

Notes on Joshua 7

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II. Sin of Achan & Defeat of Ai (Josh. 7&8)

Sin of Achan – Joshua 7

Israel had defeated Jericho by God's command and were ready to move on to the next city, which was Ai. Fresh from an overwhelming victory, they were ready for another easy victory. However, problems were waiting that they did not expect.

Verse 1

1. Who was Achan and what did he do?
2. What rule had God given that this violated?

The account begins by telling about Achan's sin. The sin is described later in much more detail. We are told about it before the account of the attack on Ai, so we understand what happened. However, Israel at this point knew nothing about why the problem would occur.

Achan of the tribe of Judah had sinned in taking some of the spoils of Jericho. This had been expressly forbidden. All was to be destroyed or given to the tabernacle treasury. Achan's sin brought trouble to the whole nation.

One wonders why the passage says "the children of Israel" sinned and God was angry with them (cf. v11). Only one man sinned and the others knew nothing about it. Does this mean He held them all guilty, or is it just an expression for the fact that sin was found in their midst and they were all about to suffer for it? (See further notes below.)

Verses 2-5

3. What city did Israel plan to attack next? What advice did spies give?
4. What happened when Israel attacked? (Think: Aside from Achan's sin, could Joshua or the people have made a mistake here?)

Defeat at Ai

The next town to be taken in Israel's path was Ai, apparently a relatively small city. We are told that it was beside Beth Aven, east of Bethel. But it was west and a little north from Jericho (see MAP).

As he had done at Jericho, Joshua sent spies to determine what means should be taken to capture Ai. The spies returned with a confident report that the city was so small that only two or three thousand men would be needed, so there was no need to trouble the whole army.

So three thousand went up against Ai, but the people of Ai defeated them. Israel fled and 36 men were struck down. They fled as far as Shebarim (location unknown). The result was great discouragement among the Israelites.

One wonders whether Joshua and Israel made mistakes here, perhaps even sinning. First, they seem almost overconfident. Fresh from such a great and easy victory over a strongly fortified city at Jericho, perhaps they thought Ai would be no problem at all.

Furthermore, Joshua had carefully sought God's guidance each step of the way till now. But here there is no mention of any prayer or consultation with God about His will. Surely had they consulted Him first, as they had been doing, He would have guided them. See on 9:14. Surely this guidance would have included a warning about Achan's sin, and this would in turn have avoided the whole defeat. One wonders whether or not this is the sense in which v1 mean Israel had sinned. Or perhaps this was just poor judgment on their part.

In any case, we learn here that times of prosperity can be a source of trouble to God's people as surely as can times of hardship. When we suffer, we tend to be discouraged and lose faith.

When all goes well, we tend to be self-confident and fail to appreciate our need to trust God. Blessings and troubles can both be a cause of downfall, if we do not use them properly.

Verses 6-9

5. What complaint did Joshua raise to God?

Joshua's plea to God

Joshua grieved deeply over the defeat. He tore his clothes and put dust on his head as customary signs of grief. He fell before the ark until evening, along with the elders of Israel.

Then he raised his complaint to God why this great loss had occurred. He asked whether God had brought Israel into the land only to have them destroyed at the hands of their enemies. He thought they would have been better off had they simply stayed on the east side of Jordan.

Then he wondered what would happen when the people of the land heard that Israel had fled in battle and from such an apparently weak enemy. He thought the enemies might surround Israel, now that they were in the land, and destroy them. This would not only be tragic for the people, but it would also bring reproach on God's name.

If Joshua had not consulted God before the attack, he surely did here! Troubles can humble us to see our need for God, when we might not see that need when all goes well.

Yet Joshua seems almost to be complaining and murmuring against God, much like the nation had done in the wilderness whenever things did not go well. His faith seems to be shaken and perhaps worse. The account does not directly say he sinned here, but God is about to respond to him forcefully in the following verses. In any case, had Joshua gone to God for guidance before the attack, surely the defeat at least could have been avoided.

Verses 10-12

6. What explanation did God give for the event?

7. List several lessons we can learn from this event regarding the consequences of sin.

God's explanation of the problem

God's response commanded Joshua to get up and asked why he was lying on his face. The response seems to imply that Joshua should have known better than to think God had in any way failed. We need to learn this lesson too. When things do not go well, it is not God's fault. Don't blame Him. Usually people are to blame to some extent, or perhaps it is Satan. But God is not to blame.

In this case God explained that Israel had sinned, as described in v1. They had transgressed the covenant by taking some of the devoted spoils of Jericho and keeping it for themselves, which God had forbidden in 6:17-19. God calls this stealing and deception. And it was stealing from God at that!

God said this was the reason Israel was defeated by their enemies. The sin had doomed them to destruction. And what was more, they would continue to be defeated unless they dealt with the sin and removed the devoted property. God would not be with them as long as they harbored sinners among themselves.

Lessons about sin

Clearly we learn here the dangers of sin and disobedience to God's covenant. God cannot bless those who sin against Him. He may continue to send the common blessings that He sends on all mankind, but He extends no special protection and blessing that He offers to His people.

Furthermore, we must learn that sins we commit create problems for other people too. Israel in general had not stolen the devoted things. That was done by just one man. People today often think, "It's my life. It's no one else's business what I do. If what I do brings consequences, that's my problem. It's my own personal business." But sooner or later sin creates problems for other people too. It may be a bad influence leading other people also to justify their sins. It may

cause suffering and hardship on our loved ones. But if nothing else, it hinders God's ability to bless those with whom we associate.

Furthermore, we see here that, when God's people learn about sin among the members of the group, they are responsible to deal with it. They must not simply ignore it, or God will not bless them. God cannot fellowship those in sin, including those who justify sin in others. God said He would not dwell among the nation until they dealt with the problem. We must take care to avoid sin in the camp. See also 2 John 9-11; Ephesians 5:11; Proverbs 17:15; 2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1; 1 Timothy 5:22; Psalms 1:1,2; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Romans 1:32; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20.

Other lessons to be learned include the fact that we cannot hide from God. He knows our sins and will surely punish if we do not repent (see notes below for more on these points.)

Verses 13-15

8. How did God say Israel should deal with the sin?

9. List several lessons we can learn regarding the responsibilities of God's people in dealing with sin.

God's instructions for dealing with the problem

If Israel had not known before what the problem was and what to do about it, they surely learned here! God told Joshua to inform the people and warn them about the problem. They were to sanctify themselves in preparation for the next day – make themselves holy (see on 3:5). He was to tell them, as God had told him, that the problem was sin in the camp. There was devoted property among them, and they could not prosper in their battles until they removed those spoils.

God then told Joshua how to handle the matter the next day. He was to have the people come before them so God could indicate what tribe, then what family, household, and finally what man was guilty. This one was to be taken out, along with the devoted spoils, and be burned along with all his family, because of his sin against God and the terrible influence he had.

Lessons about dealing with sin

One wonders how Achan spent that night! Surely he knew he was guilty. Presumably he did not believe the people could find out and punish him. But he surely knew that he was guilty, even if no one else was.

God had commanded the people to sanctify themselves. Surely Achan knew he needed to make himself holy, and God's command showed that required eliminating the devoted things. If he had come at that point confessing his deed, one wonders if the punishment would have been less severe. Perhaps God delayed till the next day to give him time to make correction. In any case, Achan made no correction, so his punishment was clearly justified when it did come. If we want mercy, we need to confess our errors and make correction while we have the opportunity.

Furthermore, this demonstrates the need for God's people to take disciplinary action against sin among the group. It is not enough for others just to refuse to commit the same sin, nor is it enough to speak against it. If speaking does not lead to repentance, the group must take action against sin. The New Testament likewise requires that God's church must discipline those who sin and do not repent. If we fail, then we become the sinners. See 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15; Matthew 18:15-17; Titus 3:10,11; Romans 16:17,18; 1 Timothy 1:3-11,19,20; 2 Corinthians 2:6-11; 2 John 9-11; Hebrews 12:15; 1 Corinthians 15:33.

Verses 16-19

10. What happened when Israel tried to find the guilty person?

Achan's guilt demonstrated

On the next day, Joshua did as God had commanded. He brought each tribe forth and Judah was taken. Then the family and household were indicated. Finally Achan was demonstrated to be the guilty man.

Joshua then commanded Achan to make confession, telling what he had done without hiding it. In this way he would honor and glorify God. It always glorifies God when we admit He is right and just, even if we must do so by admitting we are wrong. This would demonstrate that God had not failed the people (as Joshua, and no doubt other people, thought he had). Rather, there was justifiable reason for what God had done.

We are not here told exactly what method was used by God to indicate which tribe, family, etc., was chosen. Similar events occurred elsewhere, as in 1 Samuel 14:38-42 (cf. 10:19-22). In 1 Samuel 14 we are told that the method used was casting lots (cf. Acts 1:24-26). Perhaps in other cases other methods were used. In any case, the point is that this was a revelation from God.

Achan probably thought, as many people think today, that they can hide from God. They think people cannot find out what they did, so no one can know. But God knows all things. No sin can escape Him, so we should be sure that our sin will be found out and punished – Num. 23:23. See Proverbs 3:19; Psalm 139:1-4,6-12; 147:4,5; John 16:30; Matthew 10:29-31; 6:8,32; 1 Kings 8:39; Romans 11:33,34; Isaiah 55:8,9.

Verses 20-23

11. What sin did Achan confess?

12. **Define** “covet.” List other *passages* about it.

Achan's confession; the devoted things discovered

Seeing that he was caught, Achan finally confessed openly his sin. Specifically, he identified the devoted things he had stolen to be a Babylonian garment, 200 shekels of silver (perhaps five pounds) and 50 shekels of gold. He said he coveted and took them and hid them in the dirt in the midst of his tent.

Joshua sent messengers to Achan's tent. There they found the items, exactly as Achan had admitted. They brought them and laid them in the presence of Joshua, the Lord, and all Israel.

Covetousness is greed: an overly strong desire for things that leads us to be willing to obtain them in an unauthorized or improper way. In this case, it was improper to take any of the spoils from Jericho, but Achan's covetousness led him to keep them. See other verses about greed and over-emphasis on material things: Matthew 6:19-33; 16:24-27; Romans 8:5-8; 12:1,2; 2 Corinthians 8:5; 10:3,4; John 6:27,63; Luke 12:15-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Colossians 3:1,2.

Greed is especially strange in that it leads us to desire and take that which we cannot really even use. What good did that Babylonian garment do Achan while buried in the dirt under his tent? Could he wear it without people asking where he got it? Could he sell it or give it as a gift? How could he even use the silver or gold without arousing questions? Perhaps he thought he could take these things with him and later use them in some way. But the guilt and hiding in the meanwhile were surely not worth it.

And how much better everyone would have been had he obeyed God's command to begin with!

Verses 24-26

13. Describe what was done to Achan.

Achan's death

Joshua then commanded Israel to take those devoted things, Achan himself, and all his family and his possessions to a valley called the valley of Achor (location unknown). There Israel stoned him, as God had commanded, then they burned them with fire and raised a great heap of stones over them. That heap still existed when the book was written. This satisfied God's justice and His anger was taken away.

Joshua said Achan had troubled Israel, so the Lord would trouble Him. “Achan” means “trouble,” so he was rightly named. “Achor” also means “troubling.” Presumably this name was

given to the valley after this event. So the place of punishment became a symbol and a memorial to the trouble caused by sin.

Again the event shows God's determination that sin must be removed from among His people. We are responsible to deal with it, even though we did not commit it.

One wonders why Achan's sons and daughters were also slain. God had commanded that the sons were not to be put to death for the sin of the father – Deut. 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; (Ezek. 18:20). On the other hand, in Numbers 16:25-35 the families of Dathan and Abiram died with them for their sin, and this is what God had commanded to be done in Achan's case (7:15). I can only conclude that Achan's family was aware of his sin and would not stand against him or in some other way God knew they too were worthy of punishment.

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