

# **“The First Battle of Ai”**

## **Joshua 7**

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**by C.W. Powell**

1. But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel.
  
- 2 And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bethaven, on the east side of Bethel, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. 3 And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few.
  
- 4 So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. 5 And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.
  
- 6 And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. 7 And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord GOD, wherefore hast thou at all brought this

people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! 8 O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! 9 For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy great name?

10 And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? 11 Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even 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 were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. 13 Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the LORD God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you. 14 In the morning therefore ye shall be brought according to your tribes: and it shall be, that the tribe which the LORD taketh shall come according to the families thereof; and the family which the LORD shall take shall come by households; and the household which the LORD shall take shall come man by man.

15 And it shall be, that he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel. 16 So Joshua rose up early in the morning, and brought Israel by their tribes; and the tribe of

Judah was taken: 17 And he brought the family of Judah; and he took the family of the Zarhites: and he brought the family of the Zarhites man by man; and Zabdi was taken: 18 And he brought his household man by man; and Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

19 And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me. 20 And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: 21 When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it. 22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran unto the tent; and, behold, it was hid in his tent, and the silver under it. 23 And they took them out of the midst of the tent, and brought them unto Joshua, and unto all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD.

24 And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor. 25 And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones. 26 And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor, unto this day.” (Joshua 7:1-26 AV)

This is a sad and depressing story. After the glorious victory at Jericho and the great intervention of God to destroy the walls of Jericho, Israel is plunged into a great sea of despondency and despair, for they are routed before the walls of Ai, and thirty-six warriors perished.

Sin is discovered in the midst of the camp and Achan and his entire family and their bodies and all of their possessions are buried under a great mound of stones in the Valley of Achor, named after Achan, the Valley of Trouble, for Achan had troubled Israel.

What are we to make of these things? I would like to see some details, say what this story does NOT mean, and then look to make some sense out of it for the present church and for our church in particular.

## I. The Details

### A. The great over-confidence of Israel.

1. They forgot that they were totally dependent upon the Lord for their success and inheritance. They thought that their inheritance could be seized by their own power.
2. There are no easy spiritual victories. Do not think that you can overcome the least effects of sin by your own strength, for you cannot. He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, the Bible says. Trust in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, for He shall direct they paths. Israel trusted in their own strength, did not call on the Lord, and the result was the defeat at Ai.
3. The casualty count was insignificant—only thirty six dead. Great loss for the loved ones, but a small loss to the nation. What was worse was the demoralization of Israel. Vs. 5: their hearts melted. Would Joshua remember the time of the first spies? All could be lost.

### B. The wonderful prayer of Joshua.

1. Have you brought us here to destroy us?

2. We should have stayed on the other side of Jordan.
3. We will be utterly destroyed: vs. 8,9
4. Thy great name. This is really the only good thing in this prayer. I called the prayer wonderful because it was to God; the content is not so great. Pour out your hearts to God. "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah." (Psalms 62:8 AV)

### C. The discovery and execution of the sentence of God.

1. The longsuffering of God: Achan had a long time to repent.
2. His sin, vs. 11
  - a) Transgressed covenant: the covenant of Jericho
  - b) Stolen the accursed thing: Misappropriated the possessions of God.
  - c) Lied.
  - d) Put among their own stuff. Made God's things their own.
3. His Confession and Execution.

## II. What this does NOT mean.

- A. These are very unusual circumstances and unique events in Israel. God led Israel and was their civil ruler and king. He was their lawgiver and gave direct revelation to them. There is no parallel that can be made to any other nation or to the church of Jesus Christ, except as we shall most cautiously proceed in the next section.
- B. It does not mean that the private sin of your fellow Christian will keep you or the church from its inheritance. If that were true, we certainly should give up and eat, drink, and be merry.
- C. This passage has been terribly misused in the history of the church:
  1. By so-called Christian rulers. Every defeat of the Eastern Empire called for recriminations and purges in the

government, as the enemies of the emperor or the church were eliminated. There is a terrible monotony to this as we read the history.

2. By so-called Christian churches. The same thing in Rome. Heretics must be slaughtered and destroyed if Rome is to defeat the Turks or whatever the enemy was of the moment.
3. Even in local churches. How many sermons have been preached on this text by ministers who have some trouble-maker in the church. What a great text to use to beat them about the head! On the other hand, disgruntled people in the pew can take private comfort in the notion that their minister is probably an Achan in the camp and once we get rid of him then the Lord will bless our church. And so it goes. It is dangerous to read the Bible only once.

D. We are not to do the devil's work as The Accuser of the Brethren: "19 The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. 20 For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off: 21 That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought." (Isaiah 29:19-21 AV)

E. What it does NOT mean:

1. That only a pure church can be a true church and be blessed of God. There are no such churches in the New Testament.
2. That only a pure nation can be blessed of God and be considered a good nation in the world. The United States would have lost every war in her history; England would have; the Dutch would have; and so forth.
3. We do not have the time nor inclination to unpack all of these, but if you would like to read more I would recommend the fourth book of Calvin's Institutes on the nature of the true church and the biblical notion of the state, especially as it applies to perfectionism.

4. Suffice it to say, that this passage cannot be used to justify perfectionism and condemning one another when things seem to go wrong. The condemning itself can be a great sin in the eyes of God. But enough of this.

### III. What is the meaning for our day?

#### A. The particular sin of Achan is this:

1. Covetousness, which is idolatry. It was not ordinary covetousness, but a particular and aggravated covetousness, in which he stole the things that had been dedicated to the service of God, against the express commandment of the Captain of the Lord's Hosts. As such, it was not only theft, but treason against the Lord Himself. Sins are made more wicked if they are done without provocation, in defiance of great light and warnings, and continued in after warnings and rebukes.
2. Covetousness in its heart is that which seeks an earthly reward: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

#### B. I see at least three incidents in the early churches which supply some sort of parallel.

1. Ananias and Saphira, who pretended to dedicate all the price of their possession to the church, when in reality they kept some back: Theft in the holy things; lying, and hypocrisy. They lied to the Holy Ghost, and it was the Holy Ghost himself who chastised them. The inspired apostle pronounced their punishment, but it was God himself who carried out the sentence. The parallels are not exact with Achan, but there is some resemblance.
2. Simon the Sorcerer. He tried to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit. To turn God's things into a means of self-profit. This is a terrible sin. To take the gift of God and turn it to your own agenda and earthly goals. The gifts of God must not be used for earthly goals, to achieve the praise of men, to build earthly institutions, or to seek our own things. Simon had earthly goals in mind and he offered earthly things to obtain the spiritual gifts that he would use to advance his

covetousness. There is no earthly punishment that is recorded concerning him. He is anathematized by Peter, but he is not punished like Ananias and Saphira. There is no record of any disciplinary procedures against him, not in the inspired account. His judgment is left until the last day.

Again, the parallels are not exact with Achan.

3. The incestuous man in I Corinthians 5. Paul calls for his excommunication for his crime of incest, which is not only a crime against the church, but a crime against the state and human decency, a crime that was abhorred even by the heathen. This man was excommunicated, but was forgiven, restored and renewed in his fellowship in the church. The parallels again are not exact.

C. I think that the key to understanding the application of this passage to the modern day lies in these fundamental principles.

1. The administration of the church, as over against Israel, is the work of Christ in Heaven, through His word and Spirit. It is not by angels or men, except as they are sent by the Lord Jesus. Simon is left to the judgment of the last day; Ananias and Saphira are disciplined directly by God; the man in Corinth is disciplined by the elders of the church and Paul gives instructions to the kind of sins the elders are to deal with: outward crimes against the church, for men cannot see the hearts of men.
2. Its discipline extends only to the outward acts that can be verified by witness and evidence, and it has no power of life or death. The state has been given the sword, but in all ordinary cases it is to use the proper rules of evidence and witnesses to establish the outward acts that would constitute a crime under the law. It has no business seeking to control the mind and the heart.
3. The holy requirements for the blessing of God are so comprehensive that none of us could stand if they were rigorously applied to us. There would be no inheritance and no success.

- a) Achan was slain without the camp. His sin adhered to all his children and his possessions. Which of us could stand if that is the measure for us? By this the curse of God would come upon you for your father's sins; your grandfather's sins; the sins of your nation, your church, your society. Every sodomite and adulterer and corporate thief would bring a curse upon me for I am of their nation. Every sin of every member of this church would bring a curse upon me. How shall we stand, beloved, if this is the measure that is to be applied to us? We cannot, for we are undone.
- b) But there was another who was slain without the camp that gives us hope and confidence, and to which this passage points, subtly but surely.
- “5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.
- 6 So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.
- 7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.
- 8 Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.
- 9 Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.
- 10 We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.
- 11 For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp.
- 12 Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

13 Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

14 For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

15 By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. 16 But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” (Hebrews 13:5-16 AV)

c) I can identify with Achan much better than I can identify with those who stoned him. I would have been with those who slunk away from Christ when He said, “Let him that is without sin first cast a stone at her.” Oh, as an officer of the church of Jesus Christ, I will do my duty, as far as crimes against the church are concerned, just as those men did who stoned Achan. But what turmoil must have filled the hearts of those men: how many of them had been tempted over the gold and silver and wealth of Jericho. But if covetousness is the sin, how many of them were without sin when they stoned Achan? That’s why we have no stonings after the coming of the Lord Jesus, because He taught us a better way, set forth in the following scriptures:

“51 And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,

52 And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him.

53 And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.

54 And when his disciples James and John saw this,

they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?

55 But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.

56 For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.” (Luke 9:51-56 AV)

“30 But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?

31 And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick.

32 I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:30-32 AV)

“1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

2 Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

3 For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.

4 But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.

5 For every man shall bear his own burden.”  
(Galatians 6:1-5 AV)

Amen and Amen. May God bless you.