. And he struck down a huge Egyptian. [1 Chronicles says the Egyptian was 7 ½ feet tall.] Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear. Such were the exploits of Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he too was as famous as the three mighty men. He was held in greater honor than any of the Thirty, but he was not included among the Three. And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.”

Benaiah is mentioned again later in 1 Kings 2:35 where we read, “The King put Benaiah son of Jehoiada over the army in Joab's position.” Joab had been the commanding general of the armies of Israel, so Benaiah was promoted to the highest rank possible. Three exploits of Benaiah are mentioned, but the one that really fascinates me is his encounter with a lion in a pit on a snowy day. The detail that intrigues me is that Benaiah went down into the pit—he wasn't chased by the lion into the pit. Many men have been chased by lions, but few men chase lions! It's like the joke I once heard of a man who was chased by a lion and came against a cliff and had no way to escape—the only thing he could do was pray. So the man fell to his knees and prayed, “Lord, please make this lion a religious lion!” And when he opened his eyes, he thought he was saved when he saw the lion kneeling with his paws together in prayer as well! But then he heard the lion say, “Lord, thank you for this food that we're about to receive!”

Our text says Benaiah went into the pit, so the lion was already there. In other words, the lion wasn't stalking Benaiah—*Benaiah* was stalking the lion! He was a lion-chaser. Are you a lion chaser? A lion chaser is someone who is willing to go out and grab risky opportunities by the mane and subdue them. Although Benaiah is a relatively unknown champion, there's a great book by Mark Batterson entitled, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day: How to Survive and Thrive When Opportunity Roars*. Mark is a pastor in Washington D.C. who started a church in a coffee shop. It's a good book for anyone who wants to be a lion chaser. I've gleaned some ideas from his book and added some of my own and I want to share with you three lessons from a lion chaser.

LION-CHASER LESSON ONE: Your greatest opportunities are often disguised as God-sized challenges

There are two kinds of challenges you face in life. Human-sized challenges are those things you can handle on your own. A God-sized challenge is one that cannot be faced without the supernatural power of God. Facing a lion in a snowy pit is certainly a God-sized challenge!

When my mind flashes to this scene, my first question is why would Benaiah kill this lion? There was no hunting for sport back then, so it had to be for one of several reasons: Maybe this lion had been killing livestock, and it posed a danger to people and animals. Or it could be that since this was during a time when food was never plentiful, Benaiah did it to feed his fellow soldiers—even 500 pounds of tough lion steak would go a long way to help a starving army.

I’m intrigued that this happened on a snowy day. Snow makes the ground slippery and would give a four-legged adversary with a lower center of gravity a great advantage over a man on two feet. In other words, Benaiah was facing seemingly insurmountable odds. Men don’t usually win in one-on-one combat with a lion. Lions can run in bursts of speed up to 40 miles an hour—they can jump 30 feet—their eyesight is five times better than humans. A lion can crush a human skull with one slap of his paw and his jaws are powerful enough to bite through any bone in the body. Lions are scary animals even in cages at the zoo.

If I were making a movie of this I would show Benaiah tracking the lion through the snow. The camera would be above Benaiah as he creeps along with his spear in his hand, every breath creating clouds of fear in the cold air. You see the lion tracks disappear into a pit. Benaiah walks to the edge. Because he’s a crafty warrior, he takes a rock and tosses it into the pit. The air is split with a massive roar that is translated into lion language as, “Come on down, it’s breakfast time!” At this point, most of us would turn and run, but Benaiah doesn’t run from the lion. His heart is pounding with fear, his pulse is racing, and his blood pressure is peaking. His breath comes in short bursts as he summons his courage and then with the cry of a champion he jumps down into the snowy pit.

We won’t show the violence of this scene, because it may not be suitable for all audiences. But along with the scream of a warrior there’s the ear-splitting roar of a beast, and the muffled scuffling of feet and paws in the snow, the dull sound of flesh tearing, and then there’s silence. Most viewers would expect the lion to jump out with a man in his mouth, but instead, Benaiah climbs out, bleeding and wounded—but victorious. As the camera pans out again, you see two sets of footprints leading up the pit, but only one set of footprints in the snow leading away from the pit. In a few moments we see Benaiah fall to his knees in the snow and turn his sweaty, bloody face to the sky and lift his hands and say, “Thank you, God of Israel, for giving me the strength to win this battle.” What a champion! That which appeared to Benaiah as a scary lion turned out to be the basis of his reputation and success. That’s because life’s greatest opportunities often come disguised as God-sized challenges.

What kind of fearful lion are you facing right now? You’re standing at the edge of a dark pit and you want to turn and run, your fear is real. Maybe you or someone you love just got the diagnosis of the “c” word. You may be scared because with rising prices you’re running out of money before you run out of month. Maybe you’re afraid because you’re in a family that outwardly seems perfect, but you know it is coming apart at the seams. Do you seem to be facing impossible odds right now? Do not be afraid. There is a God in heaven who gives strength to those who are willing to jump into a snowy pit where there is already a lion. The odd thing about odds is that when you add the power of God to any equation, one plus God outweighs even the heaviest odds against you!

Instead of fearing your lion, you should start looking at it as one of the greatest opportunities of your life to trust in God. We all wish life would be calm and serene, but in fact life is one crisis after another. If your life is relatively calm right now you’re just between scary situations!

Life is an adventure to be experienced. For many years, I’ve read Oswald Chambers almost every morning. He possessed a wisdom and understanding beyond anyone I’ve ever read. Listen to his words. “To be certain of God means that we are uncertain in all our ways; we do not know what a day may bring forth. This is generally said with a sigh of sadness; it should rather be an expression of breathless expectation.” So why don’t you imagine yourself standing on the edge of your pit, like Benaiah? Take a few deep breaths. Reach out and take the hand of God and say, “Look out Mr. Lion, here WE come!”

LION-CHASER LESSON TWO: Your greatest fear to conquer is the fear of failure

In order to kill that lion, Benaiah had to face and then conquer his fear. I don’t think he was calm or nonchalant when he jumped into that pit. His heart was pounding like a jack-hammer and fear was coursing through his mind—but he simply exercised his will to jump in spite of his fears! His trust in Almighty God superceded his fear. Fear and faith are mutually exclusive and they cannot occupy the same place in your mind simultaneously.

Psychologists who have studied fear report infants are born with only two basic fears—the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. Every other fear we have is a learned fear. There are hundreds of phobias all the way from Ablutophobia (the fear of washing or bathing) to Zelophobia (the fear of jealousy). If all these fears are learned, that means they can be unlearned.

Mark Batterson writes about how hard it is to unlearn old fears: “Half of learning is unlearning. Unfortunately, unlearning is twice as hard as learning. It’s like missing your exit on the freeway. You have to drive to the next exit and then double back. Every mile you go in the wrong direction is really a two mile error. It often takes twice as long to get old thoughts out of your mind than it took to get new thoughts into your mind.” (p. 44)

When I was about six years old, I was attacked by a neighbor’s German Shepherd and was knocked unconscious. I woke up in my bedroom with a few bruises, scratches, and a massive fear of big dogs. Fast-forward six years and I’m in the sixth grade. I walked home from school every day and I had to pass a house where my teacher Mrs. Dean lived. She had a big white German Shepherd, who was always chained to a post. I knew the dog’s name was Stormy because I had heard Mrs. Dean talk about him. He always barked at me and ran to the end of his chain. So I dreaded passing her house and I would walk fast and as far on the other side of the street as I could. One day, to my horror, when Stormy ran toward me, either he slipped out of his collar or the chain came loose, because there was nothing restraining him as he ran toward me barking in that deep pitch German Shepherds have. I was terrified. But in that split second, I knew if I turned to run, it wouldn’t be pretty. It happened so fast I didn’t have time to pray, but I distinctly remember thinking, “Oh, God you gotta’ help me!” So I stood my ground, held out my hand and yelled, “Stormy! Stop!” And to my absolute surprise, he screeched to a stop and sat still. With trembling legs I started walking slowly away saying, “Good Stormy. That’s a good dog.” I don’t know how he got loose that day, but after that I never was as scared to walk by

there. It wasn't a lion, but it was a time I faced my greatest fear and conquered it. I've told that story, but I never noticed how important it was for me to call his name—Stormy. I don't know if he would have stopped if I hadn't named him. Before you can conquer your fears, you've got to name them. You may encounter a few stormy situations of your own, not of canine variety. Just remember that Jesus is the champion storm stopper. When He is controlling your life He can command any storm that's approaching to stop.

When you face down a fear, you're ready for the next one. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself. ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’”

Of all the fears we face, fear of failure seems to be the hardest to face. The truth is if you live a normal life, you will fail many times, but failure isn't final. If you're afraid to fail, you'll never attempt anything great for God. Have you ever been following a car where the brake lights are constantly on? That person is driving with one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake—that's an unsafe way to drive. That's the way some people go through life—with their foot on the brake—so afraid they're going to fail that they never really live. Take your foot off the brake, face your fear of failure, and trust God.

LION-CHASER LESSON THREE: Your greatest satisfaction in life will come from accumulating experiences, not possessions

The Bible never tells us how many possessions Benaiah accumulated; instead we're told about his mighty exploits, which is another word for his experiences. I can just picture King David sorting through the résumés for a bodyguard. One says, “I majored in security at the University of Jerusalem. Another one says, “I worked for Brinks Armored Chariots.” He laid those aside, and picks up Benaiah's. “I ripped a spear from an Egyptian giant, and killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day.” David said, “That's the man with the kind of experience that I'm looking for!” Later he gave him the job of leading his entire army! Have you ever considered that God allows you to go through tough challenges because He is simply building your spiritual résumé? Every lion you go after is preparing you for bigger and better challenges.

Life is so much more than working hard to make money to buy things we don't really need to impress people we don't really like. This past week, I had the honor of participating in the funeral of one of our most faithful ushers, Noah Cromer. Noah was a humble man who never accumulated a lot of possessions, but he always had a quick smile and a firm handshake. Noah's son, Aiden, spoke at his funeral and he talked about the funny experiences he'd had with his dad and then he talked about the three life-lessons his dad taught him: (1) Keep the oil changed in your car; (2) Attend church; and (3) Learn to like that person in the mirror, because if you can't love yourself, how can you love your neighbor as yourself. As I reflected Aiden's words, I concluded that Noah lived well and left his family things much more precious than possessions—he left them the valuable lessons from his life's experiences.

Are you allowing God to build your résumé? A lion chaser doesn't sit at home on a snowy day watching television. A lion chaser isn't afraid to get out and chase down God-sized challenges.

Mark Twain wrote: “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

There will be some new champions crowned in Beijing this month. Almost overnight, unknown athletes will become celebrities. Who knows what Olympian will be on the box of Wheaties in a few weeks? But there are champions among us today as well. The real heroes and champions in this world aren’t the ones who run faster and jump higher. They are the ones who are willing to lay down their lives for others. The real champions are the caregivers who sit day after day with a dying loved one. The real heroes are the men and women who go into action when someone dials 911. The true champions are the brave soldiers who deal with their fear and face bullets and explosive devices to protect our freedom.

I recently watched the WWII series “Band of Brothers” about the paratroopers of Easy Company who jumped behind German Lines on D-Day. Easy company experienced a casualty rate of almost 50%. These champions demonstrated all three lion-chaser lessons. They interviewed some of the surviving soldiers of that greatest generation, and they said they never realized their experience would be the greatest challenge they would ever face. They were all afraid, but they had to overcome their fears. Once they were told they were surrounded by Germans and one of them said, “We’re paratroopers, we’re SUPPOSED to be surrounded!”

These men of Easy Company were part of 53,000 unsung, unknown champions who ran straight toward their fears on D-Day and pushed back an evil empire. And today, when you stand in the field overlooking Utah Beach you can see 9,387 grave markers of young champions who laid down their lives for their country and for their comrades.

In the Band of Brothers the surviving soldiers, who are now in their eighties, talked about how the experience of being with their fellow soldiers in tough times were the most cherished memories of their lives. One of the surviving soldiers said that his grandson asked him, “Grandpa, were you a hero?” After pondering that thought, he said, “No, son, I wasn’t a hero, but I served in a company of heroes.”

CONCLUSION

Are you going for the gold? The greatest satisfaction you’ll ever have in your life is to experience a personal relationship with God. The Bible says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) What is God’s reward when you seek Him? It’s not only a future home in heaven; it’s the gift of a relationship with Him *now*!

Salvation is a simple act of faith. At the first of the message I told you about the meaning of the Olympic rings. Look at our rings for a moment. How many of you noticed our rings are different from the Olympic rings? The official symbol has three rings on top and two on bottom. We designed our differently so we wouldn’t infringe on their copyright. Our colors have meaning as well. The colors tell the simple story of salvation. The first ring is purple; the color of royalty, to represent the majesty and holiness of God—and to remind you that God loves you. The second

ring is black to represent how our minds and hearts are darkened by our sin. Our sin separates us from God’s holiness. The next ring is red to remind us of the blood Jesus shed on the cross so our sins could be forgiven. The Bible says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” The next ring is white to represent the cleansing and purity Jesus brings into our lives when we trust Him for salvation. The last ring is gold to represent our home in heaven. When the Apostle John saw a vision of the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, he wrote, “The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.” (Revelation 21:21) So when we talk about “Go for the Gold” this month, I’m talking about something much more important than a gold medal around your neck. I’m talking about an eternal home with God in heaven—that’s gold worth going for!!

So as you go for the gold, you’ll face a few lions in a pit on a snowy day. May God give you the heart and courage of Benaiah to chase and conquer those lions!

OUTLINE

LION-CHASER LESSON ONE:

Your greatest opportunities are often disguised as God-sized challenges

LION-CHASER LESSON TWO:

Your greatest fear to conquer is the fear of failure

LION-CHASER LESSON THREE:

Your greatest satisfaction in life will come from accumulating experiences, not possessions

Meaning of the Rings:

Purple

The majesty of God

Black

The darkness of my sin

Red

The blood of Jesus

White

The purity of forgiveness

Gold

The street of heaven

"The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass." *Revelation 21:21*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes