



Joshua 7-8 When You Just Won't Wait

Last week we saw God lead the people of Israel to conquer the first city in the Promised Land, the area that we call the nation of Israel today. That city was Jericho, and if you were here, or if you know the story, you know why we said God does things differently. God had a specific agenda and method for His people to follow at Jericho.

He also gave explicit instructions that after the city was defeated, the Jews were not to take any spoils, there was to be no looting. Everything in Jericho was to be destroyed or buried in place, except the gold and silver, which were to be put in the treasury of the LORD. And there was a very important symbolic reason for all this: Jericho, as the first city to be conquered in the land, represented the idea of a tithe, or a first fruits offering – the idea that we are to give back to God the very first portion of everything He gives to us.

The principle still applies today and it's designed to remind us that everything we have comes from God in the first place and I can't take any of it with me when I die. It's amazing if you think about it, but God lets you keep and use most of what He brings your way. When we give back to Him it's a way of recognizing that it all comes from Him anyway, and that He is what I really need. It's a sacrifice, an offering, a practical way of showing, "God, I know you're there, I know you have blessed me, and I want to put you first."

So that's what was supposed to happen when the nation of Israel entered the land. They were supposed to leave everything they found at Jericho, in Jericho. The city and its contents were supposed to be dedicated to God as a tithe, as a first fruit offering.

But they didn't. And that disobedience had tragic consequences, as we're about to see. Joshua Chapter Seven begins with an ominous word:

Joshua 7:1 But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel.

During the battle, Achan had sinned against God. He had stolen from God. Remember, everything in the city was supposed to be dedicated to God. But Achan took something for himself. And it seemed, at first, like he had gotten away with it. He didn't turn to stone or get struck by lightning. He just slipped back to his tent to hide what he taken.

Meanwhile, everyone else was cheering and giddy over the victory.

In the past week, they had seen God stop the flow of the river, gone through the ritual of circumcision reminding them of God's promise to Abraham, a covenant they were fulfilling in real-time, celebrated the Passover that reminded them of how God delivered their parents from Egypt, and seen the walls of Jericho miraculously fall down. They had a sense of destiny. God was showing up and they were sure they were invincible. You can imagine the atmosphere: "Where do we go next? Let's get this job done, let's take over this country!"

Well, Jericho was a gateway city at the bottom of a range of hills, so the obvious thing to do was to go up and explore the hilltops.

Joshua 7:2 Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth Aven, on the east side of Bethel, and spoke to them, saying, "Go up and spy out the country." So the men went up and spied out Ai. 3 And they returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for *the people of Ai are few.*"

Now, picture the excitement – they've just had an incredible victory against Jericho, and they find a smaller city up on the hills and they're sure of themselves, "This is God's will, we're doing the right thing, this little city doesn't stand a chance." So they tell Joshua, "Call up some of the JV guys and let's give them some playing time, this should be pretty easy. Let everyone else rest up for whatever is next."

And put yourself in the shoes of the guys selected for the job. They're rolling up the hill sure of the outcome. "We're going to get up there, wipe this city out, and come back as heroes" – they figure they'll be home in time for dinner and people will be singing songs about how great we were.

4 So about three thousand men went up there from the people, but they fled before the men of Ai. 5 And the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six men, for they chased them *from before the gate as far as Shebarim, and struck them down on the descent; therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water.*

We're not told exactly what went wrong, but everything fell apart. The little city that was supposed to be a pushover proved to be a problem. For the first time Israeli blood had been spilled in the Promised Land. What was going on?

And as men began to fall in combat, morale began to plummet as well. They were conducting a hasty retreat scrambling downhill, fighting backwards against a force that held the higher terrain and was counterattacking ferociously. The men had gone from being sure they could do this, to hoping they could make it out alive.

The story actually reminds me a lot of the Battle of the Black Sea, also known as the Battle of Mogadishu, which was famously captured in the book and movie Blackhawk Down.

In that battle a small force of our nation's top warriors set out to do what seemed like a small task – to capture a wanted Somali in a place and at a time when we knew where he would be. But as the events unfolded things started going wrong, really wrong. And one of the things that always stood out to me from that battle was the way it was so clear when the momentum and morale of the men broke. The US forces had been taking fire and returning it, things had gotten pretty intense, but these were our nation's elite and they could handle things getting intense, you just adjust and keep going.

Until Sgt Dominick Pilla was shot and killed. Sgt Pilla was well known, well liked and respected, and when the news that he was dead spread throughout the units over the radio, so did a strange sense of fear. That was the moment that the idea of invincibility disappeared.

Now, there's nothing wrong with fear – courage is doing what's right in the face of fear – without fear you cannot have courage. But at that moment all the bravado of being a member of the US Army's Special Operations Command and all the inflated confidence of these men disappeared. They fought on, they got the job done, but when they came back to base they sat and wondered, and the world sat and wondered – what just happened?

How did the best soldiers in the best Army with the best weapons, tactics, and technology, just suffer so much?

I think that's what it felt like when the Israelis who survived the battle returned home. They had been routed; they had failed. What had happened, and what did this mean? The people who had been celebrating were suddenly silent.

Joshua, the leader, does the best thing possible - he took his questions to God:

6 Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads.
7 And Joshua said, "Alas, Lord GOD, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all—to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Oh, that we had been content, and dwelt on the other side of the Jordan!
8 O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies?
9 For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear *it*, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will You do for Your great name?"

Joshua says, "Word of this is going to get out and then all the surrounding people are going to rally together and come crush us. God what happened? Why did you even bring us here?" And look at God's unexpected response:

10 So the LORD said to Joshua: "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face?
11 Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put *it* among their own stuff.
12 Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, *but* turned *their* backs before their

enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you. 13 Get up, sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, because thus says the LORD God of Israel: "There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you." 14 In the morning therefore you shall be brought according to your tribes. And it shall be *that* the tribe which the LORD takes shall come according to families; and the family which the LORD takes shall come by households; and the household which the LORD takes shall come man by man. 15 Then it shall be *that* he who is taken with the accursed thing 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 a disgraceful thing in Israel.' "

Twice God tells Joshua, "Get up!" There's a reason for what has happened, and it needs to be dealt with. God has removed His blessing from the people because someone has done wrong.

Now, that can seem unjust to some people. Why does God say that Israel has sinned instead of calling out Achan by name? Why does He speak as though the whole nation is at fault here?

Well, actually that's a question we're more likely to ask in Western culture where we see ourselves so individually. Other cultures have no problem understanding this because they see individuals as more tightly connected to the group. And in that sense, their culture is more inline with the Scripture than ours.

Time and time again the Bible refers to Christians as part of a single body under the head of Jesus. Or it refers to us as a single family of God. When there was sin in the church of Corinth, the church was told to put the sinning member out of the church – to separate him from them. In the book of Revelation Jesus addresses whole churches and commends or corrects them corporately.

Modern Americans Christians have really messed this one up. And it's probably even worse in a city like ours where we all talk about how transient it is.

It's easy to think of church in selfish terms – what do you like, what do you get out of it? It's easy to become a connoisseur of spiritual things instead of a family member responsible for things. And yet, God says we're all in this together – He sees us as a unit. There's no such thing as a church without people. WE are "the church." So, if "the church" is doing something, it's because someone or some group is doing it. If "the church" isn't doing something, you need to understand, that's because some people in the church are not doing that thing. If you want "the church" to be doing something, you might need to step up and be the one doing it.

And before we leave this idea, is it possible that one reason the church in America is so quiet and meek today, is that we have Achans in our midst who have sinned, and are

sinning, and God has taken away the blessing that could be ours if we were more concerned with holiness?

Friends, I think there's something to that. And I know we're in the middle of a season of blessing here at the City Gates, but don't think for a moment that God can't or won't take all the blessing away if think we can slip a little selfish sin in here and there while no one is looking. God knows what is going on, and as Jesus said, what was done in the darkness will be brought into the light.

Achan's about to learn that the hard way.

16 So Joshua rose early in the morning and brought Israel by their tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. 17 He brought the clan of Judah, and he took the family of the Zarhites; and he brought the family of the Zarhites man by man, and Zabdi was taken. 18 Then he brought his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. 19 Now Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide *it* from me."

Now, why did it have to come to this? At any point Achan could have come forward and confessed, but he tried to keep hiding his sin, hoping it would all go away.

Friends, your sin never just goes away. Sooner or later it will find you out, you will be exposed.

20 And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: 21 When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver [about 5-6 lbs], and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels [about 1.5lbs; total value is the lifetime wages of an average worker], I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it."

This is the downside of having an infinite God who knows all things. You can't hide your sin. You might erase your browser's history, or surf in private mode. You might hide the receipts. You might think no one was looking. You might think you've got a great hiding spot, or that it happened far enough away. But what do you do with this:

Ps 139: 7 Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
8 If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.
9 If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
10 Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
Even the night shall be light about me;
12 Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;
The darkness and the light *are* both alike *to You*.

God knows, God sees, and what He thinks matters most.

22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver under it. 23 And they took them from the midst of the tent, brought them to Joshua and to all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD. 24 Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and they brought them to the Valley of Achor. 25 And Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day." So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. 26 Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day.

In other words, they did to Achan what should have been done to the things he lusted after.

And because of the lusts of one man, the selfish actions and ambitions of one man, at least forty others died. Thirty-six men at Ai, and his sons – that's at least two, and his daughters, that's at least two more – so the death toll is at least forty, because one man gave in to selfishness.

Brothers, fellow men, can I ask you to consider the effects of one man's sin on his family? Last week we saw the men lay it all down for the sake of the family, they were circumcised so that their families could move forward, that's a noble example of a husband's and a father's love, but here we see the destructive power of a man's indulgent sin. Brothers – you have an affect on your family. Use it for their blessing and not their pain.

And again, I know some of you struggle and say, that's not fair – it's not fair that so many should suffer because of the actions of one. But why do you say that? You know for a fact that the actions of others affect you, and your actions affect others. And we cherish that; we celebrate it, when it means doing good, when it means my actions help someone else. But why shouldn't the opposite be true?

Why should my sins have no affect on others? And why should their sins have no affect on me? We aren't isolated, we aren't alone, in ways we acknowledge and in ways that are mysterious to us, we are bound up together with other human beings in this life and our actions and our desires really do have an affect on others and vice-versa.

But God is just. He knows the righteous. He has a way of making sure everything is dealt with in eternity. No one gets short-changed forever, just like no one gets away with their sin forever.

So after the sin has been dealt with, after the point has been made, grace is shown again.

Joshua 8:1 Now the LORD said to Joshua: “Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; take all the people of war with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. 2 And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves.

If only Achan would have waited and trusted God, he’d have had a chance to get some stuff.

Friends, there’s a warning there for us! How much trouble did Achan bring upon himself, his family, and his nation because he couldn’t wait for God? Because he wouldn’t do things God’s way? Friends, hear this warning! The things Achan took at Jericho would have been permitted just a few days later at Ai. But you’ve got to follow God’s instructions, do things His way, and wait for His timing!

So God continues to give Joshua the battle plan, He says,

2 (cont.) Lay an ambush for the city behind it.”

3 So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night. 4 And he commanded them, saying: “Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind the city. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. 5 Then I and all the people who *are* with me will approach the city; and it will come about, when they come out against us as at the first, that we shall flee before them. 6 For they will come out after us till we have drawn them from the city, for they will say, ‘*They are fleeing before us as at the first.*’ Therefore we will flee before them. 7 Then you shall rise from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand. 8 And it will be, when you have taken the city, *that* you shall set the city on fire. According to the commandment of the LORD you shall do. See, I have commanded you.”

9 Joshua therefore sent them out; and they went to lie in ambush, and stayed between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua lodged that night among the people. 10 Then Joshua rose up early in the morning and mustered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. 11 And all the people of war who *were* with him went up and drew near; and they came before the city and camped on the north side of Ai. Now a valley *lay* between them and Ai. 12 So he took about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. 13 And when they had set the people, all the army that *was* on the north of the city, and its rear guard on the west of the city, Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley.

14 Now it happened, when the king of Ai saw *it*, that the men of the city hurried and rose early and went out against Israel to battle, he and all his people, at an appointed place before the plain. But he did not know that *there was* an ambush against him behind the city. 15 And Joshua and all Israel made as if they were beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. 16 So all the people who *were* in Ai were called together to pursue them. And they pursued Joshua and were drawn away from the city. 17 There was not a man left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. So they left the city open and pursued Israel.

18 Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the spear that *is* in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the spear that *was* in his hand toward the city. 19 So *those in* ambush arose quickly out of their place; they ran as soon as he had stretched out his hand, and they entered the city and took it, and hurried to set the city on fire. 20 And when the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw, and behold, the smoke of the city ascended to heaven. So they had no power to flee this way or that way, and the people who had fled to the wilderness turned back on the pursuers.

21 Now when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.

22 Then the others came out of the city against them; so they were *caught* in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side. And they struck them down, so that they let none of them remain or escape. 23 But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him to Joshua.

24 And it came to pass when Israel had made an end of slaying all the inhabitants of Ai in the field, in the wilderness where they pursued them, and when they all had fallen by the edge of the sword until they were consumed, that all the Israelites returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword. 25 So it was *that* all who fell that day, both men and women, *were* twelve thousand—all the people of Ai. 26 For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. 27 Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as booty for themselves, according to the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua. 28 So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation to this day. 29 And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until evening. And as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his corpse down from the tree, cast it at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raise over it a great heap of stones *that remains* to this day.

I know I said last week that we would talk about the ethics behind destruction of entire cities this week, but I’m going to have to move it to next week and deal with it when we talk about the Gibeonites, so please forgive me.

Instead, we’re going to use these last minutes to see how Israel celebrated the victory God had just given them: they worship and remember.

30 Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, 31 as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: “an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded

an iron *tool*." And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. 32 And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. 33 Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as he who was born among them. Half of them *were* in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel. 34 And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. 35 There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them.

This is significant because between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim is the Valley of Shechem where God first made His covenant with Abraham. They're celebrating the fulfillment of God's promise in the place where it was made. God said I'm going to do this thing, and now they're part of it unfolding.

But as it unfolds, we see that just because you're God's chosen people in God's special place, the problem of sin hasn't gone away. Even in the Promised Land, people still act selfishly. Achan's sin was a reminder of that.

Which reminds me of another time when God had given a perfect place to chosen people. In the very beginning, God created the world and placed Adam and Eve in it to tend it and enjoy it. But just like He would say one day at Jericho, He said something is off limits – don't eat from that one tree. Everything else here in this Garden is for you, everything else in Promised Land is for you, but don't eat of that one. And long before Achan came along, Adam and Eve made a selfish grab for something that looked too good to resist.

In both situations, the consequence was death: spiritual death for Adam and Eve, physical death for Achan, and in both situations the consequence affected others. In both situations people thought God was keeping something from them.

This cycle of God wanting to bless us, and us making selfish grabs for more keeps going throughout human history. It plagues us today. You and I sin like this.

But, if we will confess our sin, if we will admit it, if we will stop trying to hide it, we can find forgiveness. Jesus went and hung on the cross in our place so we don't have to be stoned and burned with our families for our sin. That's what happened on Calvary, He did that for you and for me. He took the punishment that we rightly deserve for the things we think are hidden under our bed. Jesus becomes Achan for us; He is put to death outside the city, for our sins.

And if we'll confess them and repent of them, that means to turn away from them, He'll give us life instead of death and we'll go on to be a part of the army that marches to victory in the next battle. Because God wants to give us good things. We just have to do it all His way.