

Disobedience, Defeat and Discipline: Joshua 7

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

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Let's start in verse 2 and remember where we're at in the events of Joshua. Israel has just defeated Jericho. Or we could say, the Lord has defeated Jericho on behalf of Israel. The Lord is bringing His people into the Promised Land. And this first victory was a memorable one, indeed. The strong walls of Jericho that looked so intimidating, the Lord brought them down in one big crash. Rahab and her family were rescued, as promised, and the rest of the city was destroyed.

Jericho was like an entry point into the land of Canaan. This was their starting point. And then they needed proceed to Ai at the top of the hill, giving them a vantage point to divide and conquer the rest of the land. As the conquest moves on there will be a southern campaign, and then a northern campaign.

The geography of this region is such that there is a steep ascent from Jericho, which is one of the lowest cities in the world (almost 1,000 feet below sea level), up to the hill country just west of the Jordan River valley. Jericho is about 3,500 feet below Jerusalem, the two cities being just 17 miles apart.

That gives us a context for understanding verses 2-3 of Joshua 7.

When they say "go up" they mean "go up." It's like they're from Pittsburgh. They mean go up that big hill and take the city that's on top of the hill.

In this sermon I want to talk about three aspects of what happens in this chapter, and they're all very closely related. The three points are all in the sermon title. Disobedience, defeat and discipline.

Disobedience

The main disobedience in this chapter, the act of disobedience that is cited as the reason for their defeat, is the sin of Achan in stealing certain items that were to be devoted to the Lord. We're going to talk about that in just a moment.

But there a couple other things, in addition to Achan's sin, that are worth mentioning here in verses 2-3. This won't necessarily jump right out at us, because it's not so much what

they did as what they failed to do. As we look at these verses it may seem perfectly natural for them to make these plans to take the next city. But then it dawns on us that they were making these plans completely on their own, without a clear command from God.

There's no mention of the Lord giving Joshua or the people instructions about an attack on Ai, not until 8:1. So I guess this would be a classic example of "getting ahead of the Lord." They have ventured out on their own, without the blessing or power of the Lord accompanying them. That's a dangerous place to be.

It appears that they are pursuing this battle in their own strength. Maybe they got a big head after the defeat of Jericho and felt like they were invincible. Maybe they were taking it for granted that they would succeed in every battle they engaged in.

This story is a reminder that every true success is due to the Lord's strength. If we begin to take credit for things that God has done for us and through us, then we'll be tempted to venture out in our own strength to attempt things that He may not be calling us to do. And that can be devastating. That kind of attitude will eventually meet a very humbling defeat.

There's a similar problem that happens a bit later in the story, which we'll come to, in 9:14. That passage tells us explicitly that they "did not ask counsel from the Lord." They didn't seek the Lord before venturing out with this plan.

The story we're reading in chapter 7 is a very humbling defeat, indeed. This should have been a relatively easy battle to win, even from a human standpoint. Ai was a small city, and Israel had plenty of troops. But the Lord was against Israel at this point, disciplining them. Therefore what would have seemed to be an easy success turns out to be an embarrassing failure.

So their lack of reliance on the Lord and their overconfidence in themselves both played into this defeat. They underestimated the challenge before them and overestimated their own abilities. And in so doing they neglected to seek the Lord's counsel and did not rely on His power to fight for them.

Contrasting this battle with the battle at Jericho, we can see some striking differences. First of all, the Lord gave Joshua a clear promise of victory before they advanced against Jericho. There were clear instructions for what they were to do, and there was an absolute promise of success. Regarding Ai, they don't get that until 8:1. Secondly, the people of Israel were united in their battle

against Jericho. All the men of war marched around Jericho. The whole army participated in taking Jericho. In the self-devised plan of attack on Ai, the troops were divided. Only two or three thousand were sent to engage in this battle. When we come to the Lord's instructions in 8:1, He says, "Take ALL the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai."

And then thirdly, and most importantly, the people of Israel had been consecrated to the Lord prior to their attack on Jericho. There had been intentional spiritual preparations. The new generation was circumcised. They celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land. There was a purity and preparedness about that moment. But now, as we learn at the beginning of chapter 7, there is sin in the camp. There is blatant rebellion that has occurred, and it has not yet been dealt with. The painful and embarrassing defeat at Ai is the Lord's discipline coming upon His people.

Let's talk now about this disobedience. We read of it first at the very start of the chapter. This is the introduction to what is happening in chapter 7. Read verse 1.

As we learned in chapter 6, everything in Jericho was to be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Everyone and everything was to be destroyed, with just two exceptions. Rahab and her family were to be spared. And all the gold and silver and vessels of bronze and iron were to go into the treasury of the Lord.

This man Achan, of the tribe of Judah, acted in direct rebellion against those commands. In verse 11 the Lord describes the offense very vividly. Notice that the Lord attributes this sin to Israel as a whole, even though it was Achan who actually committed this crime against God. We'll continue to see the corporate effects of this sin as we move through the story.

The sin involved transgressing the covenant, disobeying God's commands, stealing from the Lord and lying to the Lord. This is what was happening as they took some of these devoted things.

What do you think was going on in Achan's mind when he decided to take these things for himself? Well he says it in verses 20-21 when he is forced to confess. He's backed into a corner at this point, having been miraculously singled out as the instigator of this crime.

What happened in his heart and mind? He coveted these valuable possessions. Specifically, he transgressed the tenth commandment.

““You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.””
(Exodus 20:17, ESV)

To covet is to crave something that is not yours, something that does not belong to you. It is a dissatisfaction, a discontentment with what God has provided for you, and instead lusting after certain things that God has NOT provided for you. It started in the garden of Eden, when Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate . . .” (Genesis 3:6). Some of those words are the very same ones used to describe what Achan did. He “*saw* among the spoil a *beautiful* cloak from Shinar, he *coveted* (or desired) and *took* them . . .” There were things that were pleasing to the eye, that caught his attention. As the covetousness took hold of his heart he could not resist taking hold of those things.

Just so you understand, this was not a small amount of money. It would have been about 6 pounds of silver and a pound and quarter of gold. And some estimate that would have been equivalent to a lifetime of wages for an average worker in that time. It was a lot of money he stole.

And what does this act of rebellion reveal about Achan’s heart? It reveals his lack of faith in the Lord. This is the insanity of dissatisfaction. Again, very similar to the actions of Adam and Eve in eating the fruit. The Lord had put every good thing before them. He had placed them in the beautiful garden of Eden with an abundance of things to enjoy. But they were enticed by the one thing that was forbidden.

Achan, and the people of Israel, were entering the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. God was obviously giving them amazing success already. He had brought them through the Jordan River. He had brought down the walls of Jericho. Achan had every reason to trust that the Lord was going to provide for him and his family abundantly. But what did he do? He turned his back on God. He effectively said, “I don’t believe that God’s going to take care of me. And therefore I’m not going to obey the Lord’s commands. Instead, I’m going to disobey in order to provide for myself, my own way, through deceit and disobedience.”

What about you? What are you coveting these days? What are you craving in your heart, and maybe even attempting to seize for yourself, that is not yours? And what are the good things that God has already given you that you are overlooking and minimizing as you gaze longingly at other things? One way to combat that is to redirect your gaze and cultivate gratefulness for the things you do have. Make a gratitude list. Set aside a period of time to pray to the Lord, simply thanking Him for blessing upon blessing upon blessing that He has given you.

Guard your heart from the covetousness that was the downfall of Achan, and not only Achan but his family, and potentially the downfall of the entire people of Israel.

Another thing to point out here about Achan's disobedience is that it affected many, many others as well. No sin is isolated in its impact. It can never be said, "Oh, this sin won't hurt anybody. It's done in the privacy of my own home. It's just a little secret sin, something I can hide in the ground underneath my tent." That's surely how Achan reasoned. "Oh, I can grab these things for myself and for my family. Nobody else will ever know. And it won't hurt anyone."

There are at least 2 lies bound up in that reasoning. The first lie is that nobody will know. God always knows. God sees all and knows all, and that becomes very apparent in what follows, as the Lord clearly identifies Achan's offense. And secondly is the lie that nobody else will be affected. Thirty-six soldiers died in the defeat at Ai as a direct result of Achan's sin. Thirty-six families grieved the loss of their loved ones. Thirty-six wives grieved the loss of their husband.

And then there was the devastating effect on the rest of Achan's family. His personal compromise enveloped the rest of his family. Presumably they would have been complicit in this sin, assisting him and allowing him to keep hidden these things he had stolen. And it seems to be implied that they were punished along with him. There is some ambiguity about that, whether it was just Achan and the stuff that was devoted to destruction, or Achan and the stolen things and the rest of his family.

Regardless, this story is a vivid reminder that seemingly secret sins are never really secret, and they will impact others and harm others.

That leads us to talking next about the specifics of this defeat and its aftermath.

Defeat

The spies who went up to assess the situation at Ai either underestimated the amount of people in Ai or overestimated the power of Israel's army or presumed upon the Lord's power to repeat what had happened at Jericho. In the next chapter, when the Lord does give Israel victory over Ai, we're told that 12,000 people fell, all the people of Ai (Joshua 8:25). Apparently there were more people there than these spies estimated. The spies thought that two or three thousand Israelites could take the city. That was not the case, especially because the Lord was not fighting for them. In fact, the Lord was fighting *against* Israel in this event, due to Israel's hidden sin.

In verse 4 we read that the Israelites were chased by the men of Ai. Israel fled a great distance. And even as they were fleeing they still lost a few dozen men.

Now, in light of a battle of this size, we might not think that 36 casualties is that significant. It seems like the troops and the commander would recognize that there are inevitably going to be some casualties, and 36 doesn't seem to be a great number. So we might be surprised at the response. The people melted in fear, and Joshua mourned before the Lord.

But when we contrast this with Jericho and realize that not one Israelite lost his life in the battle against Jericho, we realize that this loss to Ai would have been immensely terrifying and troubling. The implication is that the Lord is no longer fighting on their behalf.

So the people fear. As it says at the end of verse 5, the hearts of the people melted and became as water. That language reminds us of the very thing Rahab told the spies when she described how the people of Jericho feared Israel.

Now the Israelites have become like the people of Jericho. The same kind of fear has seized them, and rightly so. Because Israel is now, in a very real sense, in the place of Jericho. They have positioned themselves now as the Lord's enemies. Of course, at this point the root of the matter is yet unknown to most of them.

But now, as Joshua takes a moment to listen, the Lord tells him what's the matter. At the beginning of Joshua's prayer, in verse 7, he sounds like the Israelites who had complained to Moses. Why did You even bring us over here? We could have just stayed back there! Why would you let us face defeat?

By the end of his plea, though, Joshua sounds like Moses. He pleads with the Lord on the basis of the Lord's great Name, His reputation among the nations, and His promises to His people. God had promised very specifically to Abram that He would make Abram's name great, that He would make his descendants into a great nation. The concern now is that this people could be wiped off the face of the earth if the Lord gives them over to their enemies.

But now the Lord is going to reveal the root problem that's going on here. Sure, they should have stopped to seek the Lord's guidance, and they should have had a more humble and reliant attitude as they considered a battle against Ai. But the real issue here, and the reason the Lord allowed them to be defeated, is because of hidden sin in the camp.

In verse 10 the Lord tells Joshua to get up. Something needs to be done. Israel has sinned. Notice the connection between the individual, Achan, and the nation, Israel. Back in verse 1 we were told that Achan took some of the devoted things. Now we're told that Israel has sinned. Again, here's this reality that our personal sins affect many others. And there's even a sense in which a family, or a nation, are held responsible for one another's sins. Israel was being held responsible for Achan's sin. What they needed to do what address the sin, call it what it is, and carry out the Lord's discipline upon that sin. If, once they are aware of it, they simply ignore it or minimize it, then they effectively become active participants in the sin.

These are scary things that the Lord says to Joshua in verse 12.

There are things in your midst that should have been devoted to the Lord for destruction. If you don't do something about it then you, as a people, will be devoted to destruction.

It's interesting to me as I reflect on this narrative, that we read of Joshua's prayer time in verses 6-9, and then the Lord basically rebukes Joshua in verse 10, telling him to quit the prayer time and get up and do something about this troubling situation.

There is certainly a time to pray, and we should do so regularly, constantly. But there is also a time for action, a time for confrontation, for calling out sin and responding to it.

Think about the times when you know of a sin that needs to be confronted. But because confrontation is so uncomfortable, we say to ourselves, "I'm just going to continuing praying about that

matter. I'll continue to pray for that individual." And I know that we DO need to pray about these things. I'm not discouraging prayer. But if we continue to avoid confronting the sin, then we are in direct disobedience to our Lord's command in Matthew 18.

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15–17, ESV)

And that passage is a segue into our final point about discipline.

Discipline

Like the whole issue of holy war and the command to annihilate their enemies, this command to annihilate the wrongdoer is also difficult for us to read, difficult for us to come to terms with.

As I've mentioned in previous sermons in this series, we have to realize God's fierce anger against sin. If we are overly offended by these things, if we feel like God is being unjust in putting people to death for their sins, that is an indicator that we don't have a realistic view of sin, or of God.

Achan's sin, and our sin, is such that it deserves death. And that's what happened to Achan, sadly. He was utterly destroyed, he and everything that belonged to him. The discipline that was carried out involved the nation. It was a corporate discipline, and it needed to be that way. It was how the nation as a whole repudiated this sin, and thus affirmed their allegiance to the Lord and recommitted themselves to obedience.

It's similar (and different) when we come to the New Testament. In the new covenant people of God, the church, we are to carry out discipline as well. However, like in the sermon on Holy War a couple weeks ago, when we trace these themes from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the application becomes spiritual rather than physical. The church does not bear the sword, and I'm very glad for that. What we do exercise, and must exercise, is what we refer to as church discipline. When a member of the church strays from the Lord and rebels against Him, the church must plead with that person to repent. If that person will not repent, he or she must be put out of the church, exactly as we

heard from Matthew 18 a moment ago. We can't ignore the sin and act as though it doesn't matter. We must confront the sin, or else the whole church will be chastised.

In 1 Corinthians 5 we read of a situation where the church needed to get up and act. There was sin that needed to be dealt with. In this case it was gross sexual sin.

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:1–2, ESV)

There's a man in the church who is sleeping with his stepmom, and Paul is telling the Corinthian church, “You need to exercise church discipline on that individual.” You need to do what Jesus said in Matthew 18. Put him out of the church. He can't be part of your fellowship as long as he persists in that sin. Paul makes it clear in that context that the discipline is always meant to be redemptive. The hope is that the excommunication will result in repentance and restoration.

Paul also makes it clear in that context that this kind of discipline is only for those within the church. We are to dis-fellowship those who say they are believers but persist in outward and obvious sin. This doesn't mean we have to avoid everyone in the world who is involved in outward and obvious sin. If that were the case, we'd have to live in a cave.

“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”” (1 Corinthians 5:9–13, ESV)

There's an important principle there. We don't go out and condemn the world for their sin. What do we do? We preach the Gospel that they might repent and believe in Jesus. But where are we responsible to judge sin, rebuke sin, discipline those who persist in sin? Inside the church.

And when there's purity and accountability within the church, that's when the church will be most effective in moving out into the world for the cause of Christ.

This connects with an interesting feature of the narrative in Joshua. There is interplay between things that happen inside the camp and things that happen outside the camp. And there's an integral connection between the two.

The story begins with the Lord appointing Joshua as the new leader. That's happening in the midst of the people. But then in chapter 2 the spies are sent outside the camp to go to Jericho where they discover Rahab. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 tell of them crossing the Jordan and the spiritual preparations that happen right before the attack on Jericho. Those were spiritual preparations happening within the camp. Then chapter 6 launches outside the camp again with the destruction of Jericho and the salvation of Rahab. And now we're in chapter 7 with a serious matter being dealt with inside the camp, before they'll be able to successfully move outside the camp again in chapter 8 to defeat Ai.

What's the lesson for us? We must pursue purity. We must make the spiritual preparations, individually and as a church, as we are venturing to make a difference in the world—to defeat evil and win the lost. We can't presume upon God's grace and think that we can have an effective and fruitful ministry, individually or as a church, if there is hidden sin in our lives.

I hope you'll take this very seriously. I know this is a heavy sermon, a heavy text that God has for us this morning. Let's take it to heart. Let this be a purifying time for us. I pray this will lead to deep repentance and confession, and where needed, confrontation.

I close with this. At the end of this age when Jesus returns, every hidden sin will be exposed. There will be no secrets on that day. Even now, there are no secrets with the Lord. Don't fool yourself. He knows. He sees. Therefore don't wait for that final day, which will be a day of judgment for those who have not repented. Repent today. Confess your sins today to the Lord.

And do you know the beautiful message of the Gospel? The Good News is that Jesus put Himself forward to be destroyed. He went to the cross and died in our place. To describe it in the imagery of our lesson for this morning, Jesus suffered an embarrassing and excruciating death like Achan being stoned to death, burned with fire, and buried under a great heap of stones. As Jesus did this, the Father turned from His burning anger against

our sin. The Father's righteous wrath was absorbed by Jesus. No matter what you've done, there is the promise of forgiveness if you will openly admit your sins to the Lord and put your trust in Jesus Christ. He alone can save you. Look to Him in faith today.