

Defeat at Ai – the consequence of Achan’s sin

Soon after the success story of the fall of Jericho, a major disaster took place and at first it looked as if the conquest of Canaan was a hopeless project. Achan took some booty that was to have been destroyed, God was angry and the conquest seemed about to end in failure¹.

1 7:1

For a while no one realised what had happened. Some spies went to study Ai, just as they had previously been sent to Jericho¹. The spies came back speaking confidently. Only two or three thousand men would be needed to destroy Ai². Everyone was convinced that success was certain and no one – not even Joshua – thought of specially seeking God’s counsel. But when the soldiers went they were defeated and the people fell into despair³.

1 7:2

2 7:3

3 7:4–5

1. The seriousness of sin is often unrealised at first

1. The seriousness of sin is often unrealised at first. God had given specific instructions about the destruction of the treasures that would be available in the battle against Canaan. Joshua had firmly repeated God’s instructions¹. There was no lack of guidance in this matter. But guidance was not the problem. The problem was sin.

1 6:17–19

Achan obviously felt that no serious harm would come by taking some of the plunder for himself. No one would know! The conquest of Canaan would continue just as planned, and all would be well for him and for Israel. Oftentimes we who are among the people of God fall into some sin and at first do not realize the seriousness of it. Achan obviously felt that no serious harm would come by his ‘small’ and understandable theft of some of the plunder from the battle.

2. Sin cannot be made a purely personal matter

2. Sin cannot be made a purely personal matter. We have all at some time found ourselves out of the will of God and tangled up in one sin or another. At such a time we feel that it is purely our own personal problem. But sin often has wider consequences. Joshua 7:1 does not say ‘Achan committed a sin ... Yahweh’s anger burned against Achan’; it says ‘The people of Israel committed a sin ... Yahweh’s anger burned against Israel’. The sin of one was the sin of the whole people. Everyone was affected by what Achan had done. Everyone lost the next battle. Thirty-six men who had not been personally involved in what Achan had done nevertheless lost their lives¹.

1 7:5

• Others affected

• Foolish words of unbelief

The failure badly discouraged Joshua. He was greatly distressed¹. For a moment he spoke as if God had entirely abandoned Israel², and he regretted even the crossing of Jordan³. What foolish words we use when our plans are badly shattered! Often leaders are men of great drive and determination. God chooses people with that sort of natural character as the leaders of His people. But then such people get greatly distressed when their plans do not work out in the way they expect. In moments of distress they may use the most foolish language. Joshua’s reaction uses precisely the kind of words that were used by the unbelieving Israelites forty years previously⁴. They are words of unbelief⁵ (7:7).

1 7:6

2 7:7

3 7:7

4 Numbers 14:3; Deuteronomy 1:27, 32

5 7:7

3. Failure requires investigation

3. Failure requires investigation. Joshua’s lapse of faith is only momentary. ‘Yahweh, what can I say...?’ he says¹ and then seems to recover his calmness. He puts the matter before God with more belief: his unbelief was only momentary panic². God told him to stop

1 7:8

• **Achan confesses – God is right and he is wrong**

belief; his unbelief was only momentary panic^{¶2}. God told him to stop praying ^{¶3} and take action! The cause of the failure was sin in the camp^{¶4}. The invasion is failing because they will not destroy what God commanded to be destroyed. Israel must purify itself by dealing with the compromise with idolatry ^{¶5}. The tribes must be investigated one by one until the cause of failure is found^{¶6}. The person who has caused the problem must be executed^{¶7}. God does not say who the person is. He requires the matter be disclosed indirectly by casting lots. This involves all of the people taking note of what is happening. It demands that each part of the nation give the matter some attention, and it gives Achan time to think of what he has done. Joshua obeys God. The tribes are investigated^{¶8}; Achan is discovered^{¶9}. Joshua is fatherly and kind but demands to know what has happened^{¶10}; Achan confesses^{¶11}. The booty is found^{¶12} and brought out for everyone to see^{¶13}.

¶2 7:9
 ¶3 7:10
 ¶4 7:10–12
 ¶5 7:13
 ¶6 7:14
 ¶7 7:15
 ¶8 7:16
 ¶9 7:17–18
 ¶10 7:19
 ¶11 7:20–21
 ¶12 7:22
 ¶13 7:23

It is all emphasising the wickedness of sin. Achan has to ‘give God glory’, that is, he must acknowledge that God is right and he himself is wrong, that God knows everything and he himself was wrong to think he could escape God’s intervention.

4. Sin must be sharply repudiated

4. **Sin must be sharply repudiated.** Achan and his stolen possessions are brought to the valley of Achor^{¶1}. Achan and his immediate family are executed^{¶2}. The stolen goods could not be hidden without the help of his family; they had been involved in his sin. They and his stolen possessions are buried and the place is marked by the heap of stones^{¶3}.

¶1 7:24
 ¶2 7:25
 ¶3 7:26

Of course the modern Christian does not execute the sinner and the precise way in which Achan was killed is not a model for us. In a young community where idolatry would lead to the extermination of the nation, it was necessary that Achan and his family pay a severe price for what he had done. It had to be severe surgery which cut out, at the very earliest opportunity, any willingness to compromise with idolatry, any willingness to steal what was forbidden. The lesson the Christian draws from the story is not exactly to make it a model but to learn how powerful sin is in blocking the progress of God’s kingdom, and how severely it must be cut out of our lives and out of our churches, not by stones and fire but by the rock of God’s word and the fire of the Holy Spirit.

• **The lesson for the Christian today**

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