**The Agony of Defeat at Ai**

October 27, 2019

Joshua 7:1-26

Key Verse 7:1 “But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.”

After such a tremendous victory at Jericho, in this chapter the thrill of victory is so quickly replaced by the agony of defeat at Ai. This is the story of life, and something we each must learn to deal with in our daily walk. One minute we can be living in victory and next in defeat. The distance between a great victory and a terrible defeat is one step, and often only a short one at that. A fact of reality is that in a fallen world we can be riding high on the cloud of some great spiritual success, and the very next moment find ourselves in the valley of spiritual failure and despair. One moment we can be like Elijah standing victoriously on Mt. Carmel, and the next hiding out in a cave, fearing for his life, and complaining to God (1 Kings 19:10). May God help us to learn from the failure of the Israelites so that we may live victorious lives always.

**First**, Achan’s sin. Look at verse 1. “But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.” Chapter 7 opens with a small but ominous word, “but,” which contrasts this chapter with Chapter 6. This little conjunction of contrast is designed to emphasize an important truth, the reality of the ever present threat and contrasts of life—victory is always followed by the threat of defeat. Never is the believer in greater danger of a fall than after a victory. We are so prone to drop our guard and begin to trust in ourselves or in our past victories rather than God. One victory never ensures the next. Only when it builds our confidence in God and trusts in God more, our victories help us for the next battle, but the basis of victory is always God Himself and our faith in Him. 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

God held the whole camp of Israel accountable for the act of one man and he withheld his blessing until the matter was dealt with. God viewed the nation as a unit. One believer’s sin impacts everyone. Achan’s behavior also illustrates how one believer out of fellowship, pursuing his own selfish desires and agenda, negatively impacts and creates trouble for an entire group. Now, God could have just had Achan have a heart attack right on the spot when he was going to take the robe and the gold and the silver, but he didn’t. Why not? He wanted the whole Israelite community to take notice of what happens when you break the law. He also wanted them to take responsibility for one another’s actions. Achan’s name, the Hebrew, akan, is a play on the word akor, which means “trouble.” So Joshua would declare that God would bring trouble on Achan who had become a “troubler” to the nation because of his sin (24-25). Thus, the site of Achan’s death and grave was called, “the valley of Achor.”

**Second**, the defeat at Ai (7:2-5). Look at verses 2-5. “Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, ‘Go up and spy out the region.’ So the men went up and spied out Ai. When they returned to Joshua, they said, ‘Not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.’ So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.” Ai was smaller than Jericho and the defeat of Israel’s army as described here is the only one recorded in the book of Joshua. How, then, could such a defeat so quickly occur? As summarized in verse 1, the root reason was the sin of Achan, but there are other issues involved which led Joshua to go up against Ai when he should not have. Joshua was eager to move forward for God and to conquer more territory in keeping with God’s directions and his purpose for Israel. But after the victory at Jericho, they became over-confident. They conquered a fortified city without firing a single arrow. So they thought that Ai would be a cake walk. So Joshua evidently failed to take time to pray to God to inquire of him and seek his guidance. If he had, he would not have remained ignorant of the sin of Achan and could have dealt with the sin first. Here is a summary the causes of failure: (1) There was a lack of prayer or a failure to spend time with God to seek his guidance; (2) There was reliance on human wisdom when Joshua listened to the suggestion of the spies when they returned from spying out Ai; (3) Relying on their past victory instead of God, there was overconfidence in their own ability, thinking they could easily go up against such a small city when compared to Jericho (3-4).

How often are we not just like Joshua here in this chapter? Because of an activity-oriented mentality or a desire to get things done and to be successful, there is the tendency to rush ahead without taking time with God to draw near to him to put on the full armor of God. Such is not only unwise, but it often causes us to be insensitive to serious failures in our own lives and ministries, and leave us defenseless against the enemy because we are then operating in our own strength and wisdom. Ultimately, then, these failures stand in the way of our progress and ability to handle the various challenges in life.

Look at the last part of verse 5. “At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.” The defeat at Ai demoralized the people. This is perhaps even more significant than the defeat itself because it created misgivings and a lack of hope or confidence in God. Rather than examine their own lives as the source of their defeat, they began to doubt God and wonder if he had changed his mind or if they had misread his directions, for example, “Were we really supposed to have crossed the Jordan? Should we have stayed on the other side?” (7). In our sinful human nature, we are typically just like that. We are so quick to become depressed, discouraged, and disoriented and to look in every direction for a reason for defeat, except ourselves. We blame, we make excuses, we hide, but we so often fail to honestly examine our own lives. We assume the problem could not possibly be us.

**Third**, Joshua’s prayer (7:6-9). Look at verses 6-9. “Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, ‘Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?’”

The humiliating defeat, coming so quickly after the great victory at Jericho, demoralizes even Joshua. Here we can see the struggles of a great leader. Joshua thought he was doing everything right. He had been following God’s directions and had done a great job consecrating the people before. He led them to a great victory at Jericho and helped them to cross the Jordan River. Now this failure. By tearing his clothes and falling face down, Joshua is mourning the defeat. More importantly, he is mourning the potential elimination of the people of Israel which would then leave no one to praise the name of God. If we examine these verses closely, we see that Joshua wasn’t questioning God’s power. As the leader, Joshua struggled to understand the cause of the failure. He couldn’t comprehend why God would do such a thing. Sometimes failure can be a good thing. It can help to re-focus and re-evaluate the situation. Ultimately growing you and making your faith in God even stronger. Failure is not the end. In fact, failure can be the back door to success. Many Bible characters failed at some point, and some of them drastically, but they refused to continue lying in the dust. Abraham failed by lying about his wife. King David failed for falling into sin of adultery and murder. Their failures and repentance revealed God’s grace more. They learned to know him as the God of the second chance to his children who had failed him—and the third chance, too. The successful leader is a man who has learned that no failure needs to be final and acts on that belief, whether the failure is his own or that of another. He must learn to be realistic and prepared to realize that he cannot be right all the time. There is no such a thing as a perfect or infallible leader.

God provides an answer in verses 10-12. “The Lord said to Joshua, ‘Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.’” Nothing is ever accomplished with our face in the ground or with our eyes on our failures and problems. First, we must confess our failures. Next we must seek to learn from them. Finally, we need to know that God’s will is immediate recovery and faith in the grace of God. God’s will is to get up and move on. God said, “Stand up!” This command calls for Joshua to get up from his state of despair to prepare himself for action, to listen to God, to take up his responsibility, and lead the people in God’s deliverance. God understands and sympathizes with our problems and fears, but God does not condone our being stuck in despair. He commands us to get up, get our eyes on him and deal with the problems in our life by faith in God.

Look at verses 14-16. “In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan; the clan the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family; and the family the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done an outrageous thing in Israel!’”” God gave divine direction and Achan was discovered by supernatural means. Look at verse 19. “Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the Lord the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.” Joshua’s approach was tender, yet firm. He hated the sin, but loved the sinner. Note that even though Achan did confess his sin, he only did so when forced to by the circumstances. Can you imagine the sweat running down Achan’s forehead as each round brought him closer and closer to being exposed. But he held out until the very end in blind hope that somehow his sins wouldn’t be exposed. If he had come forth voluntarily to confess his sins and asked for mercy, his life might have been spared, as in the case of David and his sin.

What happened to Achan is recorded for our warning and instruction to remind us of the progress of sin. The progress of Achan’s sin is a familiar one. He saw, he coveted, and he took. It reminds us of James 1:14-15, “but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” It was the same with Eve (Gen. 3:6) and with David (2 Sam. 11:2-4) and it is the same with us.

Many people are bothered by the harsh punishment on Achan and his family. Let’s first think about devoted things and why it was so serious to take devoted things. Devoted things were often used by the Canaanites for idol worship. It was necessary to completely destroy such things in order to purge idol worship. So taking devoted things was a serious offense. Secondly, as they just entered the promised land, it was necessary to set an example that violating God’s command was a serious matter. They were called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Achan was put to death to strike the fear of God into the hearts of the people and to show that God is holy. Thirdly, God took such severe action because of the serious consequences of his act on others—it was a terrible example, several lives were lost, Israel was routed, and God’s honor doubted (25). This became, then, a warning to the people. That is why they made a memorial to remind Israel of Achan’s sin and God’s judgment. In the early period of the church, Ananias and Sapphira lied about giving to the church when they sold their property as if they gave all. In fact, they kept some for themselves. They did not have to give at all, but they wanted to appear to be sacrificial and wanted praise from others. God dealt it very severely by putting both of them to death. If there was no consequence, the result would have been very serious. Namely, dishonesty appears profitable and the Spirit could be deceived. It was important to punish the sin in order to set the course properly at the outset to demonstrate that God will not tolerate such hypocrisy and deceit.

When Achan sinned and there was sin in the camp of Israel, God’s blessing was stopped and the nation met with judgment and failure. But once the sin was dealt with as God commanded, God’s blessing began to flow again by his grace. Again we are reminded that a known sin in one’s life creates a barrier between us and God because it shows our rebellion to go our own way and to handle our own lives by our own ways and desires. May God help us to repent of our sin so that God’s blessing may continue to flow to us.