

The Book of Joshua, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Achan's Sin and Defeat at Ai

Joshua 7:1-8:35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The central doctrinal task of this lesson is to teach, clearly and pastorally, the seriousness of sin and the real consequences it carries, while carefully guarding the truth that guilt is never inherited. Achan sinned, and the whole camp suffered the consequences: thirty-six men died, the army was routed, and Israel could not stand before its enemies until the matter was dealt with. This is a sobering picture of how one person's hidden sin can bring trouble on many. Yet the text and the whole of Scripture are equally clear that the guilt was Achan's own. Help the class hold these together by teaching the difference between bearing consequences and bearing guilt. People often suffer the fallout of others' sins (a family wounded by one member's choices, a congregation harmed by one leader's fall), but no one is counted guilty before God for a sin he did not commit. Anchor this in Ezekiel 18:20, 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die ... the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.' We become guilty only when we ourselves sin.

Be ready to handle the destruction of Achan's household and the conquest of Ai with honesty and care. Two cautions will serve your class well. First, on Achan's family, do not teach that his children were condemned for his sin; the text describes the consequences of his transgression falling upon his household within the covenant judgment of that moment in redemptive history, and Scripture elsewhere firmly forbids treating the guilt of one as the guilt of another. Resist any reading that turns this into inherited guilt or original sin. Second, on the destruction of Ai, treat it as covenant judgment at a specific point in God's dealings with the nations of Canaan, not as a pattern or permission for human violence. The Christian's warfare today is spiritual, not physical: 'we do not war after the flesh,' and 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood' (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-18). Keep these lines clear and your class will be protected from real error.

This lesson is also aimed at the conscience and the spiritual formation of your students. Achan's confession, 'I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid,' is a mirror for every heart. Press gently into the truth that hidden sin is never as private as it feels, that covetousness and concealment and rationalizing are common to us all, and that the only road back to fellowship runs through honest confession that gives glory to God. But do not leave the class in the rubble of Ai. The story does not end in judgment; it ends with God saying 'Fear not,' bringing Israel back to victory, and renewing the covenant at Ebal and Gerizim. The aim is that students would deal honestly with their own sin and then taste the mercy of a God who gives the failing a fresh start.

Question 1

Student Question:

After the triumph at Jericho, Israel is routed at the small town of Ai, and Joshua falls on his face in confusion (Joshua 7:1–9). But verse 1 has already told the reader what Joshua does not yet know: ‘the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan ... took of the accursed thing.’ What does the text teach us about the seriousness of sin, and why does God treat one man’s hidden disobedience as something that involves the whole nation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 7 opens with a verse the reader sees but Joshua does not: ‘the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan ... took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel’ (Joshua 7:1). The narrative deliberately lets us in on the secret before the defeat, so that we read the rout at Ai already knowing its cause.

Notice the language. The text says ‘the children of Israel committed a trespass,’ yet it was Achan alone who took the spoil. This is covenant language. Israel stood before God as a people in a holy relationship, and sin in the camp affected the standing of the whole community before the Lord while the matter remained unaddressed.

This is not God charging the nation with Achan’s personal guilt. It is God treating the community’s holiness as a real thing that one man’s sin had defiled. Until the sin was dealt with, Israel could not stand before its enemies (Joshua 7:12). The consequences were corporate; the guilt, as the chapter will make plain, was personal.

Hold the two truths the lesson must guard from the start. Sin is serious, and its effects can spread far beyond the one who commits it. Yet the seriousness of sin never means that innocent people are counted guilty before God. The whole camp bore the consequences; Achan bore the guilt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin is serious before a holy God, and its consequences can reach far beyond the one who commits it.
- Israel’s covenant standing meant that unaddressed sin in the camp affected the whole community’s relationship with God.
- Bearing consequences is not the same as bearing guilt; the distinction must be kept clear from the outset.
- God does not charge the nation with Achan’s personal guilt; the guilt is Achan’s own (anticipating Ezekiel 18:20).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the text say Israel sinned when it was Achan who took the spoil?
- What is the difference between the whole camp suffering consequences and the whole camp being guilty?

- How does verse 1 shape the way we read the defeat at Ai that follows?

Question 2

Student Question:

Joshua's first response to defeat was to cry, 'wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan?' (Joshua 7:7). When life suddenly goes wrong, where does your heart run first? Do you tend to blame God, blame others, or stop and honestly ask whether there is unconfessed sin you need to face?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Stunned by defeat, Joshua falls on his face and pours out his grief: 'Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us?' (Joshua 7:7). His first instinct in the dark is to wonder whether God has failed him.

There is something deeply human here. When the floor gives way, our first question is rarely 'have I sinned?' It is more often 'why has this happened to me?' or 'where was God?' Joshua, a faithful man, defaults to bewildered complaint before he learns the real cause.

This is a self-examination question. Press your students to notice the direction their hearts run in trouble. Do they blame God, blame circumstances, blame other people, or do they stop and ask honestly whether sin might be part of the story? The aim is not guilt-hunting behind every hardship, but honest self-searching.

Be balanced here. Not every difficulty is the result of personal sin; Job's friends made that very error. But Achan's story warns us against the opposite mistake, of never asking the question at all. Sometimes the trouble in the camp really does begin in the tent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- In trouble our hearts often run first to blame (God, others, circumstances) rather than to honest self-examination.
- Joshua's bewildered 'why' is deeply human, yet the cause lay in sin he had not yet faced.
- Not every hardship is caused by personal sin (Job's friends erred), but we must not refuse to ask the question.
- Honest self-searching, not anxious guilt-hunting, is the posture this story commends.

Discussion Prompts

- When life suddenly goes wrong, where does your heart run first?
- How do we honestly examine ourselves without assuming every hardship is punishment for sin?
- What might it look like to ask the Lord, 'Is there something in me I need to face?'

Question 3

Student Question:

God tells Joshua, 'Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned' (Joshua 7:10–11). There was a time to pray and a time to deal with the sin in the camp. What does this teach us about the difference between true repentance and a religious response that avoids dealing honestly with sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God's answer to Joshua's prayer is bracing: 'Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned' (Joshua 7:10–11). There was a time to pray, and there was a time to get up and deal with the sin. Prayer was not meant to become a substitute for obedience.

This is striking, because Joshua was not doing anything obviously wrong; he was praying, grieving, seeking God. Yet God tells him to rise. Genuine repentance is not merely feeling bad or even praying earnestly; it is dealing honestly and decisively with the sin itself.

Many of us are tempted to a religious response that feels spiritual but quietly avoids the real issue. We can pour out prayers and tears while leaving the actual sin unaddressed in the tent. God calls Joshua, and us, past the posture of prayer to the work of putting sin away (Joshua 7:13).

Draw the timeless principle for the class: true repentance owns the sin, names it, and removes it. It does not bargain, excuse, or hide behind religious activity. 'He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy' (Proverbs 28:13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer must never become a substitute for dealing honestly and decisively with sin.
- True repentance names and removes the sin; it does not merely feel sorry or appear devout.
- A religious response can mask an unwillingness to face the real issue.
- God calls Joshua from the posture of prayer to the obedient work of putting sin away (Proverbs 28:13).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between genuine repentance and a religious response that avoids the real issue?
- Why might God tell a praying man to get up off his face?
- Where might you be praying about a sin you actually need to forsake?

Question 4

Student Question:

Achan's own confession traces the anatomy of his fall: 'I saw ... I coveted ... I took ... I hid' (Joshua 7:21). Walk slowly through those four words in your own life. Where does the path usually begin for you, with the look, the longing, the grasping, or the covering up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Achan finally confesses, his words lay bare the anatomy of every fall: 'When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold ... then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent' (Joshua 7:21). I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid.

This is the very pattern James describes: 'every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin' (James 1:14-15). It began with a look that lingered, became a longing, hardened into a grasp, and ended in concealment.

This is a self-examination question. Invite students to trace the path in their own lives. For some the danger is the unguarded look; for others it is the longing that is allowed to grow; for others it is the grasping, or the instinct to cover up once the deed is done. Naming where the chain usually begins for us is the first step to breaking it.

Help the class see the mercy hidden in this verse. Achan's honesty, late as it was, finally tells the truth about himself. Self-deception keeps us in bondage; honest naming of sin is where freedom begins. We cannot forsake what we will not first confess.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin typically follows a path: the look, the longing, the grasping, the covering up (James 1:14-15).
- Covetousness begins in the eyes and the heart long before it reaches the hands.
- Concealment is itself part of the sin and deepens its hold on us.
- Honest self-naming is where freedom begins; we cannot forsake what we will not confess.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does the path of sin usually begin for you: the look, the longing, the grasping, or the covering up?
- How does naming the pattern honestly help you guard against it?
- What does it cost to tell the truth about ourselves, and why is it worth it?

Question 5

Student Question:

Achan was uncovered slowly, tribe by tribe, family by family, man by man, until he stood exposed before all Israel (Joshua 7:16-18). Why do you think God let the discovery come so deliberately

rather than naming Achan at once, and what does this patient closing-in reveal about how God deals with hidden sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God uncovers Achan slowly. Israel is brought near by tribes, then the tribe of Judah is taken; then the families of Judah, and the family of the Zarhites is taken; then man by man, until Achan stands exposed (Joshua 7:16–18). The net closes one ring at a time.

God surely knew Achan's name from the first. He could have spoken it instantly. Instead the discovery comes deliberately, tribe by tribe, household by household, through a long and public morning. The slowness is not God's uncertainty; it is His mercy and His warning.

Each narrowing of the lot was another chance for Achan to step forward on his own. The closing circle preached a sermon to him and to all Israel: hidden sin will be found out, and it would be far better to confess than to be exposed. 'Be sure your sin will find you out' (Numbers 32:23).

For the class, this patient closing-in reveals how God deals with hidden sin. He is not mocked, and what is done in secret does not stay secret before Him. Yet even in the exposing there is mercy, for every step gave Achan space to repent before judgment fell.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hidden sin is never hidden from God; what is done in secret is known to Him (Numbers 32:23).
- The deliberate, step-by-step discovery was both a warning and a mercy, giving room to confess.
- God's slowness in exposing sin is not uncertainty but patience that calls us to repentance.
- The closing circle preached to all Israel that sin will surely be found out.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think God exposed Achan slowly rather than naming him at once?
- What does the closing circle teach us about how God deals with hidden sin?
- How is there mercy even in the way God brings hidden things to light?

Question 6

Student Question:

Achan had hours, even a full night, between the casting of the lots beginning and the moment his name was reached, time when he could have stepped forward on his own. When has God given you space to come clean before you were found out, and how did you respond to that mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The casting of the lots was not instant. From the moment Joshua rose early and began bringing Israel near, through tribe and family and household, Achan had time, perhaps a full night of warning beforehand and a long morning of narrowing, in which he could have come forward of his own accord (Joshua 7:14–18).

This is a self-examination question about the mercy of being given room to repent before being found out. Achan let every chance pass. He waited until the lot fell on him personally, until there was nowhere left to hide, before he spoke.

Most of us know that space. There is often a stretch of time, a tug of conscience, a quiet prompting, when we sense we ought to come clean before the matter comes out on its own. How we use that space reveals much about our hearts. Achan's tragedy is that he spent his on hiding rather than confessing.

Encourage the class that the space God gives is a kindness, not a trap. The Lord would always rather we come to Him freely than be cornered. Confession offered before exposure is the path of mercy; concealment held until exposure is the path of grief.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God often gives space and warning before sin is exposed; that space is a mercy, not a trap.
- How we use the room God gives us to repent reveals the true state of our hearts.
- Achan's tragedy was spending his space on hiding rather than confessing.
- Confession offered freely before exposure is the path of mercy.

Discussion Prompts

- When has God given you space to come clean before you were found out?
- How did you respond to that prompting of conscience?
- Why is it better to confess freely than to be cornered into it?

Question 7

Student Question:

When Achan finally speaks, Joshua says to him, 'My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him' (Joshua 7:19). What does it mean that genuine confession gives glory to God, and why is honest confession, rather than excuse or concealment, the only road back to fellowship with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Joshua's words to the exposed man are tender and weighty: 'My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done' (Joshua 7:19). Even in the moment of judgment, Joshua calls him 'my son' and frames confession as giving glory to God.

This is a profound truth: honest confession glorifies God. When we tell the truth about our sin, we are agreeing with God's verdict, honoring His holiness, and acknowledging that He is right and we are wrong. Confession is not groveling; it is a form of worship, declaring that God is just and true.

Confession is the only road back to fellowship. Excuse, blame-shifting, and concealment all keep us at a distance from God, because they insist on a version of reality in which we are not truly guilty. Honest confession lays down the pretense and meets God in the truth, and there mercy waits (1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13).

Help the class feel both the kindness and the seriousness here. Joshua does not minimize the sin, but he does not abandon Achan to it either; he calls him to the dignity of honest confession. So God deals with us: He calls us to tell the truth, and in that telling there is glory given to Him and grace held out to us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest confession gives glory to God; it agrees with His verdict and honors His holiness.
- Confession is a form of worship, not mere groveling; it declares that God is just and we are not.
- Excuse, blame-shifting, and concealment keep us at a distance from God.
- Honest confession is the only road back to fellowship, and there mercy waits (1 John 1:9).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that honest confession gives glory to God?
- Why is confession, rather than excuse or concealment, the only road back to fellowship?
- How does seeing confession as worship change the way you approach it?

Question 8

Student Question:

After the sin was judged, God said to Joshua, 'Fear not, neither be thou dismayed' and brought Israel back to win the very battle they had lost (Joshua 8:1). Where in your life have you tasted that mercy, the Lord meeting you on the far side of failure and giving you a fresh start once sin was dealt with honestly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the sin was judged and put away, God speaks fresh courage to Joshua: 'Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai' (Joshua 8:1). The God who had let them fall now lifts them up and gives them the very victory they had lost.

This is the turn the whole lesson has been waiting for. The story does not end in the rubble of defeat. Once the matter was dealt with honestly, the path forward opened again. God brings Israel back to the very place of their failure and turns it into a place of triumph.

This is a self-examination question inviting students to recall the mercy of a fresh start. Many of us know the shame of a failure that felt final. Yet the gospel pattern, foreshadowed here, is that on the far side of honest dealing with sin, God meets us with 'Fear not' and a future.

Be careful with the second half of chapter 8, the conquest of Ai itself. Treat it as covenant judgment at a specific moment in redemptive history, not a model for human violence. The Christian's warfare is spiritual; 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood' (Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5). The enduring lesson is the mercy of restoration, not a sanction for the sword.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God meets honest repentance with 'Fear not' and a fresh start; failure need not be final.
- He brings Israel back to the place of their defeat and makes it a place of victory.
- Restoration comes on the far side of dealing honestly with sin, not by ignoring it.
- The conquest of Ai is covenant judgment at a moment in redemptive history, not a model for human violence today (Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you tasted God's mercy meeting you on the far side of failure?
- What does it mean that God brought Israel back to the very place of their defeat?
- Why must we read the conquest of Ai as covenant judgment rather than a pattern for our own conflicts?

Question 9

Student Question:

Achan's sin brought real and terrible consequences on the whole camp, thirty-six men dead and a household destroyed, yet Scripture is equally clear that 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die' and that a son does not bear the guilt of his father's iniquity (Ezekiel 18:20). How do we hold both truths together, that sin has wide social consequences others may suffer, while guilt itself is never inherited but belongs to each person who sins? Why does this distinction matter so much for how we understand accountability before God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it must be handled with great care. The consequences of Achan's sin were real and terrible: thirty-six men of Israel died at Ai, the army was routed, and the chapter records that judgment fell upon Achan's household and

possessions (Joshua 7:5, 24–25). Sin is never as private or as contained as we imagine; others truly suffer the fallout of what we do.

Yet Scripture is equally clear that guilt itself is personal and is never inherited. ‘The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him’ (Ezekiel 18:20). We become guilty before God when we ourselves sin, not because of what another has done.

The class must learn to hold these two truths together by distinguishing consequences from guilt. A family wounded by one member’s choices, a congregation harmed by one leader’s fall, a nation suffering for one man’s sin in the camp: these bear consequences. But no one is counted guilty before God for a sin he did not personally commit. The whole camp bore the consequences of Achan’s sin; Achan bore the guilt of it.

This distinction matters enormously for how we understand accountability before God. It guards us from the error of inherited guilt or original sin, the notion that we are born condemned for Adam’s sin or any other’s. Scripture teaches personal accountability: each of us answers for our own sins (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). This is both sobering and freeing. Sobering, because we cannot blame our ancestors or our circumstances for our own guilt. Freeing, because no one is condemned by God for a sin he did not commit.

Be careful and pastoral with the destruction of Achan’s household. Do not teach that his children were counted guilty of his sin; rather, his transgression brought devastating consequences upon all he had, within the covenant judgment of that particular moment in Israel’s history. Resist any reading that turns this passage into a proof of inherited guilt. The clear, settled teaching of Scripture is Ezekiel 18:20: the son does not bear the iniquity of the father. Consequences ripple outward; guilt stays with the one who sins.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin carries real social consequences; others genuinely suffer the fallout of what we do (Joshua 7:5).
- Guilt itself is personal and is never inherited; each answers for his own sin (Ezekiel 18:20).
- The whole camp bore the consequences of Achan’s sin, but Achan alone bore its guilt.
- This guards against the error of inherited guilt or original sin; we are not born condemned for another’s sin.
- Scripture teaches personal accountability before God; each of us answers for our own sins (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).
- Handle the destruction of Achan’s household as covenant consequence at a moment in redemptive history, not as proof of inherited guilt.
- The distinction between bearing consequences and bearing guilt is the key that keeps this passage faithful to the whole of Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- How do we hold together the truth that sin has wide consequences while guilt is never inherited?
- What is the difference between bearing the consequences of another's sin and bearing the guilt of it?
- Why does the truth of personal accountability (Ezekiel 18:20) matter so much for how we understand standing before God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole story, from the buried garment to the renewed altar on Mount Ebal where Joshua read 'all the words of the law' to the whole assembly (Joshua 8:30–35). Name one specific way the Lord is using Achan's failure and Israel's restoration to search your own heart this week. What is He asking you to confess, and what fresh obedience is He calling you to?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The story does not close at Ai but on the slopes of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, where Joshua builds an altar, offers sacrifices, and reads 'all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law' to the whole assembly, men, women, children, and the strangers among them (Joshua 8:30–35). After sin and judgment comes covenant renewal.

This is the capstone. The arc of the lesson runs from a buried garment to an open book, from a sin hidden in a tent to the whole law read aloud before all Israel. Where Achan's sin was secret, the renewed covenant is utterly public; where he hid, the people now stand in the open before God and His word.

Invite the class to look back across the whole story and let it search them. Achan's failure is a mirror; Israel's restoration is a promise. Help students name the specific place the Spirit is pressing, the sin to be confessed, the concealment to be ended, the fresh obedience to be taken up.

Point them at last to Christ and to grace. The God who judged sin also renewed the covenant and gave the victory; He is the same God who in Christ deals with our sin honestly at the cross and then says to us, 'Fear not.' Ask each student to name one thing to confess and one fresh step of obedience to take this week, that they may walk in the open before the Lord rather than hiding in the tent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- After sin and judgment, God leads His people to covenant renewal and the public reading of His word.
- The arc runs from a secret sin to an open book; honesty before God replaces concealment.
- Achan's failure is a mirror, and Israel's restoration is a promise of mercy to those who deal honestly with sin.
- Christ is the goal: God deals with our sin honestly at the cross and then says, 'Fear not'; each student should name one sin to confess and one step of fresh obedience this week.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the public reading of the law at Ebal answer the secret sin hidden in Achan's tent?
- As you look back over the whole story, what is the Lord asking you to confess and bring into the light?
- What one fresh step of obedience is He calling you to take this week?