

Joshua Chapters 7 and 8

“But...” – this simple word warns us that something is about to go wrong – “the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan... took some of the devoted things...” (Joshua 7 v 1), and Chapter 7 tells the story of Achan’s sin and its tragic consequences for Israel. Recall that “devoted things” refers to the idols and things devoted to the demonic and depraved worship of the people of Canaan...

Israel defeated at Ai (Joshua 7 v 1 to 9)

“For they are few” (v 3) – actually the total population of Ai was about 12,000 (Joshua 8 v 25). Fear makes the enemy appear greater than he really is, but pride makes him appear less than he is.

- What mistakes did the Israelites make (v 2 to 5)? In particular, what did Joshua neglect to do?
- What was commendable about Joshua’s behaviour in v 6 to 9?
- What was his overriding concern (v 9)?

Joshua had express instructions: “He shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. *At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in...*” (Numbers 27 v 21). We often fail spiritually after a great victory, and in our ‘strongest’ suit – remember Peter’s bold claim that he would never fall away, and Jesus said that before the rooster crowed he would deny him three times (Matthew 26 v 33 to 35)?

To tear one’s clothes and put dust on one’s head (v 6) displayed mourning. Joshua was not only mourning the death of thirty-six men, but more so, he and the elders of Israel mourned the loss of the blessing and guidance of God.

The sin of Achan (Joshua 7 v 10 to 26)

- Why was Achan’s sin so serious? Why was his punishment so severe?

“Israel has sinned” (v 11) – one man’s sin can damage many: Abraham’s disobedience in Egypt almost cost him his wife (see Genesis 12 v 10 to 20); David’s disobedience in an unauthorized census led to the death of 70,000 (2 Samuel 24); Jonah almost sank a ship (Jonah 1); and “many died through one man’s trespass” (Romans 5 v 15), referring to Adam. Paul speaks in similar terms about sin in the Corinthian church: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (1 Corinthians 5 v 6b) – a small amount of sin, accepted and tolerated among believers, can infect the whole group.

“I have sinned” (v 20) – Achan has joined the ranks of seven other men in Scripture:

1. Pharaoh (Exodus 9 v 27)
2. Balaam (Numbers 22 v 34)
3. Saul (1 Samuel 15 v 24)
4. David (2 Samuel 12 v 13a)
5. Shimei (2 Samuel 19 v 20a)
6. the prodigal son (Luke 15 v 18)
7. Judas (Matthew 27 v 4).

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“The spoil” (v 21) was actually ‘devoted things’ – we too try to ‘reclassify’: adultery is called ‘an affair’, perversion is called ‘lifestyle’, theft is ‘entitlement’.

The “beautiful cloak from Shinar” may have had occult significance, as Babylon in the plain of Shinar was the origin of all pagan worship.

“I saw... I coveted... and took” (v 21) – this is the same order as Eve’s actions in Genesis 3 v 6. ‘Coveting’ is idolatry (Colossians 3 v 5).

The fall of Ai (Joshua 8 v 1 to 29)

Moving on – God turns defeat into victory, but notice how this time the strategy is completely different. God told Joshua the overall battle plan (“Lay an ambush against the city, behind it”, v 2), but it was up to Joshua as a military leader to work out the detailed tactics – choosing a force of 30,000 soldiers (instead of 3,000 previously), laying the ambush to the west of Ai, between Ai and Bethel, drawing the enemy out of the city by feigning withdrawal...

- What did Joshua and the Israelites get right this time?
- What were the secrets of their victory?

“Joshua spent that night among the people” (v 9) – Joshua was especially near his people during this crucial time of trying to regain victory. The people needed to know he was near, and to follow his leadership closely. If we are to be victorious in life’s battles, we must follow Jesus, who is our ‘Joshua’. He is always near to us at the crucial times in our Christian life. Key steps to victory: (i) be encouraged; (ii) follow God’s instructions; (iii) use the best resources; (iv) look to Jesus and follow him closely; (v) go on the offensive: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12 v 21).

Joshua renews the covenant (Joshua 8 v 30 to 35)

Joshua’s renewal of the covenant in these verses, including building an altar, offering sacrifices, writing a copy of the Law, and reading to the people of Israel from the Book of the Law, was in fulfilment of Deuteronomy 11 v 26 to 29, and Deuteronomy chapters 27 and 28 – where through Moses the Lord had told Israel, when they entered the Promised Land, to come to these mountains: “Half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal” (v 33).

This was a beautiful place for the reading of the Law, and the whole nation could hear, as the area is a natural amphitheatre. This event, at this particular place, shows that Israel was now in control of the middle, highland region of Canaan. The rest of the campaign, as described in the Book of Joshua, would be a matter of taking advantage of this strategic position...