

## Josh 7:2-26, Loss at Ai and Judgment of Achan

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### 2-5, The First Battle of Ai

#### 2-3, *The Spy Mission: Learning about Ai*

2, Joshua dispatches spies, just as he had to spy out Jericho. Nothing wrong here; he is following the pattern that was so successful in ch. 2-6 in the campaign against Jericho.

3, their report: just send a small force. Nothing intrinsically wrong here, either. Compare Num. 31, where Moses sent only a representative force against Midian.

#### 4-5, *The Failed Attack*

Note how few the casualties were. The spies weren't wrong about the size of the opposition. The people of Ai were indeed "few," only about 12K including women, according to 8:25. The problem is at the end of v.5; Israel was smitten with terror from the Lord, the same terror he imposed on the Canaanites, 2:11; 5:1. Cf. 1 Sam. 28:16, "the LORD is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy."

### 6-9, Joshua Prays

#### 6, *Preparation*

His preparation for prayer indicates his attitude. There are two components: mourning (indicated in the outer two actions), and submission to the Lord (reflected in the center one).

*Torn garments.*—The most common sign of mourning. The dress symbolized the inner attitude of the heart, and had to be appropriate to the occasion. Just as it was an offense to come to a wedding without the appropriate joyful attire (Matt. 22:11,12), so to continue to wear fine clothing in a time of sorrow would show lack of respect. Tearing the clothing immediately turns it into a mourning garment, suitably reminiscent of the decline and decay all around us.

*Fall on the face.*—First reference is Abraham in Gen. 17:3, 17; no context of grief, and in fact the second is one of joy. Attitude of submission to the Lord and his will. While Joshua and the elders are deeply grieved, they do not let their grief turn them against the Lord.

*Dust on the head.*—Like rending the garment, best understood as a rejection of rejoicing and celebration. Maybe an inversion of the common Levitical ritual of bathing. Repeatedly in Lev. 15-17 and Num 19, washing the clothes and bathing the flesh is part of the remedy for ritual uncleanness, required to participate in the tabernacle worship. Just as tearing the clothes symbolizes exclusion from social joy, perhaps dust or ashes on the head emphasize exclusion from religious celebration.

#### 7-9, *The Prayer*

Joshua seeks to understand the mind of the Lord. He asks God, "Why did you do this?" (v.7), and then gives him three reasons that it's not a good idea. This is meaningful prayer, wrestling

with God, and contrasts strongly with the rote repetition that is so common in liturgical circles and that our Lord condemns as “vain repetition” (Matt. 6:7).

### 7, *The question, “Why?”*

By itself, this question is reminiscent of the complaints of the multitude in the wilderness, condemned in general in 1 Cor. 10:9-10:

- Exod 17:3, at Meribah they “tempted the Lord” (v.7) by asking Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt?”
- Num 14:3, after the report of the spies, they ask, “Wherefore hath the Lord brought us into this land?” Their lack of faith leads to 40 years in the wilderness.
- Num 21:5, a similar complaint leads to the poison serpents.
- Num 11:20 reports a similar complaint that led to the sending of the quail and the death of many at Kibbroth Hattaavah.

Why can Joshua indulge in similar complaint? The answer lies in the difference in motives. The people in the wilderness were complaining because they were inconvenienced. Their attitude was one of rebellion. Note by contrast Joshua’s motives, illustrated already by his posture with his face to the ground.

### 8-9, *Motives*

His concern is with three reputations:

*8a, His reputation.* “What shall I say?” Recall the regular pattern of forwarded commands, in which God commands Joshua, and he in turn commands the people. God has said that he was doing this to enhance Joshua’s reputation (3:7). Now an instruction that Joshua has given has led to disaster, and Joshua is discredited.

- It is not wrong to be concerned about one’s own reputation: Prov. 22:1, “A [good] name [is] rather to be chosen than great riches, [and] loving favour rather than silver and gold.”
- However, one must prefer the praise of God to that of men, John 12:43; Rom. 2:29.

*9a, Israel’s reputation.* The Canaanites will “cut off our name from the earth.” Yet God has promised them this land in fulfillment of his promises to the patriarchs.

*9b, God’s reputation.* Both of these are of concern to Joshua because ultimately God’s good name is in jeopardy. “What wilt thou do unto [for] thy great name?” He is concerned for God’s glory, not his own comfort, and this makes the difference between his lament and that of Israel in the desert.

### 10-15, *The Lord Responds*

Note the repetition of the command “Up” in 10 and 13. The first occurrence introduces the diagnosis of what is wrong; the second introduces the prescription of the remedy.

### **10-12, Rebuke and Diagnosis**

Joshua's position on his face, a sign of submission to the Lord, is inappropriate, for the nation he represents has not submitted itself to the Lord. "Israel has sinned." (The whole nation is guilty, though only one has actually done the deed.) The Lord makes this accusation specific in five ways, all exactly parallel in their construction. See long Keil. These are successive steps in the sin.

1. "transgressed my covenant." The *context* of the sin. They have violated the personal relationship Israel enjoys with the Lord. The sin starts in the heart, and then manifests itself outwardly.
2. "taken of the accursed [devoted] thing." Achan picked up a devoted object. This in itself would not be wrong, if he had delivered it to the wardens of the tabernacle treasure. But he went on and ...
3. "stole," took it for himself. Even then he might have confessed and returned it, but he ...
4. "dissembled," "concealed" the fact of his sin. We are to envision him hiding it under his garments as he furtively leaves the city, and finally ...
5. "put it among their own stuff," as he conceals it in his tent.

Diagnosis: not just, "they were accursed," but "they became accursed," by the presence of the accursed material in their midst. Two lessons here:

1. Holiness must be intrinsic; impurity is communicable. Cf. Hag 2:11-13.
2. God demands holiness of his people, "without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). As long as they are defiled, "neither will I be with you any more."

### **13-15, Rebuke and Positive Instruction**

The instruction begins with a summary: "sanctify the people." Cf. Exod. 19:10, 14, at Sinai. There, the sanctification took the form of washing clothes; here, it requires putting off a more serious pollution.

Four stages in the process:

1. Sanctify yourselves, in preparation for confronting the Lord. Here is their chance to deal with anything impure, to seek it out themselves. Achan should have come forward at this point.
2. 14a, they will be brought near, that is, to the Lord for judgment. Cf. use of *nigrab* in Exod. 22:8. An "ordeal by confrontation," cf. Exod 19:17, and the peoples' response, 20:18-21. There, Moses could represent them before the Lord, but now they must approach his holy presence individually.
3. 14b, God will indicate the guilty party.
4. 15, that individual and all that is his will be destroyed, because he has transgressed the covenant and "wrought folly in Israel." This latter term elsewhere is restricted to sexual impurity (rape or harlotry), and thus here has connotations of sexual impurity, violating Israel's marriage to the Lord.

## 16-18, The Trial: Learning about Achan

Joshua follows the procedure outlined by the Lord, probably through drawing lots. Urim and Thummim apparently permit a yes-no question to an individual question, so he would bring each unit at a given level before the Lord and ask, "Is it this one?" Working down hierarchically would reduce the number of questions to ask.

## 19-23, Confrontation with Achan

### 19, Challenge

"My son," indicating the humane attitude on Joshua's part, even toward a condemned criminal. Joshua does not gloat over finding the "bad guy," but mourns over the loss of one entrusted to his care. Yet he does not mitigate the judgment required by God's law. Calvin: "This example contains a lesson to judges, so to restrain their severity when punishing the criminal, as still to preserve the feelings of humanity; and yet so to regulate their mercy, as not to fall into laxity and carelessness."

"Give glory to the Lord ... make confession [lit. 'give praise'] to him." The confession is the next step; here, the first step is to urge Achan to resume a posture of worship before the Lord whose covenant he has violated. As the root of the sin is spiritual, not physical, so the remedy must begin spiritually. When we sin, we challenge God to a contest, his law against our will. By identifying the thief, God indicates that his power is greater, and Joshua calls on Achan to acknowledge this and glorify God for his demonstrated power.

"Tell me what thou hast done." Here Joshua calls for confession.

### 20-21, Confession

Note three features of Achan's confession:

1. "Indeed," "Truly." He does not beat about the bush or try to make excuses. When finally confronted, it acknowledges that the accusation is completely true.
2. "I have sinned." Hebrew emphasizes the personal pronoun: "I myself, emphatically I." The nation as a whole has suffered for his sin, but he accepts full personal responsibility.
3. "The Lord God of Israel." Acknowledges the national scope of his sin, since it is against the nation's Lord that he has offended.

Note also three steps to his sin: "I saw ... and I coveted ... and I took." In Hebrew, the three are parallel, and provide a capsule study of sin.

- Eve gives evidence of the same three steps in Gen. 3:6, "And when the woman *saw* that the tree [was] good for food, and that it [was] pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be *desired* to make [one] wise, she *took* of the fruit thereof.
- James 1:13-15 names two of them, and continues to point out Achan's final destiny. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: 14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. 15 Then when *lust* hath conceived, it bringeth forth *sin*: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."

Achan, Jos 7	Eve, Gen 3:6	Jas 1:15	
21, Saw	Saw		We may not be able to help what we see (but on the other hand, we should avoid situations that will fuel our lust)
21, Coveted	Desired	Lust	Now the sinner consciously directs his thought to the forbidden object.
21, Took	Took	Sin	Here is the action itself, yet it can only spring up in ground prepared by lust.
25, stoned		Death	Be sure of the result; it isn't worth it.

### 22-23, Verification

Achan is not executed merely on his confession. Joshua requires that every available piece of validation be made publicly clear, so that there can be no question of error in such a serious penalty.

### 24-26, Execution

We do not know the location of the mountain valley to which Joshua led the nation for the execution. Two observations of note:

- Participation of Achan's family in the punishment, not because the children should suffer for the father's sin (Deut 24:16), but because, being in the tent, they could hardly have been without knowledge of what happened, and participated in the concealment.
- Participation of all Israel in delivering the judgment. Compare the Lord's command to the Jews in John 8 ("let him that is without sin cast the first stone"); Deut. 17:6,7 (witnesses to cast the first stone). When judgment is regrettably necessary, all the nation participates.

### Epilog

Why is Achan treated so harshly, when many others later in Israel's history are guilty of worse crimes but get off much more lightly? Why isn't the harsh judgment on Ananias and Sapphira duplicated in later eras of corrupt Christianity? These individuals may be singled out precisely because of the freshness of the spiritual institutions in each case. Two reasons may be involved.

1. Israel was in "the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals," when the Lord himself declared her to be "holiness unto the Lord, ... the firstfruits of his increase" (Jer. 2:2,3); the early church had not yet "left [its] first love" (Rev. 2:4). In such conditions one has only to purge out the occasional offender to keep the whole pure; cf. the judgment commanded in 1 Cor. 5. When the body as a whole is corrupt, such signal judgment would leave none behind, and it is the righteous who must withdraw in reform. One can "put out" an occasional heretic (Titus 3:10), but must "withdraw [one]self" from a corrupt church (1 Tim. 6:5).
2. The severity of the judgment may be didactic, necessary at the beginning of an institution to make clear the Lord's expectations, but lessened later because of the long suffering of God.