



## Joshua - Chapter Seven

### II Joshua 6:1-12:24 - Taking the Land (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Seven

The events of Chapters 1-6, with the possible exception of Chapter 2, were initiated by divine instruction. Chapter 7 recounts how Joshua launches an attack on the city of Ai, but it makes no mention either of a divine mandate to do so or of any inquiry made to the Lord as to how Israel should proceed. Perhaps Joshua felt overconfident after the remarkable success of Israel's battle against Jericho, or perhaps the implication is that even an apparently easy target is not easy if the Lord is against them.

#### II.b Joshua 7:1-26 - The Sin of Achan and Its Punishment

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things; and the anger of the Lord burned against the Israelites.

#### Joshua 7:1

After the rousing success of Israel's first victory in Canaan, the opening summary of this chapter has an ominous ring: **But the Israelites broke faith**. Joshua commanded the nation in Joshua 6:18 that they should not take of any of **the devoted things**, those things that were associated with the demonic and debasing worship and practices of the Canaanites. This breach of faith, Hebrew *ma'al*, denotes Israel's failure to reverence Yahweh and render to him his due in obedience and worship. While **Achan** is the actual perpetrator, Israel, as a covenant community, is held responsible for the presence of sin in its midst.

Achan's abuse of the devoted things; which were commented on in Joshua 6:17-19), arouses the anger of the Lord and leads to Israel's first defeat in the land of Canaan. Israel could not be defeated by the Canaanites, but they could defeat themselves by alienating themselves from God's plan and power. The wars fought by Israel in Canaan were not to be plundering wars of personal gain; they were an unusual, sacred instrument in God's hand, used for judgement against a society ripe for judgement. Despite his fine Israelite pedigree, i.e. of the tribe of Judah, Achan begins the 'Canaanisation' of Israel by his greedy and deceitful actions.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, 'Go up and spy out the land.' And the men went up and spied out Ai. <sup>3</sup> Then they returned to Joshua and said to him, 'Not all the people need go up; about two or three thousand men should go up and attack Ai. Since they are so few, do not make the whole people toil up there.' <sup>4</sup> So about three thousand of the people went up there; and they fled before the men of Ai. <sup>5</sup> The men of Ai killed about thirty-six of them, chasing them from outside the gate as far as Shebarim and killing them on the slope. The hearts of the people failed and turned to water.

#### Joshua 7:2-5

For a second time Joshua sent men to spy out the land. However, this spying mission proves disastrous. The spies give an optimistic estimate of the challenge of taking Ai, and the cost is the lives of thirty-six of their men. In a striking reversal of what had earlier been the state of Canaanite morale, reported in Joshua 2:11 and 5:1, now it is the Israelites whose hearts have failed and become as water.

The thirty-six men killed were thirty six more than were killed at Jericho, which was thought to be a much more difficult city to conquer. Although this number was small from a military standpoint, what it meant was staggering to Israel. It meant that Israel could be defeated in the Promised Land. The defeat at Ai showed that what mattered was not the strength of the opponent, but the support of God. Without God's help, all would be lost.

About two or three thousand men should go up and attack Ai. The recommendation to send only two or three thousand men was either a response of faith or self confidence. In the end it did not matter; in their disobedience, they could have sent 100,000 troops and it would have made no difference. Israel's success depended on their own state of being conquered by God; Achan's rebellion showed that, in that respect, they were not conquered by him, and therefore open to defeat.

So about three thousand of the people went up there. Joshua, a wise military leader, commands the larger number recommended by his military intelligence to be sent, but it makes no difference: they fled before the men of Ai.

The location of ancient Ai, whose name means ‘ruin,’ is often assumed to be at Khirbet et-Tell, in the central hill country about 13 miles or 21 km by road west of Jericho and 3,458 feet or 1,054m higher in elevation. However, the specific site identification is disputed, as the stratigraphy of et-Tell does not match important events of biblical history, such as Joshua’s campaign against it. It is more likely that Ai was in the same general location but at the modern site of Khirbet el-Maqatir.

<sup>6</sup> Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. <sup>7</sup> Joshua said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Why have you brought this people across the Jordan at all, to hand us over to the Amorites so as to destroy us? Would that we had been content to settle beyond the Jordan! <sup>8</sup> O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has turned their backs to their enemies! <sup>9</sup> The Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will you do for your great name?’

#### Joshua 7:6-9

After tearing his clothes and falling to the ground on his face before the ark, a sign of distress and mourning: <<*When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry*>> (Esther 4:1), Joshua speaks to the Lord for the first time in this chapter, raising his urgent complaint and accusing the Lord of bringing this people across the Jordan just to hand us over to the Amorites. Joshua’s words carry the further implication that the Lord has reversed his repeated promise made in Chapter One to give both the land and the inhabitants of Canaan into Israel’s hands. For Joshua and the elders of Israel, this defeat was a national calamity. They do not take this defeat in their stride; there is no ‘win a few, lose a few’ mentality at work. They know that every battle matters, and there is always a reason for defeat, it does not just happen by chance or fate; therefore, it must be the Lord’s will.

Would that we had been content to settle beyond the Jordan! Joshua well knows that if God’s hand of blessing and guidance is not there, it would be better that they had not come into the Promised Land. If God will not deliver them, all will be lost. How different from so much of Christianity today! Some people are often so filled with man’s programmes and power, that if God withdrew his blessing and guidance, it would not be missed for quite a long time.

Joshua's fear that 'our name' will be cut off from the earth hints at a further reversal; namely, of the Lord's promise to Abraham to <<*make your name great*>> (Genesis 12:2b). If these promises fail, Joshua insists, they will do little for your great name. However, Joshua is about to learn that his probing questions are misdirected. On the issue of Israel's fate and the Lord's reputation, refer to Numbers 14:13-16 and Deuteronomy 9:26-29.

<sup>10</sup> The Lord said to Joshua, 'Stand up! Why have you fallen upon your face?' <sup>11</sup> Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings. <sup>12</sup> Therefore the Israelites are unable to stand before their enemies; they turn their backs to their enemies, because they have become a thing devoted for destruction themselves. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.

#### Joshua 7:10-12

Stand up! Israel has sinned. In no uncertain terms, the Lord redirects Joshua's attention to the true reason for Israel's defeat: Israel has transgressed my covenant. They have taken some of the devoted things, stolen, acted deceitfully, and put them among their own belongings – all actions explicitly forbidden in the Law of Moses: <<*The images of their gods you shall burn with fire. Do not covet the silver or the gold that is on them and take it for yourself, because you could be ensnared by it; for it is abhorrent to the Lord your God. Do not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it. You must utterly detest and abhor it, for it is set apart for destruction*>> (Deuteronomy 7:25-26). Adherence to that law was insisted on in the assurances given Joshua: <<*Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful*>> (Joshua 1:7-8).

The good news was that God had not failed the nation. The bad news was that this defeat was due to the sin of Israel. Joshua does not need to fear that the problem is with God, it is almost comforting to find that the problem is with always with his people! This is why God tells Joshua to get up. He does not need to beg God to change his heart towards Israel. Joshua must change

Israel's heart before God. God's provision is for his people to live a life of unbroken victory. However, he will not make defeat impossible, taking away his people's ability to choose good or evil. He always makes it possible for them not to sin: <<*No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one*>> (James 1:13); here, Israel sinned, but they did not have to.

God says that Israel had sinned, not just one man. It is staggering to think that the whole nation was found guilty, and thirty six men were dead, all for the sin of one man and his family. Paul speaks in similar terms concerning sin in the church; regarding sin among the Corinthian church, he says: <<*Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?*>> (1 Corinthians 5:6). A small amount of sin accepted and tolerated among believers can infect the whole group. In this sense, the acceptance and toleration of the sin is worse than the sin itself, so it must be dealt with strictly.

The actual perpetrator of these crimes was Achan. However, in addition to the corporate responsibility inherent in a covenant community, there was also the apparent negligence of Joshua and Israel's leaders in failing to seek divine direction for the Ai campaign; refer also to the explicit reference to a similar neglect in the Gibeonite affair in Joshua 9:14. No wonder, then, that the Israelites are unable to stand before their enemies, which contrasts Joshua 1:5, where the reverse was promised, on condition of Israel's faithfulness to the Lord.

Israel could not fight in God's power and presence unless they walked in obedience to God. Israel was under a covenant with God that promised blessing on their obedience, and also promised curses upon their disobedience. Christians, however, are not under that kind of covenant. Their position with God is made by the work of Jesus on their behalf, not their own works. Yet if they want God's power and presence in their own battles, they must walk in fellowship with him, and this fellowship is hindered by their own sin and rebellion. A Christian's position before God is secure in Jesus; but their fellowship with him is hindered by their own sin: <<*If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true*>> (1 John 1:6). This fellowship with God is the wellspring of power to live in the Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> Proceed to sanctify the people, and say, "Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'There are devoted things among you, O Israel; you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you.'

### Joshua 7:13

Sanctify yourselves. Sanctifying, or separating oneself, included washing one's clothes and temporarily abstaining from sexual relationship with one's spouse. It is a term used to prepare oneself for service to a Holy God: <<*For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy*>> (Leviticus 11:44a).

You will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you. When God deals with a particular area of sin, and people resist his work, his mercy causes them to fail in battle. Christians are most dangerous when they think they are winning battles by their own self-reliance. It is sobering to realise that a body in sin has no power before their enemies. It is wonderful to realise that once the sin has been dealt with, God's power can again flow in the Christian life.

<sup>14</sup> In the morning therefore you shall come forward tribe by tribe. The tribe that the Lord takes shall come near by clans, the clan that the Lord takes shall come near by households, and the household that the Lord takes shall come near one by one.

### Joshua 7:14

That the Lord takes. The Hebrew text reads simply 'takes,' and 'by lot' is the likely interpretation as the means by which God indicated his choice. The use of Urim and Thummim by the high priest is another possibility.

The Urim and Thummim are mentioned also in Exodus 28:30, Numbers 27:21, Deuteronomy 33:8, 1 Samuel 28:6 and Ezra 2:63. They may have been two stones of two different colours, a bright colour and a dark colour, with one representing a positive and the other a negative answer, that were kept in the breast piece of judgment of the priest's ephod; refer to Exodus 28:30 and Leviticus 8:8. They were the only legitimate means of directly seeking a 'yes' or 'no' answer from the Lord, apart from God speaking directly to people.

Although the identity of the sinning family was unknown to Joshua, it was known to God. Secret sin on earth is an open scandal before God. Therefore, Christians should therefore live their lives with the kind of life that can be seen by anybody, anywhere as, trying at least, to live by the Word of God.

<sup>15</sup> And the one who is taken as having the devoted things shall be burned with fire, together with all that he has, for having transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and for having done an outrageous thing in Israel.””

## Joshua 7:15

The offending party, once discovered, is to **be burned with fire**, because one who takes **devoted things** commits **an outrageous** act, i.e. an act of wilful, sacrilegious folly, and makes himself and **all that he has** liable to the same treatment that **the devoted things** would receive. While it is likely that Achan's family must have known of his offence and thus rightly shared his fate (v.24), the text does not comment on this. Achan's offence is not a civil infraction for which he alone might be held responsible: *<<Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death>>* (Deuteronomy 24:16), but a religious one that defiled the camp and, most especially, those closest to him. However, once God dealt with the one sinning individual and his culpable family, blessing could come again on the whole nation.

<sup>16</sup> So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken. <sup>17</sup> He brought near the clans of Judah, and the clan of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the clan of the Zerahites, family by family, and Zabdi was taken. <sup>18</sup> And he brought near his household one by one, and Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. <sup>19</sup> Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.'

## Joshua 7:16-19

**Achan, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.** This must have been an excruciating experience for Achan. How much better to simply walk in obedience to God! All this time, Achan certainly remembered exactly what he had taken, and how he wished he had not taken it. However, he and everyone else should remember the regret of sin before they sin, and not afterwards. Sin may, on occasion, have its pleasures. Taking those things may have given Achan a good feeling at the time. But the penalty of sin, both within the individual and upon them, outweighs any of the fleeting pleasures of sin.

**Joshua's** charge that **Achan give glory to the Lord God and make confession to him** is probably to be understood not so much as commanding worship as in preparing Achan to **tell me now what you have done.** The Greek words for **give glory to God** appear in John 9:24, where the Jewish leaders put under oath a man whom Jesus has healed: *<<So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner'>>*; and the word **confession**, Hebrew *todah*, can connote praise as well as **confession**.

Even when a person sins and tries to cover that sin, they can still give glory to the Lord by openly and honestly confessing that sin. Hidden sin always has a special power over God's people: <<*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*>> (1 John 1:9).

<sup>20</sup> And Achan answered Joshua, 'It is true; I am the one who sinned against the Lord God of Israel. This is what I did: <sup>21</sup> when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them. They now lie hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.'

### Joshua 7:20-21

The allure of what Achan saw among the spoil was not insignificant; the five pounds of silver and a pound and a quarter of gold represent, according to some commentators, about what an average worker would have earned in a lifetime.

Measured against the lives of thirty six men and the welfare of the entire nation, what Achan gained was pretty insignificant. Truly: <<*the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains*>> (1 Timothy 6:10). Think of how Achan could have rationalised his sin: "No one will know." "These things will not be missed." "Think of how I'll be admired in this beautiful Babylonian garment." "I'm not hurting anyone." "I deserve this." The excuses can go on and on, but they all fall short. When people are at the terrible place Achan is, they all feel terrible about their sin, wishing they had never done it. A prayer is that God would help them to feel terrible about their sin before they do it!

A beautiful mantle from Shinar was a decorated garment made in Babylon, famous at the time for fashion and quality. It was likely taken from one of the nobility and would have been bedecked with jewels and decorated with blue, crimson and purple thread. This would be similar then to the garments worn by the Israelite priests; refer to Exodus 39:1-31.

<sup>22</sup> So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. <sup>23</sup> They took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites; and they spread them out before the Lord. <sup>24</sup> Then Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan son of Zerah, with the silver, the mantle, and the bar of gold, with his sons and daughters, with his oxen, donkeys, and

sheep, and his tent and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. <sup>25</sup> Joshua said, 'Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord is bringing trouble on you today.' And all Israel stoned him to death; they burned them with fire, cast stones on them, <sup>26</sup> and raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore that place to this day is called the Valley of Achor.

### Joshua 7:22-26

Having brought trouble on Israel by his covetous act, Achan is put to death and he and all that he had are covered under a great heap of stones in the Valley of Achor. Achor represents Hebrew 'akor, which sounds like the Hebrew word for 'trouble,' 'akar.

Seven heaps or piles of stones figure in the Joshua account; refer to the comment made on Joshua 4:20. The first was set up by Joshua as a memorial to the Lord's faithfulness in bringing Israel safely across the Jordan River. This heap of stones over Achan is a reminder of Israel's potential for unfaithfulness and of the dire consequences that result.

The word them (vv.24-25) presumably includes Achan's children, but there is room for uncertainty here because v.15 only says <<**all that he has**>> and this could be what them refers to; and there is no mention of Achan's wife.

And all Israel stoned him to death. This method of execution appropriately involved the entire community, as the entire community had been defiled and needed to be purified. This is in keeping with the law: <<**One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer**>> (Leviticus 24:16a). It also freed any single individual from bearing the weight of acting as sole executioner.