

# LEARNING FROM LOSING

## *JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH*

by Doug Goins

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While the people of Israel were still in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses, he described Canaan to them, telling them what they could look forward to when they came into the land. He said Canaan was "a land of hills and valleys" (Deuteronomy 11:11), in contrast to the monotonous, barren flatness of the Nile delta in the land of Egypt.

Canaan does have beautifully carved, rugged hills. But I think the phrase "a land of hills and valleys" also describes the geography of the life of faith that is pictured by Israel's experience in the land of Canaan. As we claim our inheritance in Christ by faith, we experience hilltops of victory and deep valleys of defeat and discouragement. I don't think discouragement is inevitable in the Christian life, but it does seem to come more than we would hope or intend. Hills and valleys just seem to go together.

Looking carefully at the opening of Joshua 7, we will notice that it begins with the ominous word "but." That word is a signal that things are going to change. Joshua and the people of Israel are about to descend from a mountain top experience, the great triumph in the battle of Jericho, into a valley of defeat at the little city of Ai. Things change quickly and dramatically for the people. In 6:20, 27 was the great climax of the battle: "So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city...So the LORD was with Joshua; and his fame was in all the land." Contrast that with 7:1-2:

**But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things; for Achan the 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 people of Israel.**

### **Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai....**

The author has done something interesting in verse 1-he has let us get inside the story. That dramatic device is still common in movies, plays, and novels today. We, the reader or viewer, see, for example, a crime committed, and we know who the culprit is ahead of the game. Then the story unfolds as the detective tries to figure out the truth about the culprit. That's what happens here in Joshua 7. We know who the culprit is and we know what God's response to the crime is already.

This story of Achan and the city of Ai is really about learning how to avoid spiritual defeat, and then how to recover from the discouragement of defeat. This is much more than ancient history. The spiritual issues are as contemporary as ours are today.

### **The danger of over-confidence**

Look at verses 2-5. There is a warning in these verses:

**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. And they returned to Joshua, and said to him, "Let not all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai; do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are but few." So about three thousand went up there from the people; and they fled before the men of Ai, and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six men of them, and chased**

**them before the gate as far as Shebarim, and slew them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.**

The Lord collapsed the walls of Jericho and gave Joshua and the nation of Israel a great victory. They had obeyed God's specific direction, living and marching by faith. It was purely a miracle, a gift. Joshua and the people had only to accept the victory that the Lord gave them. His fame spread throughout Canaan. Joshua understood very clearly though, that the battle was the Lord's. He knew where the power lay.

But now in chapter 7 Joshua is going to begin a new part of the conquest. He wants to subdue several cities that are up in the central Judean highlands, in the middle of the land straight west of Jericho. He really wants to divide the northern cities from the southern cities. So he sends spies to this little town of Ai about fifteen miles up into the hill country, to do reconnaissance. The march from Jericho to Ai is over very difficult terrain. The elevation gain in fifteen miles is about twenty-five hundred feet, because Jericho is eight hundred feet below sea level, and Ai is about seventeen hundred feet above sea level. That's why in verse 3 the spies say, "Don't make the whole army toil up there." It's really a hard march.

It's striking that Joshua instantly takes the counsel of the spies. The spies are acting as military advisors, not just giving him information. Joshua doesn't pray about it; there is no gathering before the Lord to say, "Lord, is this what you would have us do?" But immediately they act. And we're told that, shockingly, they are defeated. They turn tail and run. This little outnumbered city of Ai routs three thousand of Israel's soldiers and chases them halfway back to Jericho. There are thirty-six fatalities, which is ironic. During the week spent marching around the walls of Jericho thirteen times, with the whole army exposed to the arrows of the archers of Jericho, there was not one fatality. But here thirty-six men die. The name Ai in Hebrew means ruins, and it was certainly a ruinous military expedition for the people of Israel.

This story of defeat can be applied to the spiritual battles that we have to fight every day. We must conclude that apart from the strength of Christ who indwells us, the smallest temptation, the seemingly most insignificant thing, is going to be too powerful for us.

There is a very sad observation at the end of verse 5 that the hearts of the people melt and become as water. That describes their response to the failure, the defeat at Ai. Their morale is shot, their strength is melting away. Proverbs 16:18 describes their situation.

**"Pride goes before destruction,  
and a haughty spirit before a fall."**

Ai represents a battle fought in their own strength, trusting their own resources, leaving the Lord out of the equation. There is no mention of prayer before this second battle.

As I wrestled with the text this week, I had to address my own vulnerability in this area. By nature, the way my folks raised me, I'm a very self-confident person. I tend to trust my own judgment. But I'm too quick to trust my own instincts and leadership abilities. I'm much more prone to do that than to consciously turn to the Lord and ask for his direction and empowerment.

### **His strength out of our weakness**

Let's look now at verses 6-13, which show Joshua and the people turning to the Lord. These verses show us how to turn defeat into spiritual victory:

**Then Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord GOD, why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and will surround us, and cut off our name from the earth; and what wilt thou do for thy great name?"**

The LORD said to Joshua, "Arise, why have you thus fallen upon your face? Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant which I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, and lied, and put them among their own stuff. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become a thing for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. Up, sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel, "There are devoted things in the midst of you, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies, until you take away the devoted things from among you.'"

Defeat can be reversed if we confess our impotence, and surrender to God's power and direction. Joshua and the nation's leadership end up prostrate before the Lord, tearing their clothing and covering themselves with dust. Those are signs of humiliation, grief, and mourning before the Lord. Joshua cries out in agony. He is challenging God, arguing with God, asking why this terrible thing has happened. If you examine the prayer carefully, Joshua is self-serving to a degree. He is really wrapped up in himself. He blames God, as a matter of fact, for setting them up for defeat. It's driven by self-pity. The bottom line of his prayer is, "Lord, how could you do this to us?"

But before we're too hard on Joshua, let's not forget that he does have this conversation with the Lord, rather than with someone else. And most of us have the same kind of mixed motives when we come before the Lord in times of confusion, terror, or being overwhelmed by something. The important thing is that he calls out to the Lord. And just because we're confused or terrified, or some terrible reversal or life-threatening situation has overcome us, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't come to the Lord. God doesn't expect us to be stoic or to be coldly theological, pretending the problem is not there. What if Joshua had done that? "Only thirty-six men died. We'll just reorganize, we can still take the city."

But Joshua refuses to be that detached. He understands that whatever power was at work in the battle of Jericho is gone. His leadership has no significance. "What can I say?" he says. And he's determined to wrestle this through with God, to find out what the cause is. Joshua is emotional and subjective, and the Lord allows him to take it pretty far. In verse 9 he ends up saying basically, "We're all done for. This is the beginning of the end. Every Canaanite king is going to hear about this humiliation, send all their troops, and overrun the plains of Jericho; and every Israelite will be slaughtered. And by the way, Lord, your reputation as the God of Israel means nothing anymore."

God lets him rant, but interrupts him in verse 10. There is an interesting word play here. Back in verse 7 Joshua said, "...Why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan....?" He was saying, "God, it's your fault. You crossed us over this river." God says in verse 11, "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed [crossed over] my covenant. It's your fault, not mine."

Into Joshua's agony and turmoil God speaks the truth. He brings objectivity into Joshua's out-of-control subjectivity. The Lord isn't very therapeutic about this. His language is blunt. He's saying in effect, "Wait a minute, Joshua. You don't see reality correctly. There's a reason for the trouble and defeat. But you've got to be willing to look for sin in the camp. There's been stealing and lying and covering up. You broke one of the commands that I expected you take seriously before the battle of Jericho." Back in 6:18 God had said to the nation before the battle of Jericho, "But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction, and bring trouble upon it." God now says, "Your behavior has brought you trouble. Devoted things belong to me alone, and you have no right whatsoever to mess with them."

Turning to the Lord means accepting his diagnosis of our problems rather than our own evaluation of them. We need to learn how to pray with Joshua's candor, transparency, and vehemence, and then we need to stop talking and start listening to the Lord, because he may see things very differently than we do, which is clearly the case in this story.

## **The corrupting influence of sin**

In verses 14-18 God continues to explain to Joshua what he is to say to the nation, and talks about the profound effect of the disobedience of even one person in the nation:

**"In the morning therefore you shall be brought near by your tribes; and the tribe which the LORD takes shall come near by families; and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households; and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done a shameful thing in Israel."**

**So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken; and he brought near the families of Judah, and the family of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the family of the Zerahites man by man, and Zabdi was taken; and he brought near his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.**

This process of investigation and discovery suggests the seriousness of Achan's sin, and the corrosive corrupting influence of sin in a community. God says that somebody has done something in secret that is going to affect the future of the whole nation. Somebody in disobedience has taken things that were placed under the ban. It's a very serious issue, but God works through Joshua's spiritual sensitivity and willingness to cooperate in the process. And Achan is discovered.

Alan Redpath, a British Bible teacher, says this about the issue:

*Now mark well a lesson here for all time. What actually had happened? One man had stolen property which belonged to God, had taken of the spoils of victory that were to be set apart for the Lord. One individual in the camp had betrayed God's trust, and the verdict from heaven was not, "Achan hath sinned," but "Israel hath sinned." One man had failed, and the whole army was defeated. You see, the children of Israel were a nation—they were brought to redemption ground as one man, the weakest of them and the strongest of them. They were a complete entity; God was dealing with them as a corporate body through whom His purposes for men were to be fulfilled.*

A number of years ago when John Fischer was on our staff here as a musician, he wrote a song out of this story of Achan and Ai. It has the haunting refrain, "You don't sin alone." Whatever I do has an effect on the people around me. A church family can be defeated by the malignancy of an individual's unconfessed sin.

I've been involved recently with a family that was literally destroyed fifteen years ago by the sinful choices of the father. He was unwilling to repent and deal with the sin, and the marriage exploded. It was an acrimonious divorce. As a result of this mess, the three children, all in late adolescence or early adulthood, ended up estranged from both their mother and their father, and embittered against the Lord himself. That estrangement has gone on for almost fifteen years now. None of us sins alone. Sin has a corrupting influence.

### **The pattern that leads to defeat**

Look at Achan's public confession in verses 19-23. What he is going to describe is a response to temptation, a pattern that always leads to spiritual defeat:

**Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and render praise to him; and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me." And Achan answered Joshua, "Of a truth I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: 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; and behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath."**

**So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his**

**tent with the silver underneath. And they took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and all the people of Israel; and they laid them down before the LORD.**

Look again at this forced confession in verse 21, at the progression in Achan's thinking and the behavior that results. He says first of all that he saw the beautiful, valuable articles-this gorgeous Babylonian robe, the silver money, and a bar of gold. The second thing he does is reclassify them: He calls them spoils. But they weren't spoils of war for the soldiers; they belonged to the Lord and were part of his treasury. The third thing Achan says is that he coveted them. This is interesting, because it tells us where his focus was. He was thinking about himself and his own possessions rather than rejoicing in this great spiritual victory that God had won, and in the privilege he had of being part of the people of Israel in the battle of Jericho. Achan was imagining what it would be like for him to have these things that were so attractive to him. Fourth, he says he took the articles, which would have required surreptitiously sneaking them out of the city without anyone seeing them. He had to be tricky to pull that off. The last thing he says is that he hid the treasure. He thought he could get away with his sin by hiding the loot. When we follow temptation into sin, all of us follow this same basic pattern.

James says in the New Testament, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one...." (Remember, that's one of the points God made to Joshua earlier: "It's not my fault that you caved in, that Achan coveted. It's your responsibility, I didn't do that.") "...But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death." (1:13-15.) It starts inside of us and it grows and grows. Conception and birth suggest life; we think we're going to get life by taking the things that we think we need, but the result is death.

Achan's personal sin was a hidden discontentment with what he had, an ambition to have more. But this discontentment certainly wasn't going to be fulfilled by living on top of a hole in the ground hiding a lot of stolen valuables. Jesus warned in Luke 12:15, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness, for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Living with Achan's discontentment will always cause us to view the people around us with covetousness. The circumstances, the people, the material goods are so much more attractive. We won't be content with what God has given us: the people, the place, the ministry, the resources. Achan said, "I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid." Remember, there is nothing wrong with beautiful robes or silver and gold, but it's so easy to covet them. And coveting in the Scriptures is clearly idolatry-replacing the centrality of the Lord with something else that will satisfy.

It is coveting, by the way, not demonic activity that is at work in Achan's life. Achan couldn't say the devil made him do this. This came from the discontentment inside of him. Achan wasn't able to say as the apostle Paul did, "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11).

We may not all have Achan's struggle with material things, but there will be something that we are attracted to-people, or circumstances, perhaps. It will look attractive, we'll see it, we'll covet it, we'll take it, and we'll believe that just a little bit of it is all we're going to mess with; we're not going to go too far. We'll take pleasure when it pleases us, and then we'll walk away. But we end up believing the same lie that Adam and Eve believed in the garden: "You shall not die," Satan told them. But in the end we're the ones who get taken.

## **The wages of sin is death**

Look at the shocking way the story ends in verses 24-26. It speaks of the severity of God's judgment:

**And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the mantle and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters, and his oxen and asses and sheep, and his tent, and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him with stones; they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day; then**

**the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.**

The root meaning of Achan's name is trouble. (Notice the similarity of the names Achan and Achor.) That's why Joshua asks this anguished question, "Why have you troubled us?" And then the sad, final sentence, "Now the trouble [judgment] of God will deal with you." They make a huge pile of boulders over the whole execution site to remind the people of Israel of several things: (1) Sin working in their midst is very dangerous. (2) The sin has been dealt with. The anger of God has been turned aside from the people because the sin is out in the open. (3) God has restored Israel to a right relationship with himself.

The sad thing is that Achan never did ask for forgiveness. The only reason he ever admitted it was that he was forced into the open by Joshua. Terrible things are done in this world, and there are consequences. God dealt swiftly with Achan. He couldn't afford to let this malignancy of greed and ambition run rampant through his people during this period of new beginnings in the land at the start of the conquest.

God is a God of justice. The legitimate wrath that God has toward sin cannot allow him to be sentimental, to wink at things that are wrong.

Let me say this in conclusion about the story. The temptation to sin is an ever-present danger in the life of every Christian. At the heart of the story of Achan and Ai is this crucial spiritual issue: Sin will either master us, or we will master sin. The Lord himself first said this in Genesis 4 in the story of Cain and Abel. God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but he did not accept Cain's, because Cain's heart was not right. Cain grew to hate his brother. So God showed up and confronted Cain: "...Sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (4:7). In essence, sin is like a lion waiting to devour you. It will control you and destroy you unless you gain mastery over it. God also promised Cain in that passage that if he did master the sin, he would be lifted up; he would have God's resources. In Romans 6:15-23 Paul says that we were created to be slaves, to be mastered by something, either sin, which leads to death, or obedience to Christ, which leads to righteousness. We gain mastery over sin by obeying Jesus.

There cannot be any ground of neutrality toward sin for us. Our problem is that we don't believe that. We think that we can play with sin just a little, with just certain sins-nice, agreeable, likable, pleasurable sins that won't really hurt anybody. We think that we can keep sin under control, limit its influence or our involvement. But we don't realize that in reality we will fall under its control little by little, and it will master us.

Some years ago I read about how they catch monkeys in New Guinea. They take a big, dry gourd, hollow it out, and fill it up with nuts that the monkeys love. They cut a hole in the gourd just big enough for the monkey to slip his hand through. So the monkey grabs the nuts inside, but can't pull his hand out. All he has to do to get free is let the nuts go and slip his hand back out. But the monkey wants the nuts too badly and won't let go, and then he's captured.

That's the point of the Achan and Ai story for the nation Israel, and for us today as well. When we hold onto sin in our lives, we become slaves to sin. We think we can get away with just a little moodiness, a little selfish anger, a little resentment. After all, God created all these lousy circumstances and put these idiotic people around us-it's his fault. We have a right to be resentful and angry and moody. But what happens is that it begins to overcome us; it spills over to everyone around us. Ultimately it destroys relationships. Or we think we can get by with a little envy or a little pornography. But almost before we know it we are absorbed; it controls us, we are mastered by it.

This story tells us that we can't have a temporary relationship with sin, we can't play with it, we can't go just so far and then cut it off, because it will destroy us. "The wages of sin is death"-not physical death, but spiritual death, a death-like state that sets in when we allow sin to control us. So we live with frustration, anxiety, guilt, impatience, boredom, and misery. These are the results of the sins that we cling to.

The bottom line for us is that we cannot allow Achan to live. If Achan had lived it would have been a life of defeat for him and for God's people ultimately. Israel acted decisively toward sin. God calls us to deal with sin in our lives in the same way.

Let me ask you, what are the sinful areas in your life that trouble you, your family, your work relationships, your friendships? What are the things in your life that ought to be brought out into the light and stoned? That happens for us through repentance and asking forgiveness. We want to hang on to these sins somehow. But God says to put them to death.

### **The door of hope**

The place where the execution took place, the Valley of Achor, shows up again later on in the life of the nation, in the writings of the prophet Hosea. Hosea is a book about troubled relationships. In it God is totally estranged from the nation. And Hosea's relationship with his wife Gomer is broken because she is unfaithful to him. Hosea goes after her to bring her home, to win her again, to set right that troubled relationship. Eventually, Hosea is forced to use very strong measures, as God does with us to discipline us, to confront us with issues in our lives. But listen to what God says through the prophet. This is the Lord speaking to his people Israel (2:14-15):

**"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,  
and bring her into the wilderness [where the relationship began, at Mount Sinai],  
and speak tenderly to her [speak to her heart].**

**And there I will give her vineyards,  
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.**

**And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."**

The Valley of Achor in the memory of the nation Israel became a proverbial expression for the good results of discipline in the life of the people.

Israel went on from the Valley of Achor to conquer Ai. We'll see that in chapter 8. And then it took only seven short years to complete the conquest of Canaan. Continuing victory grew out of the difficult experience they had at Ai and then at Achor. What appeared to be a great disaster was a learning experience for the whole nation. In Hosea's words, it became a door of hope, a door of expectation. They entered into a renewed relationship with God.

The good news today is that we can experience the same thing if we're willing to let God put his finger on those areas of our life where we are consciously resisting his will; and bring them out into the light, put them to death, repent of them, receive full forgiveness, and then go on in his power with hope for the future.

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