

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 6: Achan's Sin and Defeat at Ai -- Joshua 7:1-8:35

The trumpets at Jericho had barely faded. The walls lay in heaps of rubble, the shout of victory still echoed in Israel's memory, and the people stood at the threshold of a whole land waiting to fall before them. After Jericho, the little town of Ai must have looked like an afterthought. The scouts came back almost laughing: send two or three thousand men, they said, and do not trouble the whole army; the people of Ai are but few. Israel was riding high. And that, as it so often is, was the most dangerous place to be.

Then came the unthinkable. The men of Ai, a town nobody feared, chased Israel's soldiers from before the gate and struck them down on the hillside. Thirty-six men fell, and the heart of the people 'melted, and became as water' (Joshua 7:5). The same army that had watched walls collapse at the sound of a horn now fled in terror from a handful of farmers. Joshua tore his clothes and fell on his face before the ark until evening, crying out the question that rises in every heart when the floor falls out from under us: Lord, why? What happened?

What happened was hidden in a tent. While the whole camp celebrated at Jericho, one man named Achan had seen a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold, and he had coveted them, taken them, and buried them in the ground inside his tent. No one saw. No one knew. He must have thought the matter was finished, sealed under the earth like the secret it was. But God saw. And the trouble that came on the whole camp came because of a sin that one man thought he had buried where no one could find it.

This lesson asks us to walk into the hard, honest truth that sin is never as private as it feels. We will watch a secret unravel, a man confess, and a nation learn the weight of holiness. But we will also watch grace and mercy work, for once the matter is judged, God brings Israel back to Ai and gives them the victory He had promised all along. Do not read this story from a safe distance. Achan's words, 'I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid' (Joshua 7:21), are a mirror. Let the Lord hold it up to your own heart, and listen for what He is asking you to bring out of the dark and into the light.

Group Discussion: When Israel was defeated at Ai, Joshua's first instinct was to ask God 'why,' and God's answer was 'Israel hath sinned' (Joshua 7:10-11). Why do you think we are so quick to look outward for explanations when things go wrong, and so slow to ask whether sin in the camp might be part of the trouble?

Personal Reflection: Achan thought a sin buried in his tent was a sin that was finished. Is there something you have hidden away, sure that it is over and done, that the Lord may be asking you to bring into the light?

Read Joshua 7:1-8:35

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Ezekiel 18:20, the soul that sins shall die and a son does not bear the guilt of his father, the clearest statement that guilt is personal and never inherited; Proverbs 28:13, he that covers his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy; James 1:14-15, each is tempted when drawn away by his own lust, which when it conceives brings forth sin, the very pattern Achan traced; 1 John 1:9, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, our warfare is not after the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are mighty through God, reminding us the conquest is not a license for human violence today.

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