



## Defeat Turned to Victory at Ai Joshua 7-8:29

### Introduction

Do you ever feel insignificant or powerless because you are only one person? Do you think what you do has little or no effect? Or do you sometimes think you can do whatever you like and no one else will be affected? If you have ever had these opinions, the lesson of Ai is for you.

After their spectacular victory under Joshua at Jericho, the Israelites were eager for their next conquest. The city of Ai, standing between them and Bethel, was much less formidable than Jericho. It was between Ai and Bethel that Abraham had first *built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD* (Genesis 12:7).

*But the children of Israel committed a trespass* (Joshua 7:1).

### Outline of Joshua 7 and 8

- I. A Defeat at Ai - Joshua 7:1-15
- II. Achan's Sin - Joshua 7:16-25
- III. Ambush and Victory at Ai - Joshua 8:1-29

#### I. A Defeat at Ai - Joshua 7:1-15

##### A. God's Anger as Prelude to Defeat - Joshua 7:1

###### 1. Sin in the camp

*"But"*, the first word of Chapter 7, is the clue to a change occurring. We are told of Achan's sin at the outset, so the defeat at Ai is put in its spiritual context. How much of what puzzles us in life would be clear if we had the spiritual perspective God has and would see as God sees. People who know God and His Word often understand events others consider perplexing, unintelligible, or meaningless.

###### 2. Corporate responsibility

It is interesting that the children of Israel are said to have committed the trespass when it was Achan who sinned while the rest knew nothing about it.

##### B. Dangerous Underestimation of the Situation - Joshua 7:2-3

###### 1. Spies sent

Following the established procedure of gathering information from spies before the attack, *Joshua sent*

*men from Jericho to Ai*. There is no mention of prayer or God's leading regarding the next attack.

###### 2. Spies' report

*They returned to Joshua and said, "Do not let all the people go up"*. The spies were confident two or three thousand men could handle it. It would be an easy victory. Why tire the troops for a few people in Ai? Joshua accepted not only their report, but also their advice, much to his regret. He sent only three thousand men against what turned out to be twelve thousand men of Ai. Joshua allowed himself to be deceived by both the uniquely easy victory against Jericho and the spies' presumptuous advice.

Have you ever given wrong counsel to others, tempting them to take the easy way out of a situation? Do you ever overstep your area of responsibility causing others to sidestep theirs? If so, will you ask God to help you stay within the boundaries of the work He has given you and do that job well?

##### C. Disastrous Results - Joshua 7:4-5

The three thousand turned and ran from the men of Ai who chased them down the hill killing thirty-six. Now it was the Israelites' hearts melting in fear.

##### D. Joshua's Prayer - Joshua 7:6-9

###### 1. Joshua's agonized response - 7:6

Joshua and the elders of Israel put dust on their heads, tore their clothes, and humbled themselves before God, falling on their faces before the ark. Tearing of clothes and putting dust on their heads were signs of mourning and grief. These actions were also associated with severe distress and sincere repentance.

###### 2. Joshua's three questions to the Lord GOD - 7:7-9

###### a. Why did this happen? - verse 7

*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?* Joshua at first blamed God for getting them into a predicament where they would fail. When things go wrong is your first reaction to blame someone else? If there is no one else to blame, do you blame God? Do you forget that God wants His people to succeed not fail?

For a moment, Joshua even thought they would have been better off not having crossed into their inherited land at all. He lamented not staying where it was safe, on the other side of the Jordan River. Apparently he forgot that they would also have had no victories and no fulfillment.

b. How do I handle it? – verse 8

Joshua asked God how to handle the failure of Israel's army. "O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies?" Joshua did not admit his own failure as the leader of the attack. Ultimately a leader is responsible for everything under his command, just as parents are responsible for everything in their homes. Joshua tried to distance himself from the defeat. When Moses, Ezra, and Daniel interceded for their people with a clear conscience they identified with the people even though they themselves were innocent of wrongdoing (Exodus 33:16; Ezra 9:6; Daniel 9:4-5).

Do you willingly take responsibility for the failures of other who are under your care, such as children, students, or employees? Do you trust God to help you handle the situation and acknowledge that you too are a sinner needing His grace?

c. What will God do? – verse 9

"The Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and surround us and cut off our name from the earth." And then the big question, "What will You do for Your great Name?" Joshua feared that Israel might be destroyed by their enemies in the land. Then, he remembered that the main issue was God's glory and honor. This was something he had learned from Moses (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13).

How honest are you with God? When you are in trouble, is your first response to go to Him and acknowledge your feelings and fears? He knows them all but wants you to seek Him so He can deliver you from all your fears (Psalm 34:4). Jesus gives the invitation, "Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

E. God's Answer – Joshua 7:10-15

1. "Get up!" – 7:10

Having taken the problem to God, Joshua was told this was a time for action not further agonizing on his face. Often with earnest prayer, short and focused is sufficient. More may contribute to self-pity.

2. Israel had sinned – 7:11

Joshua heard the cause of defeat. The nation was

involved in Achan's sin because of their covenant relationship with God. They had transgressed the covenant. The nation was like a chain, no stronger than its weakest link no matter how strong all the other links may have been. God told Joshua the specific sin was disobedience, theft, and deception. Sin is complex and usually intertwined with more sin.

3. "Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies" – 7:12

A clear commandment had been deliberately transgressed. There would be no more victory until sin was confessed and eradicated. If the *accursed things* (7:1) Achan had taken were not destroyed, Israel would be doomed.

4. "Sanctify yourselves" and "take away the accursed thing from among you" - 7:13-15

God gave Joshua a specific plan for rooting out the sin that festered among them. The next morning all Israel was to gather and God would narrow down through the tribes, families, households, and individuals to the guilty party. The one who had "done a disgraceful thing in Israel" would be "burned with fire, he and all that he has".

## II. Achan's Sin Discovered and Punished - Joshua 7:16-26

### A. The Process of Judgment - Joshua 7:16-18

1. Joshua rose early in the morning

The sooner a difficult task is tackled the easier it is to complete. Procrastination only compounds the problem. Joshua's established habit of rising early worked for him in handling the situation quickly with vigor and determination.

2. The narrowing process

Judah was taken out of the tribes. Out of Judah, the Zarahite family was examined man by man. Zabdi was taken and brought his household man by man. It was Zabdi's grandson, Achan, son of Carmi, who was finally singled out and the process was complete.

### B. The Purging of the Sin - Joshua 7:19-28

1. "Be sure your sin will find you out." - Numbers 32:23

Sooner or later sin will fester and surface. In this case the defeat at Ai led to Joshua's agonized prayer and God's detailed revelation of cause. Joshua then proceeded with the process of discovery. One day all

sin that is not cleansed by the blood of Christ will be revealed. To be cleansed, sin must be brought to the light. Do you confess known sin daily? Do you keep short accounts with God? See 1 John 1:9.

## 2. Achan's confession - 7:19-23

Joshua dealt gently but firmly with Achan who received no credit for his confession since he did not confess voluntarily but only when commanded. His confession is instructive, showing the progress of sin from inward contemplation to outward action. There are four steps:

### a. Achan "sinned" - verse 20

Sin took place in Achan's heart prior to any action.

### b. Achan "coveted" - verse 21

Achan entertained the thought and allowed it to take root.

When entering Jericho along with many other soldiers, Achan saw exotic and alluring items. While the others ignored the temptation, mindful of the LORD's commandment to take nothing for themselves, Achan allowed himself to admire a foreign garment. He allowed his mind to entertain the thought of how beautiful it was and how lovely it would be to possess it. Perhaps he imagined himself wearing it. He may even have felt it and found it soft and superior to the rough desert garments he knew. Achan felt an intense desire for the Babylonian garment from Shinar.

### c. Achan "took" - verse 21

The thought became the deed. Without further consideration, Achan took the beautiful garment. Then he saw some silver coins and a wedge of gold. He reacted quickly, almost without thinking, and took them too. Apparently he did not consider the consequences.

### d. Achan hid the stolen goods - verse 21

Ever since Adam hid in the garden, sin, by necessity, must be hidden. It is one of the more awkward features of sin. It hates the light. Is there something hidden in your life that you do not want others to know? Jesus said, "For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known" (Luke 12:2). Confession will cleanse and remove sin. But exposure later will be before all.

### e. Brought before Joshua and all Israel - verses 22-23

Men went to Achan's tent and found the forbidden items.

They laid them out before Joshua, all Israel, and the LORD. Achan's sin was publicly exposed. So it will be some day with all sin that is not confessed and cleansed by the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11).

## C. The Punishment of the Sin - 7:24-26

### 1. Inevitable

Two deplorable aspects of sin are the damage it does and its inevitable punishment. Sin consists of accursed things that are forbidden because they are harmful to all. Sin in the Old Testament is likened to leaven in its pervasiveness. Today we may compare it to cancer in its hidden malignancy and ultimate destructiveness.

### 2. The wages of sin

*The wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23). For the sake of the nation and God's purposes for it, this first instance of willful disobedience had to be punished swiftly, completely, and publicly. Punishment would be a deterrent to others who might be tempted.

### 3. The Valley of Achor

Joshua and all Israel took Achan, all his possessions, and his family (who may have been involved in his deception and encouraged it) to a valley where Joshua pronounced sentence. Then *all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones*. "Achor" means "troubling" and may have been named for the trouble that Achan caused his people.

### 4. But the gift of God

Although Romans 6:23 tells us *the wages of sin is death*, it does not end there, but rather with, *the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*. This is the "but" that answers the "but" in Joshua 7:1. We are not the helpless, hopeless victims of our sin. We can take our sin to Jesus and receive forgiveness which He purchased for us on the cross through His spotless, sinless sacrifice.

Have you taken your sin to the cross? Have you repented and asked the Lord for forgiveness? If so, you are declared righteous in His sight. *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## III. Ambush and Victory at Ai - Joshua 8:1-29

Once the sin that undermined the nation had been judged, God continued leading His people on to victory. The people of Ai had probably gained confidence from their first defeat of the Israelites, and had no doubt they

could defeat them again. But this time Israel would go forward with God as their commander.

#### A. God's Battle Plan - Joshua 8:1-2

##### 1. Encouragement - 8:1

Graciously, God began by encouraging Joshua, just as He had before the crossing of the Jordan and before the battle of Jericho. *“Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed.... See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land.”*

##### 2. Victory assured - 8:2

God revealed his plan of ambush to Joshua, a plan that would result in the Israelites' victory, just as they had been victorious at Jericho. The difference was that God would allow Israel to take Ai's spoil and cattle.

#### B. Joshua's Leadership – Joshua 8:3-9

##### 1. So Joshua arose, and all the people of war - 8:3-7

This time, Israel's entire army would go out against Ai. They were given God's ambush orders, requiring faith, obedience, and skill. They were all to be ready for swift coordinated action. A decoy attack with a retreat would draw Ai's fighting men out from the city to facilitate Israel's ambush and capture of the city. The retreating armies would be at risk, but their action would assure a surprise victory if the troops in ambush were alert and faithful to follow instructions.

##### 2. Joshua's command to his men - 8:8-9

God would deliver Ai into the hands of the armies of Israel, and they were to burn the city with fire. Victory would be theirs as they obeyed Joshua's final charge, *“According to the commandment of the LORD you shall do. See, I have commanded you.”*

#### C. Enemy Outwitted - Joshua 8:10-29

##### 1. God's plan carried out - 8:10-25

*Then Joshua rose up early, as was his custom. He mobilized the people of war, along with the elders, and led them up to Ai, camping on the north side of the city. He then sent thirty thousand men to lay in ambush behind Ai (8:3-4). He placed another five thousand men in ambush between Ai and Bethel, and Joshua led the rest of his forces forward in a mock attack against Ai.*

The advance of Joshua and his army drew the people of Ai out of the city, and the Israelites pretended to withdraw in retreat. At this point Joshua signaled for the ambush. Following God's orders, he held up his spear toward Ai. The men in ambush entered the city and, true to His promise, God delivered Ai into their hands. When Joshua and his men saw smoke rising from the city, they turned and attacked the men of Ai.

##### 2. God's plan accomplished - 8:26-29

Joshua did not withdraw his spear *until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.*

*So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation to this day. Ai was so thoroughly destroyed that archeologists have been unable to determine its exact location even to this day.*

#### Applications

1. Do you, like Achan, have unconfessed sin in your life, keeping yourself and others from experiencing victory and blessing? What sin do you need to confess to God and put out of your life?

2. What problem in your life are you attempting to solve without God's help? What problem will you give to Him now, seeking His guidance and wisdom?