

Israel is Defeated at Ai

Joshua 7:1-12

Joshua 7:1-12 - *“But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel. ² Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth Aven, on the east side of Bethel, and spoke to them, saying, “Go up and spy out the country.” So the men went up and spied out Ai. ³ And they returned to Joshua and said to him, “Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few.” ⁴ So about three thousand men went up there from the people, but they fled before the men of Ai. ⁵ And the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six men, for they chased them from before the gate as far as Shebarim, and struck them down on the descent; therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water.*

⁶ *Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. ⁷ And Joshua said, “Alas, Lord GOD, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all—to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Oh, that we had been content, and dwelt on the other side of the Jordan!” ⁸ O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies? ⁹ For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will You do for Your great name?” ¹⁰ So the LORD said to Joshua: “Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff. ¹² Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you.*

Background Notes

The book of Joshua is the inspired account of the military conquest of the land of Canaan by the nation of Israel, in the early part of the 14th century BC -- about 1400BC. Israel's strategy for the conquest of the land was to divide and conquer. First there would be a central campaign to divide the land; then there would be a southern campaign, followed by a northern campaign.

The destruction of Jericho was the beginning of the central campaign. It was a great victory for Israel. Jericho had been a major stronghold of the enemy, and it had blocked the entrance into the central part of the land. But now Jericho had been completely destroyed. Only Rahab and her family had been saved out of Jericho. This is a good illustration, by the

way, of God's program for this world that is already under God's judgment. Only **people** will be saved out of this world that is programmed for destruction.

After defeating Jericho, Israel was to move on into the central part of the land and conquer the hill country. Ai was a small city about 15 miles from Jericho, up on the ridgeline. It blocked one of the natural passes up into the hill country.

Although Ai was not a major fortification like Jericho, it was strategically placed and it definitely had to be conquered if the central campaign was to move on. But Israel was defeated at Ai. Ai was Israel's only military defeat throughout the whole conquest.

Why was Israel defeated at Ai? What are the spiritual lessons for us? Remember that the book of Joshua is not just the inspired record of Israel's military conquest of Canaan -- it's also a handbook for Christians for spiritual warfare. Every battle in the book of Joshua is an illustration of a spiritual battle in the Christian life. Every tactic of the enemy in the book of Joshua is an illustration of the tactics that Satan uses to defeat us in spiritual warfare. Every victory and every defeat of God's people in the book of Joshua contain lessons for God's people today about victory and defeat in spiritual warfare.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. There are definite causes for defeat in the believer's life.

a. Disobedience (v1): *"But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan... took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel."* God had said that everything at Jericho was off limits. No one was to take anything from the city. All of the silver and the gold of Jericho were to go into the treasury of the Lord. But Achan, whose name means "troubler," disobeyed God by stealing some of the treasure of Jericho. He actually robbed God, because all the gold and silver was to go to God! Achan disobeyed the Lord, and he stole what belonged to God. This sin led to the defeat of the entire nation of Israel.

We, too, can be defeated if we rob God. This is disobedience. One example would be robbing God of our time. When we waste time we are really robbing God. Too much TV time, or sports or movie-watching time, or web-surfing time, or hobby time -- or even too much golf time can be a form of robbing God. (Why did I throw that golf thing in there, anyway? That was for **me!**) Even good and wholesome things can rob God if they take up **too much** of our time. We've got to set our priorities! We can't get into even good things too much.

Another example would be robbing God of our talents and abilities. When we use our God-given talents and abilities only to glorify ourselves, or just make more money, and we don't use these abilities and talents to serve the Lord, we rob God. And what about our money? When we don't **at least** tithe our money, and if we just give token amounts back to the Lord for what he has given us, we're really robbing God. Robbing God was disobedience for Achan, and it is for us, too. Disobedience leads to defeat.

b. Overconfidence (v3) - *“And they returned to Joshua and said to him, “Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few.”*

Ai was not a major stronghold like Jericho. Ai was only a small fortified town. (In fact, Ai was so small that it was only spelled with two letters (ha, ha)!) Anyway, it was smaller than Jericho.

Do you see the lesson? Overconfidence can lead to defeat in spiritual warfare. And notice that defeat in a “small” everyday area of our lives can follow a major victory. Israel had just conquered the major fortress of Jericho, but then they were defeated by little Ai. How often this happens in the Christian experience!

Here are a couple of illustrations. A Christian businessman refuses a very lucrative moneymaking scheme because it involves lying and unethical business practices – what a major moral victory! But the same day this same Christian goes home and loses his temper over some small item at home; he flies into a fit of rage and sets a terrible example for his family. Or a Christian woman has a great victory in spiritual warfare -- she is able to finally share the gospel with a neighbor she’s been praying for! A wonderful victory! But the same day she experiences defeat when she doesn’t give back the money to a store that undercharged her.

Watch out for the little Ai’s! Just when you think you are growing as a Christian, and you feel like you’re a spiritual giant, a “little” sin pops up when and where you least expect it! Don’t be overconfident as believer, because it will lead to defeat.

c. Lack of prayer (v6-7, 10) - We don’t read of Joshua or the children of Israel consulting the Lord before they went to fight Ai. It appears they didn’t consult the Lord until after the defeat. No wonder the Lord said to Joshua, *“Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? Israel has sinned...”* In other words, “Joshua, now is not the time to pray. You should have prayed before. Now is the time to deal with the sin.”

How often we neglect prayer in spiritual warfare, especially when we’re overconfident and begin to think that we can live our lives as believers in our own strength. Fear makes the enemy appear larger, but pride and overconfidence make the enemy appear smaller. We must constantly be in communication with the Lord through prayer. Ephesians 6:18 says that in order to keep from being defeated we must pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit. If we don’t pray, we’ll be defeated. There are definite causes for defeat in the believer’s life.

2. There are definite consequences of defeat in the believer's life.

a. God is angry (v1) - *“so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel...”* God loves us, but He must deal with our sin. 1 Peter 4:17 says that “judgment begins at the household of God.” Hebrews 12:6 says that “those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines.” When we are defeated in spiritual warfare because of our sin, the Lord doesn’t take this lightly. He must deal with our sin.

b. Others are affected (v1, 11) - Even though Achan was the only person who had disobeyed God by taking taken loot from Jericho, we read in verses 1 and 11 that **all** Israel had sinned! God saw all Israel linked with Achan's sin.

The lesson is that we can't sin in a vacuum! You may think that your sin is private, and you may think that your sin is only between yourself and God -- but God sees you linked to other believers in the body of Christ! Other believers are affected.

c. Blessings are withheld (v12) - *"Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you."* Until the sin was judged, Israel would continue to be defeated. They could not move forward. They would not know the presence of the Lord in their midst.

The same is true in our lives. 1 John 1:9 says *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* But if we don't judge and deal with the sin in our lives, we will continue to be defeated and blessings will be withheld. There are definite consequences of defeat in the believer's life.

Practical Application

Are you an Achan?

Achan's name means troubler! Achan's sin troubled all of Israel and caused the blessing of God to be withheld from the whole camp.

Is it possible that you are an Achan? Are you involved in what you think is only a "small" private sin? No one knows about it but you? But God knows! Is it possible that the forward progress of the Lord's people at your church is being held back because of your sin? Is the blessing of the Lord being withheld from your congregation because of your sin? Think it through. Remember that your sin **doesn't** only affect **you**. Are a troubler? Are you an Achan?