

## “He Has Transgressed the Covenant of the LORD”

*The seventy-eighth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Joshua 7:1-26; Acts 5:1-11**

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The seven trumpets sounded seven times, the people of Israel gave a great shout, and then suddenly, the walls of Jericho collapsed. The army of Israel quickly entered the city and put to death all of Jericho’s inhabitants just as God commanded. The only people spared were Rahab and her family, because they believed that YHWH was the Lord of all the earth, and because at the risk of her own life, Rahab hid the two spies Joshua had sent to investigate Jericho’s defenses. But not only did the Lord command that everyone in Jericho be put to death, he also commanded that the entire city was to be completely destroyed. Because YHWH had devoted the city to himself for destruction, no Israelite was to take any personal property from the ruins of the city. The only items to be spared were things made of gold, silver and bronze, which were to be added to Israel’s treasury for eventual use in the temple. As long as Israel obeyed the Lord’s commands, victory over the Canaanites was assured and Israel would soon possess all the land. But should any one of the Israelites disobey the Lord’s commands, trouble will come upon the entire nation.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Joshua. We have just completed chapters 5-6, which describe those days immediately after Israel’s entrance into the promised land as well as the account of the fall of Jericho. Throughout these chapters, the emphasis has fallen upon the contrast between this present generation of Israelites who entered the land of promise and that generation of Israelites who left Egypt and who perished in the wilderness because of their unbelief. This generation was not like the former one. This generation obeys the Lord’s commands. They submit to Joshua. They renew the covenant. And they are victorious over Jericho and its formidable defenses, because they followed the Lord’s commands to the letter. And so the entire nation of Israel was privileged to watch Jericho’s walls collapse at the end of what amounted to a seven-day worship service, in which a holy procession led by Israel’s priests and the ark of the covenant marched around the city of Jericho as a sign that YHWH is Israel’s shield and defender, as well as Lord of all the earth.

In the opening chapters of Joshua we see the “works principle” very clearly set forth. As in the original covenant of works God made with Adam in Eden, which was then republished at Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, God promises blessings for obedience and threatens curses for disobedience. This is the operative principle when Israel renewed the covenant at Moab (our present Book of Deuteronomy), and shortly thereafter when Israel advances on Jericho under the leadership of Joshua and crosses through the Jordan River on dry ground. This principle is also evident when YHWH gave to Israel a great victory over Jericho. But before YHWH gives Jericho in the hands of his people, Joshua reveals to all Israel an additional command of the Lord in Joshua 6:18-19, a command which is the basis for what unfolds in chapters 7-8. *“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. But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.”* The law of God does exactly what he intends it to do. It both exposes sin and reveals to us his will.

God has promised to give Israel all the land of Canaan, including its bounty—the milk and honey, the farms and fields. God has commanded that Israel destroy all Canaanite religious shrines and cities—such as Jericho—because such places are bastions of paganism. This is divine judgment upon a people who

knew that YHWH was Lord of all the earth and that the land of Canaan belongs to him, but who worshiped and served Baal instead. This was also done to ensure that the religious practices of the pagan Canaanites will have no influence upon the people of Israel once they settle in the land and is the reason why the LORD forbids the people of Israel from taking any spoils of war from Jericho. Everything in the city was to be destroyed by fire, except the precious metals, which would go into the national treasury so as to be used in the eventual construction of the temple. Should anyone disobey the Lord's command, trouble will come upon all Israel.

**I**n chapter 7, Joshua describes what happened to Israel in those days immediately after the city of Jericho fell. These events take Joshua completely by surprise.

A number of commentators have pointed out the remarkable contrast between the key figures in Joshua chapters 2 and 7. In Joshua 2, we read of the remarkable faith of Rahab—a Canaanite prostitute who believed the promise and who received God's blessing—and in Joshua 7 we read of Achan, an Israelite from one of the tribe of Judah's finest families who disobeyed God's command and who came under God's judgment.<sup>1</sup> The contrast between Rahab and Achan serves to illustrate the point that Gentiles can receive covenant blessings through faith in YHWH, while Jews can come under covenant curses through unbelief, in this case which leads to dramatic consequences for the entire nation.

In verse 1, Joshua give us the background for what follows in the next two chapters. *“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.”* While chapters 5-6 of Joshua focused upon Israel's obedience unto the Lord, the opening verse of chapter 7 reminds us that the depths of human sin and depravity are ever present, even when the people of Israel are zealous to obey the Lord. After witnessing God's power and seeing what happens when his people obey him, we learn that not everyone in Israel has done as YHWH commanded. Achan willfully disobeyed Joshua's command and took certain items from Jericho which had been devoted to destruction and to the Lord. The disobedience of this one man exposes the whole nation to God's anger. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word translated “broke faith” (ESV) is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to described adulterous behavior in a marriage (cf. Numbers 5:12-13). Achan's sin is not mere theft. Achan's sin amounts to breaking faith with YHWH's covenant, similar to an adulterous spouse breaking faith with their husband or wife.<sup>2</sup>

Joshua, of course, had no idea that Achan had done this. All he knew was that Jericho's walls had fallen, every living thing in the city had been put to death as God had commanded, and the remains of the city had been put to the torch. With Jericho destroyed, Joshua continued to plan the campaign to take Canaan by first taking Ai, a small city about 12 miles away from Jericho, located in the hill country above Bethel. But as we learn in verses 2-5, things did not go as planned and Joshua and the Israelites were in for a rude awakening. *“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, ‘Do not have 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 few.’ So about 3,000 men went up there from the people. And they fled before the men of Ai, and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six of*

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, Joshua, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Howard, Joshua, 188.

*their men and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted and became as water.”*

The scouts had reported back to Joshua that Ai was weakly defended and that a small force of 3,000 men could easily take the city. As we learn later in chapter 8 (v. 25), Ai was a small city with some 12,000 inhabitants. The name Ai means “the ruin” and most scholars believe that this is the tell (man-made hill) about two miles east of modern Beitin (ancient Bethel).<sup>3</sup> After hearing YHWH’s promise to fight on the side of Israel, and having just witnessed what happened at Jericho, Joshua fully expected Ai to fall quickly and easily, thereby securing the western flank of Israel’s advance into Canaan.

But Joshua and the elders of Israel were in for a huge surprise. Instead of an easy victory, the men of Ai thoroughly whipped the Israeli force, inflicting a number of casualties and driving the remaining Israelites away in full flight. Upon hearing the news that a weakly defended city like Ai put up such a tenacious fight, the hearts of those in Israel melted. This was a very bad sign. Suddenly, the people were very afraid that the Canaanites (who have a reputation for great ferocity) might just be able to keep the Israelites from possessing Canaan. If things went so badly at a small city such as Ai, what would happen when Israel came up against larger, better defended cities. Was Jericho a fluke? A defeat at Ai was not supposed to happen. What went wrong? This did not bode well and the people were afraid.

Joshua, who still knew nothing of Achan’s actions, took the news of the defeat very badly. He and the elders of Israel went into state of mourning, as described in verses 6-9. *“Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel. And they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, ‘Alas, O Lord GOD, why have you 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 will you do for your great name?’”*

There are a number of interesting and important things here to notice. The tearing of clothes and throwing dust upon one’s head was an act of mourning, appropriate for those times when a leader or a patriarch dies.<sup>4</sup> This defeat was a shock. The consequences were grave. Indeed, Joshua’s actions reflect Israel’s long history of such laments and whining—“Lord, why did you bring us this far only to kill us in the desert?” This time the lament becomes “why did you allow us to cross the Jordan only to allow the men of Ai to defeat us?” Joshua was deeply disappointed that the men he sent “turned their backs before their enemies.” Turning one’s back to an enemy was to invite a spear or a sword, as it was a sign of fear and humiliation. Even in defeat, soldiers of Joshua’s time were taught to turn their face their enemies and not show fear. Better to die facing the enemy, then live while exposing your back and running away. The reason for this is that an army’s reputation for ferocity and courage was just as important, if not more so, than its actual ability to fight. If the people of Canaan got wind that the men of tiny little Ai defeated the Israelites, then the demoralizing effects upon Israel’s enemies of the stunning victory over Jericho would evaporate. If news got out that the Israelites broke and ran when they faced heavy resistance, every city in Canaan would put up a similar fight.

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 178-179.

<sup>4</sup> Hess, *Joshua*, 147.

Joshua had two reasons to be concerned. The success of his army and the campaign to take Canaan was tied to the very survival of the entire nation. Israel was now camped inside Canaan with the Jordan River blocking all chance of escape. A failure of will on the part of the army, meant that the entire nation would be in danger of attack and at risk. But Joshua was also concerned that the Lord's great name might be besmirched by the Canaanites. Joshua feared that God's enemies might mock YHWH because of Israel's failure. This is a reflection of the importance of calling upon the name of God, found throughout much of the Old Testament, especially as seen in the Psalter. Joshua wanted to see God's name honored, but he was afraid that somehow, Israel had lost God's blessing and would be destroyed.

In verses 10-15, Joshua learns what has brought about this surprising defeat. Joshua also learns what is to be done to find the perpetrator and extent of the punishment he is to face. *"The LORD said to Joshua, 'Get up! Why have you fallen on your face? Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. Get up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel, 'There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you.' In the morning therefore you shall be brought near by your tribes. And the tribe that the LORD takes by lot shall come near by clans. And the clan that the LORD takes shall come near by households. And the household that 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 an outrageous thing in Israel.'"*

With that, Joshua learns that someone has violated God's command and kept items taken from Jericho. God will not side with Israel until this matter is dealt with. Joshua is to conduct an inquest to determine who has done this and to then mete out punishment upon that one who has transgressed the covenant of the Lord. This is what Joshua does as recounted in verses 16-21. *"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 clans of Judah, and the clan of the Zerahites was taken. And he brought near the clan 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. Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.' And Achan answered Joshua, 'Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath.'"*

The casting of lots revealed that Achan, a son of one on the most prestigious families in Judah is the one who has violated the Lord's command. Joshua calls him "my son" (indicating his office as covenant mediator). Joshua commands Achan to do four things. "Give glory to the LORD God," "give him praise," "tell me what you have done," and "do not hide it from me." Achan has violated the eighth and ninth commandments (he stole property which was not his and coveted items of his pagan neighbors), he has violated God's instructions in Deuteronomy 20:10-20, he has lied (cf. Leviticus 19:11) and he has violated the first commandment by placing monetary gain over loyalty to YHWH.<sup>5</sup> It is helpful to

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<sup>5</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 197.

consider what it was that Achan kept for himself. Taking the gold and silver is easy to understand—the monetary value. But the “beautiful cloak of Shinar” is a Babylonian garment and was probably some sort of a status symbol (like Joseph’s coat of many colors), which reveals that which occupied Achan’s attention—impressing others while disobeying YHWH’s command.

Achan had hidden his sin for a time, but the Lord now brought it out into the open. His actions have brought down the covenant curses upon the entire nation. The punishment will be swift and severe. As we read in verses 22-24, “*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 to all the people of Israel. And they laid them down before the LORD. And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters and his oxen and donkeys and sheep and his tent and all that he had. And they brought them up to the Valley of Achor.*” Not only was the devoted property which Achan had stolen from Jericho to be destroyed, but so are all his own personal possessions. Even his animals and his children are to be put to death. Everything Achan owned or possessed is to be wiped out. His entire lineage will perish.

The reason for this very severe punishment—and notice too, it was Joshua *and* the whole nation which imposed this punishment on Achan—is that his selfish actions have placed the entire nation in jeopardy. Achan’s “breaking faith” brought the entire nation under the covenant curse—not just himself. Yes, Achan’s sin is great. Yes, the punishment is severe. But it certainly fits the crime. The great irony in all of this is that God would allow the Israelites to take anything from Ai once it fell (Joshua 8:2).<sup>6</sup> If Achan had obeyed the Lord and just waited a few more days, he could have taken whatever he wanted from the remains of Ai. But no, he violated YHWH’s command to avoid all devoted property at Jericho.

As the sentence of death is about to be administered, Joshua asks Achan in verse 25, “*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.*” Since Achan’s actions effected all of Israel, the entire nation participated in his punishment. In fact, as we learn in verse 26, “*And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day.*” Achan and his entire family, all their possessions and all the devoted articles he had stolen were burned and then buried under the huge pile of stones which the entire nation hurled upon them. At the end of our passage, Joshua simply tells us “*therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.*” The term “Achor” simply means “valley of trouble,” and no doubt, it was.

Stoning will be the fate suffered by the king of Ai, (when that city was defeated, as we will see in chapter 8), and stoning will also be the fate of Absalom (David’s rebellious son). Because he is holy, God will not overlook the sin of his own people especially at the very time he is bringing judgment upon the people of Canaan. Israelites who disobey his commandments will be treated just as the Canaanites will be treated—no difference. In effect, through this punishment, Joshua excommunicated Achan from Israel. All such covenant breakers must be punished to preserve the health of the nation as a whole. God will jealously preserve his people. Through this act of judgment, YHWH is making the point as clearly as possible, that violating his commands will bring the entire nation under judgment.<sup>7</sup> Those who do so will be punished. Under the terms of the covenant God made with them at Sinai, Israel’s occupation of

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<sup>6</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 198.

<sup>7</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 199.

Canaan will depend upon their obedience to his commands.

But then, once Achan and his family, his animals, his possessions, along with the devoted items which he stole, had been totally destroyed, we read “*Then the LORD turned from his burning anger.*” The punishment fit the crime and demonstrated to all that once this had been done, YHWH’s anger toward Israel was turned aside. As we will see next time, Ai will fall and Israel will be victorious. Just as a stone monument was erected and “stands to this day” when Israel crossed the Jordan River, so too a pile of stones cover Achan’s remains, “until this day.” The people of Israel must never forget that the sins of one man cannot be allowed to put the whole nation in jeopardy.

**W**hat then, can we say by way of application?

There are two main issues raised by the sin of Achan. The first is that God demands perfect obedience to his commandments—the so-called “works principle.” In fact, not one of us here this morning will be in heaven without such perfect obedience. Related to this is the fact that Achan “broke faith” with YHWH. As Joshua puts it, “he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD” which very likely means that he was an unbeliever within Israel—the punishment of his entire family, thereby wiping out his entire line seems to be a clear indication of this. As a matter of justice, God will not treat such a man any differently than he will treat the pagan Canaanites. But not only did Achan sin against the Lord, since Israel was a holy nation (a theocracy) his act was a capital crime against the nation (and therefore amounts to treason). Because of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, the sin of one man, brought down God’s judgment upon an entire nation. In this, we can see the strong parallel to the works principle with Adam in Eden. Because of Achan’s sin, God’s judgment will fall upon the entire nation. This is why the entire nation participates in stoning Achan and destroying his possessions. The punishment fits the crime. His act threatens all. The nation puts him to death for a capital crime.

Not only would this have a huge impact within Israel—reminding everyone that there are blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience and that Israel can never conquer Canaan in their own strength—the excommunication and execution of Achan would also be an amazing testimony of God’s justice not only to Israel, but to all those Canaanites watching from afar. This same principle of divine judgment and excommunication carries over into the New Testament church, as we see in our New Testament lesson this morning in Acts 5:1-11 and the account of Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck down because they lied to the Holy Spirit. Such acts of divine judgment reminds everyone—both inside the church and out—that God’s judgment begins in the house of the Lord and that God will not allow the sins and rebellion of individual to destroy the church—those for whom Christ has died. Neither will he allow this sins of some to besmirch the gospel, so that people will not call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. While God is gracious and long-suffering with sinners, he will also defend and preserve his church, even from enemies within it.

The second point to consider is that as a matter of divine justice, there is not one of us who deserves anything less than Achan received. None of us are law-keepers with sufficient obedience to avoid the wrath of God. We are law breakers. And yet, the whole point of Achan’s rebellion and punishment is to remind God’s people that we have all transgressed the covenant of the Lord and cannot possibly save ourselves. It will take the death and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. Indeed, in Jesus Christ, God freely gives to us, everything he demands from us under the law. Therefore, we who have transgressed the covenant of the LORD must be saved by that one who never transgressed the covenant of the LORD and who died for all the times we have transgressed. That’s what we must learn from the account of Achan’s sin. He got what he deserved. Jesus Christ took what we deserve.