

## Lesson 7

# Faith Challenged

## *Joshua 7-8*

### Introduction

The Book of Joshua is more than just a historical account of the events of the nation of Israel. Throughout its pages are the principles by which God expects us to live. The first six chapters repeatedly stress that the receiving of Canaan (and first Jericho), was a gift to be received. However, alongside that great gift came a covenant responsibility for loyalty and faithfulness to God. As we will see here in Joshua 7, when the covenant is violated, serious consequences come.

After the great victory at Jericho, Joshua wasted little time in seizing the momentum gained. He planned on proceeding up into the mountains cutting off the Canaanites from the north to the south. The first city to be taken in this part of the mission was Ai, around 24 miles NW of Jericho. Ai was situated on a mountain ridge and was around 2 miles from Bethel. *Bethaven* is said to be a separate town, not far from Bethel.

Now with Jericho sitting in a heap, completely destroyed, the people would have expected to go forward in triumph. Unfortunately, because of one man's sin, this would not be the case. The opening verse of chapter 7 sets up the story, informing us that Achan took some of the *set-apart* things from Jericho for himself, *and the Lord's anger burned against the Israelites, 7.1.*

### Personal Sin Can Bring Corporate Results

At first, we may struggle with what happens in this chapter. Why did the entire nation have to suffer because of Achan's very personal sin? Certain Old Testament passages, such as Deuteronomy 24.16, Jeremiah 31.29-34, and Ezekiel 18, state that guilt for sin cannot be passed on to others. So how do we reconcile what happened here with what is expressed in those Scriptures?

Although the responsibility for committing a sin falls entirely on the individual who indulges in it, the impact of that single act can have far-reaching consequences. Take, for instance, Adam's original sin, which led to the downfall of an entire race, as stated in Romans 5.12. Similarly, Ezekiel 18.2 talks about how the repercussions of one's sins can be passed on to their children. It's not hard to see how the effects of alcoholism, child abuse, divorce, and other such tragedies can linger on for generations, affecting those who may not have been directly involved in the original act. It's a sobering reminder of the importance of making responsible choices and considering the potential ripple effects of our actions.

The story of Achan's sin and its consequences illustrates how his actions affected all of Israel. Thirty-six innocent individuals lost their lives as a result of Achan's choice. This example is consistent with a broader reading of the Old Testament, which emphasizes how covenant life requires the people of God to prioritize the needs of the community over their own desires. Israel is not called to be self-indulgent,

self-protecting, self-accumulating, or self-absorbed. Instead, they are expected to be relational, invested in their community, and concerned about the well-being of their neighbors.<sup>29</sup>

## 7.2-5: Defeat at Ai

After following the same strategy that he had used at Jericho, Joshua sent some men to scout the city of Ai. The scouts came back with the report that Ai wasn't heavily fortified, and two or three thousand men would be enough to capture it. The spies' estimate was inadequate, based on the results of the battle and also based on the number of people of Ai who fell in the destruction of the city: twelve thousand men and women, 8.25. Joshua decided that the entire army didn't need to make the difficult journey up into the mountains. To reach this area from the vicinity of Jericho requires a steep and difficult ascent of more than 3,000 in elevation over a short stretch of ten miles.

So, Joshua dispatched three thousand troops to attack Ai. However, the defenders launched a counterattack that caught the overconfident Israelites off guard. Joshua's troops "fled from before the men of Ai, 7.4" This attack resulted in the deaths of thirty-six Israelites on the mountain slopes, making them the first to die in the campaign to inherit the land. This setback rekindled fear in the hearts of the Israelites. *The people lost heart, 7.5.* They had failed in their first attempt to take a city of Canaan by military means. No mention of God is witnessed in this episode. The entire plan appears to be orchestrated apart from God's initiative, from start to finish.

After their defeat, the Israelites were greatly afraid. Their hearts melted, and they became weak. The wordplay involving "melting" here recalls Rahab's and the spies' statements in 2.9, 11, and 24. Because of Achan's sin, Israel had become like the Canaanites, alone and without any true god to protect them, and as a result, they were melting away with fear.

## 7.6-15 Joshua's Distress and God's Response

After experiencing defeat, Joshua was overcome with distress. He ripped his clothes and prostrated himself on the ground before the ark of the covenant, along with the elders who also put dust on their heads as a sign of mourning. They remained there until evening, 7.6. The sorrow shown should not be judged solely based on the number of men who died, which may have been relatively low. Moreso, their great grief came from the fact that their initial effort to capture a Canaanite city in the land designated for Israel's future home had completely failed. In his despair, Joshua uttered a heart-wrenching prayer, full of deep pain and confusion. He then asked for guidance in the midst of the darkness: *Why did you ever bring these people across the Jordan to hand us over to the Amorites for our destruction?*

Joshua wished that the entire nation had not crossed the Jordan River. And he expressed great concern about what they would do now that Israel had *turned its back and run from its enemies.* He feared that the inhabitants of Canaan would be encouraged by this news, leading them to surround and exterminate Israel at Gilgal. Joshua wondered, *what will you do about your great name?* He believed God's reputation among the Gentiles was on the line, 7.8-9.

## 7.10-15: God's Response

Joshua struggled in prayer, discouraged that God had not aided Israel against Ai. But the Lord rebuked him, reminding Joshua that he should have known the reason - there must have been sin in the camp. Joshua had warned Israel at Jericho that violating the ban would bring trouble, 6:18. Indeed, that is what happened - some Israelites had taken objects under the ban from Jericho.

This passage shows that God held all of Israel accountable for sin, not just Achan individually. While God had ordered the extermination of the Canaanites due to their wickedness, here he allowed the entire nation to suffer the consequences of one man's offense. God's overriding concern was holiness and obedience in worship. Verse 11 demonstrates the seriousness of the sin through the language used. It speaks of "Israel" sinning, yet Achan later confesses "I have sinned." This reflects the biblical concept of corporate solidarity – where the entire group is treated as a unit, sometimes represented by an individual who is closely identified with them.

The verse builds up the description of sin climactically. It first uses the general term "sin," then the more specific "violated." It mentions the sinful acts themselves - taking, stealing, lying, and putting devoted things among their own. Six verbs are linked together, four denoting sin and two in this context. This cumulative phrasing depicts the full extent of Achan's wrongdoing.

Israel had broken the covenant God made with them through Moses. This referred specifically to the portion requiring the annihilation of the Canaanites, as outlined in Deuteronomy 20.10-20. God would not tolerate disobedience to his commands concerning devoted things given for holy war. Corporate accountability and individual responsibility were both at play in God's judgment of Israel's sin.

With contraband still among them, God's presence had departed from Israel. As a result, they continued to flee their enemies 7.10-12. In 7.13-15, the Lord instructed Joshua on how to address the situation.

- Joshua must take action, and get up.
- He was to call the people to consecration and purification.
- He must reveal the troubling truth to the people - forbidden items remained in their midst.
- Joshua would have to explain the consequence - with such sin among them, they could not stand against their foes.
- A process of discernment was outlined to identify the guilty party. Tribes, clans, families, and individuals would come before the ark, and God would indicate through lots where the guilt lay.
- Finally, the punishment was stipulated - the transgressor, along with all they owned, must be stoned and burned for the magnitude of their sin against Israel.

Joshua's role was to faithfully carry out God's instructions and lead the people in remedying the situation.

## **7.16-26: Achan Exposed and Executed**

The next morning, Joshua carried out God's instructions precisely. In the process of identification, the tribe of Judah was first selected. Then, the clan of the Zerahites, and finally, Achan's own family. When Zabdi brought his family before the ark, the lot fell on Achan, 7.16-18. Why did God not simply reveal Achan's name? Smith speculates that the lengthy process gave Achan the opportunity to confess

willingly. By remaining silent earlier, he showed his hardened heart. Joshua pleaded with Achan to acknowledge his guilt, though forgiveness was no longer possible.

Now directly accused, Achan confessed to stealing:

- A beautiful Babylonian garment. The “beautiful cloak from Babylon” was literally “one beautiful garment of Shinar” in the Hebrew text. The land of Shinar is mentioned in Genesis 11.2 as the place where men built the Tower of Babel (i.e., the “Tower of Babylon”).
- About 6.5 pounds of silver.
- Over 1 pound of gold.

Ironically, he derived no benefit, having only seen, coveted, taken, and concealed the items under his tent, 7.19-21. Messengers immediately searched Achan's tent, finding the stolen goods as described. They were brought before Joshua and the assembly, then "poured out" before God as rightful owner, too tainted for the treasury, 7.22-23.

All Israel took Achan, his possessions, and the stolen items to a valley now called Achor, "Trouble." The exact location of the Valley of Achor is uncertain. Some scholars propose it was the Buqei'ah Valley, approximately 8 miles from Jericho, the furthest possible location in either direction - eastward where Israel had come from, and away from Ai. Choosing a site so distant emphasized the concern to fully remove the impurity from Israel's midst. Taking Achan on such a long journey, away from both Gilgal and the battlefronts, demonstrated the seriousness of thoroughly purging the sin. It also served to isolate Achan, separating and distinguishing the act of judgment from the camp of Israel. The remote location emphasized the need to expel impurity from the people as they prepared to continue God's work in the land.

Noting Achan's troubling of Israel, Joshua declared he would be troubled in turn. The people stoned Achan and his children, suggesting their complicity. Their bodies and possessions were burned, and stones heaped over the site as a reminder of rendering to God his due. Thus God's anger against Israel was turned away, 7.24-26.

## **8.1-29: Ai Taken**

With the camp purified, it was time to resume victory. After Ai's setback, Joshua needed encouragement to continue the conquest. He would not act without God's word. God commanded Joshua to take the whole army against Ai. This subtly rebuked Joshua's earlier misjudgment of their strength, reminding him the conquest required unity. God promised to deliver Ai into their hands, 8.1.

The battle plan differed somewhat. As with Jericho, Ai's inhabitants were to be destroyed. But plunder and livestock could now be seized. God then revealed Joshua's strategy - a military ambush, 8.2. Joshua sent 30,000 warriors in an ambush by night near Ai. The main force would feign retreat, luring Ai's soldiers out. When the signal came, the ambush would seize the city. Assured of victory if they obeyed, the men departed to positions west of Ai, 8.3-9. The landscape in this area is rough and hilly. There are large rocks on the hills, which would have provided a suitable hiding place for Joshua's men.

The next morning, Joshua led the main force to camp north of Ai. Another 5,000 were guarded further west. When Ai's king saw Joshua's forces, he sent his men out, falling for the ruse. Israel pretended to be beaten back by them and fled toward the wilderness. All the troops from Ai were summoned to pursue them and left the city. No one remained in Ai as pursuit began, 8.10-14. At Joshua's signal, the ambush arose and set Ai ablaze. Trapped between forces, Ai's men were destroyed. Only the king survived and was brought to Joshua. The city was sacked, and its 12,000 inhabitants were slain. Spoils were seized; Ai was left a ruin, 8.19-24.

Ai's king was killed and hung on a tree until evening, demonstrating God's curse. This practice was common during wartime in Egypt and Assyria. It is also found in Deuteronomy 21.22. The encounter with Ai began and ended at the city gate. Just as the king's body was dumped there, a heap of rocks was erected over it. As the ruined city remained a "heap" as a sign, so the king's body under stones served as a sign. The king's fate matched Achan's - the same words describe large piles of stones raised over each, remaining "until this day." This showed God would not favor Israel over Canaanites in disobedience. Achan was expelled and treated as foreign, demonstrating God's standards.

This concludes the initial phase of conquest. Jericho's fall through ritual and Ai's defeat and victory taught holiness and obedience lessons dramatically. At Jericho, one man's sin caused national defeat. Ai also paid dearly for resistance - its ruins stood for decades as reminders.

The symmetry between Achan and Ai is underscored. Both the disobedient man and the king who opposed Israel were buried under great heaps of stones. While later victories received less attention, these "firsts" established God would not tolerate sin in his people and his power would overcome all opposition to their mission. The rock monuments left a lasting impression of God's demands and provision for the conquest. United and following God's word, victory was restored to Israel.

## **8:30-35: Covenant Renewal**

With central Canaan subdued, Joshua fulfilled Moses' directive from Deuteronomy 27.4-5 to assemble at Shechem. Shechem was located between the two mountains, Ebal to the north and Gerizim to the south. The city is not mentioned by name until the boundary lists in chapter 17, but it was the site of the important covenant-renewal ceremony with which the book ends, 24.1. Shechem had an ancient tradition of religious significance and covenant making in Israel that went back to Abraham. For example, Abraham built an altar to the Lord after the Lord had appeared to him there, Genesis 12.6-7. Jacob bought land there, he too erected an altar there, Genesis 33.18-20, and the city eventually became the family's home, Genesis 35.4; 37.12-14.

On plastered stones, Joshua wrote the law of Moses before Israel. The passage does not specify how much was written, only that this fifth mound proclaimed God's sovereignty over the entire land. Something more occurred at Ebal and Gerizim. The new generation formally accepted God as their king by consenting to his law's terms. Joshua positioned tribes on the mounts as Moses commanded, with priests and the ark in the valley between.

Joshua read the blessings and curses aloud from Deuteronomy. All Israel, including women and children, responded "Amen" in recommitment. This covenant renewal ceremony cannot be overstated. The

book's key point is that possessing Canaan depended on voluntarily submitting to God's Sinai authority. It also recognized Joshua as Moses' rightful successor in leading the people.

The ceremony centered the nation at the heart of the land, physically writing God's law there as a permanent reminder. Both ritual and consent reestablished the people's identity and mission under their divine king before entering the rest of the territory.

## What's In This for Us?

1. **Personal Accountability and Community Impact:** Achan's sin highlights the interconnectedness of personal behavior and community well-being. Individual actions can have broader implications within a family, church, or community. We need to make our decisions considering the importance of how they can affect others.
2. **The Seriousness of Disobedience:** The severity of Achan's punishment and the message it conveys about God's view of sin should be implanted into our minds. Are there areas in your life where you may be compromising on God's commands and have the need for repentance?
3. **The Consequences of Overconfidence:** The Israelites were overconfident in their approach to Ai and did not consult God. There is danger in becoming overconfident in spiritual life. We must see the need for continual reliance on God rather than our own strength or wisdom.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our journey through Joshua 7 and 8 has provided us with important lessons about the nature of sin, the importance of obedience, and the impact of our individual actions on the collective life of those around us. We've seen how Achan's personal sin had corporate consequences, reminding us that we are not isolated beings but part of a larger body where our choices can bring either blessing or suffering to others.

We've discussed the sober reality of God's holiness and the seriousness with which He regards covenant faithfulness. This lesson challenges us to examine our hearts and lives for any areas of compromise or disobedience. We've also seen the importance of unity and collective action in fulfilling God's mission, as well as the need for leadership that is attuned to God's guidance, especially in times of crisis. Our lives are not just our own. We have been called to live in such a way that brings honor to God, advances His kingdom, and promotes the spiritual health of the local church.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### *Lesson Outline:*

1. Achan's Sin and National Consequences
  - The Defeat at Ai: Complacency and Overconfidence
  - Joshua's Distress and God's Response
2. Identifying and Dealing with Sin in the Camp
  - The Execution of Achan: Justice and Restoration
3. Victory at Ai: Strategy and Dependence on God
  - Covenant Renewal at Mount Ebal and Gerizim

### **Thought Questions for Discussion:**

1. Why do you think individual sin can have an impact on more than just you?
2. Can you think of a modern-day example where personal actions affected a group, family, community, etc.?
3. How does Joshua's response to defeat at Ai demonstrate the importance of leadership?
4. Why is it necessary to address sin openly within a community?
5. What does the execution of Achan teach us about God's justice?
6. How can we ensure that we're not acting in overconfidence but in God's guidance?
7. How do the blessings and curses read by Joshua relate to our choices today?
8. How can we apply the lessons from the conquest of Ai to our spiritual battles?

## **Group Activities:**

### **Activity 1: Discussing the Reconnaissance**

- Divide into small groups and discuss what might have led to their underestimation of Ai's strength and how overconfidence could have been avoided.

### **Final Encouraging Word:**

As we reflect on the lessons from Joshua 7 and 8, let us be encouraged by the mercy and restoration that God offers when we confront and repent of our sins. You can move forward with the assurance that, when you are united in purpose and dependent on God's guidance, no obstacle is too great to overcome. Recommit to living a life that honors God and build up other Christians in faith, hope, and love. Remember, your victories are not won by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord, Zechariah 4.6. Go forward in that spirit, confident in God's leading and be steadfast in your commitment to His covenant.

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<sup>29</sup> Ziese, Mark. *Joshua*. The College Press NIV Commentary. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2008, p. 161.