

Joshua 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 09 June 2020

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[0 : 00] Joshua chapter 7 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 three thousand 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 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. 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.

[1 : 25] And what will you do for your great name? 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 tribes 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 has 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.

[2 : 37] 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 two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold wearing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath.

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.

[3 : 48] 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. And Joshua said, 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. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.

The book of Joshua to this point has been one in which the Israelites have largely been faithful. However, in chapter 7, we find that unbeknownst to Joshua and the rest of the people, one of the people had sinned, and they were all about to suffer as a result of that one man's sin.

Sin, even secret sin, has consequences for the entire community, and must be dealt with seriously accordingly. When it is not dealt with, the ramifications can be very severe.

[4 : 51] This is especially the case when the sin explicitly breaches a commandment given to the entire community as a body when they are acting in the name of the Lord. Where the holiness of the people is at stake, unless such sins are dealt with very decisively, everyone associated with the sinner can suffer with them.

Israel has just won the battle at Jericho, but they had failed in the aftermath. As one of their number, Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, had taken some of the items devoted to the Lord.

Achan's name means serpent, so we should not be surprised that he was up to no good. He violated the commandment of chapter 6, verses 18 to 19. 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. This was not just a sin of theft. It was an act of unfaithfulness, a breaking of trust, a breaking of the covenant.

It also put Israel in a very dangerous position. They now had items devoted to destruction in their possession, and unless they could identify the culprit and the items, they could suffer destruction on account of them.

[6 : 11] Joshua sends out spies to a town named Ai, from which they return with an encouraging report. Confident in their capacity to defeat the town, they send only a small number of men, about 3,000.

Considering that Israel had about 600,000 men of military age, this was just a very small band. But they suffer a humiliating defeat. They're pursued and they lose 36 men.

There's a reversal of fortunes here. Israel is routed by a seemingly weaker force. And their hearts now melt. The lesson should be clear. Without the Lord fighting for them, they are truly doomed.

They suffer the same sort of weakness that their enemies have suffered to this point. Joshua responds to the crisis in a remarkable way. He tears his clothes. He falls face down before the ark of the Lord and remains there until the evening.

He's joined by the elders. And his words might be shocking to us. He complains to the Lord in words reminiscent of those of the Israelites who complained in the Exodus that the Lord had brought them into the wilderness to destroy them.

[7 : 14] There seems to have been a failure of Joshua's faith at this point. He seems to have temporarily forgotten the charge given to him by the Lord in the opening chapter of the book and the promises attached to it.

He wonders whether Israel should not just have contented themselves with settling on the far side of the Jordan with the two and a half tribes in the land taken from the Amorite kings, not considering that those victories were examples of how the Lord would bless them in the land itself.

Joshua is concerned on two key accounts. First, they have a precarious purchase on the land on the far side of the Jordan at this point. They've defeated Jericho, but nowhere else. And they have the flooded Jordan River to their backs.

And if the Lord forsakes them at this point, they cannot easily get back across the river and will be trapped and destroyed by the Canaanites, who will recognize their weakness and come to attack them. The result would be the Canaanites cutting off their name.

And with it, the Lord's name would also be brought into low reputation among the nations. The Lord rebukes Joshua. He instructs him to get up. Israel's defeat was not a sign of the Lord's fickleness or his unfaithfulness to his covenant.

[8 : 21] Rather, Israel has offended against the Lord's holiness. If Israel is the means by which the Lord is defeating the Canaanites for their sin, they cannot be allowed to get away with sinning in such a manner.

In this calling, Israel must act as a faithful unity and a little leaven can leaven that whole lump. If the Lord is to be in their midst and to fight for them, they must rigorously maintain their holiness.

And the specific sin is expounded upon in verse 11. It's described in six separate stages. 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. Until and unless this sin was dealt with, the Lord wouldn't fight for Israel. What is worse, they would themselves be set apart for judgment.

Israel must consecrate itself and prepare itself for judgment the next morning. The culprit would be identified by going down through the levels of the people, from tribe to clan to household to man.

[9 : 22] And this would occur by lot, perhaps by the Urim and the Thummim. The guilty party would then be destroyed with his entire family. On this, as on other occasions, the Lord deals with solidarities, not just with individuals.

Achan is finally identified and Joshua charges him to acknowledge what it was that he did. By so doing, he would give praise and ascribe glory to the Lord who had declared his sin.

Achan had taken the forbidden fruit, as it were. He had stolen what belonged to the Lord, the one thing they were told not to take. He had lied, he had broken the Lord's express command concerning the spoil, he had rejected the Lord and he had coveted what was not his.

He ends up declaring the items that he has stolen and where he hid them. And then Achan was brought to be stoned with the items that he had stolen and with all of his family. They are then burned and covered up with stones.

Should be observed that he and his family are suffering the fate of Jericho, which also had stones brought down upon it as the walls came tumbling down and then was presumably burned with fire according to the way that cities condemned to destruction were generally destroyed in chapter 13 of Deuteronomy and then left as a pile of rubble.

[10 : 36] Like Lot's wife, who had looked back at Sodom, Achan's attachment to the destroyed city led to him and his family suffering its fate. The pile of stones over Achan remained a testament to his sin and a caution to Israel.

On the one hand, there are the memorial stones from the crossing of the Jordan and on the other hand, there are the stones covering Achan and his family. As James Bajon has observed, Achan is a reverse of Rahab.

Rahab is saved with all of her family and becomes one of Israel. Achan is destroyed with all of his family and becomes one of the Canaanites. There's more going on here. By virtue of the way that he is introduced to us and by the process by which the lots are taken, Achan's lineage is highlighted and most particularly that he is a descendant of Zerah.

This brings us back to Genesis chapter 38, verse 27 to 30 at the end of the story of Judah and Tamar. When the time of her labour came, there were twins in her womb and when she was in labour, one put out a hand and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand saying, this one came out first.

But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, what a breach you have made for yourself. Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand and his name was called Zerah.

[11 : 58] The story of the twins here is interesting. Perez's descendants go on to prosper despite a number of threats to being cut off as a line. Zerah's line, however, seems to be largely cut off.

They don't go anywhere. Achan is a descendant of Zerah. I previously commented upon the strange and troubling law of Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 11 to 12.

I've suggested it is a symbolic law and that it looks back to Genesis chapter 38. When men fight with one another and the wife of one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts, then you shall cut off her hand.

Your eyes shall have no pity. Symbolically, this represents the conflict between Judah and his oldest son, Ur, and the failure to build up Ur's name, the dead son, by giving his son, Shelah, to Tamar as the one to perform the leveret.

As a result, Tamar reaches out, as it were, and grabs him by the private parts, having relations with him secretly. Then at the end of the story, there is a child that reaches out his hand.

[13 : 05] That hand has a scarlet cord tied around it and then the bearer of that hand is ultimately cut off while another takes his place. Zerah, I suggest then, is the hand that gets cut off.

His line goes nowhere and Achan is an example of this. However, there is another hand or line and that's that of Perez. Perez goes on to be the ancestor of David and of Christ and there are two stories with a scarlet thread.

There's the story in Genesis 38 and then there's the story of Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho. Rahab is a character who might remind us of Tamar in a number of different ways, who also plays the prostitute and is connected with a scarlet cord.

Rahab ends up marrying into the line of Perez. In Matthew 1, verses 3-5, we read, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar and Perez the father of Hezron and Hezron the father of Ram and Ram the father of Amminadab and Amminadab the father of Nashon and Nashon the father of Salmon and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab.

Achan is also recalled at various points later in scripture. Joshua 22 verses 19-20 Only do not rebel against the Lord or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God.

[14 : 21] Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things and wrath fall upon all the congregation of Israel and he did not perish alone for his iniquity? In 2 Chronicles chapter 2 verse 7 he's mentioned again The son of Carmi Achan the troubler of Israel who broke faith in the matter of the devoted thing His name is actually given here as Achar in the text and is described as the troubler of Israel which is essentially the same term as Achar A question to consider How might Achan be like the characters of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5?