

Joshua 7 – Forward Blocked by Sin

At the beginning of the book of Joshua God makes a promise to him:

Joshua 1:1-5

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴ Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea ^[a] on the west. ⁵ No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

So far things had gone very well for the Israelites. They had crossed the Jordan River in dramatic style as God stopped the flow of the water so as they could cross on dry ground. And they had defeated the mighty city of Jericho, a city thought to be indestructible. Clearly God was with them, just as he promised he would be. Jericho was seen as something of a stronghold in Canaan. It was as though they had got the hard bit out of the way first. Now they had taken Jericho, they could take anyone. God had promised them the whole territory of Canaan and they were starting to see that promise fulfilled. So brimming with confidence and eager anticipation, Joshua sends men to spy out the next city on the agenda, a place called Ai.

Ai was in the hill country and would be a good place to form a base before launching attacks on the other places in Canaan. A base in hills of Ai would offer protection against Egyptian or Canaanite chariots.

The spies came back apparently even more confident. Their report must have been music to Joshua's ears.

Joshua 7: 3

"Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there."

What a confident statement and what great news. Compared to Jericho, Ai was small fry. This was going to be an easy victory. Notice here that the assessment of Ai's strength is given from a very human perspective. The spies appear to be counting numbers and comparing that to the number of the Israelite army. On a human level it seems that the Israelites considerably outnumber the army of Ai. They will easily win with only a portion of the army. Also the way the spies advice sending only a few so as 'not to weary all the people' may also indicate that they have begun to think on a human level, in terms of their own strength rather than thinking in terms of God's strength.

But nonetheless this appears to be a walkover. And so, bursting with confidence, three thousand men marched out to take the city of Ai. But they were in for a

shock. Ai are a bigger challenge than they expected and the Israelites that went to fight are defeated. Initially 36 are killed. At this point the Israelites' confidence disappears and they retreat.

Joshua 7:5

They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries ^[6] and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water.

The three thousand men that went to take on Ai, all dead. It should have been an easy victory. The phrase "the hearts of the people melted" is an interesting one. It is the same phrase that the spies used to describe the residents of Jericho in chapter 2

Joshua 2:24

"The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."

The tables had been turned and it was now the Israelites who were melting in fear because of their enemies.

Why has this happened though? Victory should have been theirs'. Besides the size and strength of the army, they had God on their side. God had already promised them the victory. As God said to Joshua:

Joshua 1:5

No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Put yourself in Joshua's shoes. How would you be feeling now? After taking Jericho, the neighboring cities would have naturally feared them and would most likely have been preparing themselves for battle. After this defeat, perhaps the other cities would come and attack them. And what confidence did Joshua have that they would be able to withstand such an attack? They had already lost what should have been an easy fight. Perhaps this was what God intended but why bring them across the Jordan, just to have them flattened by their enemies? Joshua has a good old moan.

Joshua 7:7-9

And Joshua said, "Ah, 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! ⁸ O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? ⁹ 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?"

So what had gone wrong?

In Joshua chapter 6 we read about how the Israelites marched around the city and how God made the walls of the city collapse. I just want to look back at part of that chapter and Joshua's warning to the people of Israel that was given just before they took the city.

Joshua 6:15-19

¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!" ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted ^[a] to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ **But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.** ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."

At the start of chapter 7 we read:

¹ But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things ^[a]; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, ^[b] the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel.

We're given details of Achan's family here and apparently, 'Carmi' means 'vineyard', 'Zimri' means 'to give a gift' and 'Zerah' means 'brightness' and 'sunshine'. Sounds like a good family. Just goes to show that even good chickens can lay bad eggs.

¹⁰ The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

Notice that although it was only one person who sinned, God talks about this in terms of a plural sin. V11 says "ISRAEL has sinned; THEY have violated my covenant... THEY have stolen, THEY have lied... etc. Achan's sin had polluted the whole of the people of Israel. Israel were to be God's holy people, set apart for him, an example of holiness to all. But they had now been polluted.

As the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 12:18-20, 26

...God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body... ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it...

The sin of Achan was like a cancer in the body. It did not belong among God's people. Sin contaminates God's holy people and it had the potential to destroy them. It needed to be cut out and destroyed.

Let's read on (v16-26)

Thursday for us is bin day, and on Thursday morning there is the familiar sight when you open the curtains of lots of bin bags lining the pavement. Many of them have been torn open during the night by the foxes. The foxes seem to have worked out that a lot of people put their rubbish out on a Wednesday night and this seems to be something of a party night for the foxes, and like all parties, the place looks a bit of a mess when they've finished. Anyway, this Thursday was no exception. As I was leaving about to go down to church, I noticed that rubbish was spewed across the pavement in front of our house. It wasn't our rubbish but I thought I ought to clean it up. Well, it looked quite a messy job so I tied a food bag to my hand and went out with a bin bag to clean up. It was a horrible job. There were messy bits of half eaten food, various boxes and worst of all, soiled nappies! It was not the most pleasant way to wake up but I think God must have a sense of humour because towards the end, when I had nearly finished, I picked up a packet of something with the brand displayed in big letters which read "Good Morning".

It's never a nice job having to clean up a mess but it is a necessary thing to do. If we don't get rid of rubbish, it will rot and cause bad smells and contamination.

I remember when I was a student living in a shared house in Northampton. There were five of us living in the house and in the kitchen we all had one shelf of a cupboard to store our food. Well during the summer of course we all went home for about three months so we emptied our cupboards. One year when I came back in September there was a horrendous smell in the house that seemed to get stronger as I walked towards the kitchen. There I found one of my housemates who had just finished cleaning out my cupboard. I had left a potato in there and over the summer it had rotted away and leaked everywhere.

The potato needed to be thrown away and the cupboard needed to be disinfected. It was a good thing that there was no other food around because that would have been ruined too. Do you see the point? Because of Achan's sin, there were serious consequences for Israel. Some of them were killed in battle. Sin is a serious problem and God takes sin very seriously. The consequences of sin are deadly. Sin is deadly to our relationship with God. That was the first thing that happened to the Israelites, they were cut off from God, a barrier had been formed between them and God could no longer be with them until that barrier had been removed. When we are cut off from God, we are vulnerable and that is when we get into trouble.

Sin has serious consequences. For Israel there were corporate consequences. They were killed in battle. And there were individual consequences for Achan. God treated this sin very seriously and took radical action to remove it. Like a

rotten apple in a fruit bowl needs to be got rid of so as it doesn't contaminate the rest of the fruit. So Achan needed to be destroyed so as his sin did not contaminate Israel and so as God could once again be with his holy people.

This is not a comfortable passage to look at because when we look at this passage honestly, we can probably put ourselves in Achan's shoes. We may not have stolen anything or been deliberately deceitful, but we can probably all think of times when we have done things that we know are not right by God. There may even have been times when we have deliberately disobeyed God. By rights, we deserve the same treatment as Achan. We should be publicly disgraced and stoned to death.

Just think about that for a minute. So often we don't take our sin seriously, but it was and still is serious to God. So serious that he needed to do something to destroy it. You see, the barrier that sin causes breaks God's heart. He can't stand it when he is separated from his people. Something needed to be done. God loved us so much that he took the stoning for us. Our sin deserves the death penalty, but because God loves us so much, he took the death penalty for us.

[DVD Clip – When I Survey the Wondrous Cross]

It cost Jesus everything to enable you to be cleaned up. Try to avoid playing in the rubbish.