

On January 1, 1978, the entire force of firefighters in all of England went on strike. In response, the government called out the British Army to stand in their place. On January 14<sup>th</sup> they were called to the home of an elderly lady in South London; their mission: to rescue her cat, stuck high in a tree. The British army arrived in their fire trucks with impressive haste and valiantly, with great care and cleverness, delivered the woman’s cat safely into her arms. As they began to drive away, the grateful woman insisted the soldiers stay that she might reward them with a spot of tea and crackers. After a time of friendly communion, the soldiers bid their fond farewells, and as they drove off, with a waving of hands and arm - one of the fire trucks ran over her cat and killed it.

Yesterday’s victory does not make us immune to today’s defeat. No clearer can that be seen than in our text for today, as Joshua 7 begins with the ominous word *“but.”* That word is a signal that things are going to dramatically change from what has just happened. For Joshua and Israel that was the dramatic change from the great victory in taking down Jericho, into the pain of defeat at the little city of Ai. We open where we left off last week as the dust settles from crumbling walls of Jericho.

*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. 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 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. Joshua 7:1-5*

As we step into Joshua we read that unexpectedly, after two great victories – the crossing of the uncrossable Jordon River and breaking down of the impenetrable walls of Jericho - Israel suddenly tastes defeat. Up to this point Joshua and the people of God had only experienced success in their mission to claim the land God had promised them. Following Jericho, the city of Ai seemed to be next in line to fall. Though a much smaller fortress than Jericho, Ai’s location was on the strategic edge of the central ridge region that runs through Canaan. Defeating Ai would mean Israel would hold all the hill country, along with commanding the route to the interior through Jericho, which they’d already overtaken. Compared to the mighty fortress of Jericho, Ai was little more than an insignificant little town, a wide spot in the road that should easily been defeated by Joshua and his army. Yet Ai handily defeated Israel, sending Israel’s soldiers running. How could this happen?

Right from the beginning of the book of Joshua, we’ve been reading of God giving His people instructions as to what they must do to in order to claim victory. In Joshua 1:7 He said: *“Be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.”* And in Joshua 5 God told them they would have that *“good success”* if they *submitted to the authority of God* and in Joshua 6 he taught them they would know victory if they *obediently trusted in God’s ways*. *“But”* - in Joshua 7 we see what happened when they no longer followed those instructions. Success caused them to take their eyes off God and look to themselves. Drunk with victory, they became lazy and self-absorbed. As a consequence, the self-centeredness of their sin took hold of God’s people, and they suffered defeat both as individuals and as a nation. In our text for today we see how the power of disobedience can cause self -defeat even when God blesses us with the victory in life He has promised. Yesterday’s victory does not make us immune to today’s defeat.

This all begins in Joshua 7:2, where we read that, “Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai.” In the words that follow we read that Joshua decided to launch an attack on the city of Ai - but it makes no mention of God of telling to do so nor of any request from Joshua as to how Israel should proceed. We don’t really know why Joshua did this on his own initiative. Most likely he felt overconfident after the miraculous success of Israel’s battle against Jericho or maybe someone talked Joshua into thinking Ai would be an easy target. Nevertheless, it seems out of character for Joshua to do so.

It's also striking that Joshua instantly takes the counsel of the spies. The spies are acting as military advisors, not just giving him information, but also making decisions based on their limited opinion. Joshua doesn't pray about it; there is no gathering together and asking: "Lord, is this what you would have us do?" But immediately they act on their own. And we're told that, shockingly, they are defeated. They turn tail and run. This little outnumbered city of Ai routs 3,000 of Israel's soldiers and chases them halfway back to Jericho. There are thirty-six fatalities, which is ironic. During the week spent marching around the walls of Jericho thirteen times, with the whole army exposed to the arrows of the archers of Jericho, there was not one fatality. But here thirty-six men die.

The name Ai in Hebrew means ruins, and it was certainly a ruinous military expedition for the people of Israel. There is a very sad observation at the end of verse 5 that, “*the hearts of the people melted and became as water.*” That describes their response to the failure, the defeat at Ai. Their morale fractured; their strength is melting away. Proverbs 16:18 describes their situation. “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*” Jesus spoke of this also when he said, “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*” (Matthew 23:12). Yesterday’s victory does not make us immune to today’s defeat.

The defeat at Ai represents a battle fought in their own strength, trusting their own resources - leaving God’s will, God’s wisdom, God’s power and God’s presence out of the equation. We see that in that there is no mention of seeking God in prayer before this second battle. Proverbs 3:5-8 says: “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.*” There is no self-confidence in the Kingdom of God, only total dependence on the One who rules and reigns over all the universe.

*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?”*

*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.”* Joshua 7:6-13

Here we begin to read how self-defeat and can be turned into spiritual victory. In 2 Corinthians 12:9 Jesus declared: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Defeat can be reversed if we confess our impotence and surrender to God's guidance and power. Joshua and Israel's leaders end up broken before God - tearing their clothing and covering themselves with dust - signs of humiliation, grief, and mourning before the Lord. But Joshua seems to be angry. He challenges God, argues with God, asking why this terrible thing has happened. He even blames God for setting them up for defeat. The bottom line of his prayer is, "Lord, how could you do this to us?"

God lets Joshua rant - but interrupts him in verse 10. There is an interesting word play here. Back in verse 7 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?"* In other words, "God, this is your fault. You crossed us over this river." In verse 11 God then says, *"Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them."* In other words: "It's your fault, not mine." Into Joshua's agony and turmoil God speaks the truth. He brings objectivity into Joshua's out-of-control subjectivity.

God isn't very therapeutic about this. His language is blunt. He's saying in effect, "Wait a minute, Joshua. You are not seeing reality. There's a reason for the trouble and defeat. But you've got to be willing to look for sin in the camp. There's been stealing, lying and covering up. Devoted things belong to me alone, and you have no right whatsoever to mess with them. You have broken my commands to be careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you, and you have not submitted to My authority and you haven't obediently trusted My ways - that I expected you to take seriously before and after the battle of Jericho. You attacked Ai without my guidance and presence. Your behavior has brought you trouble." In verses 14-18 God continues to explain to Joshua what he is to say to the nation of Israel and also tells what Joshua is to do.

*“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.”* 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.”* 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. Joshua 7:14-23

In these words we read of the profound effect that happens to others because of the disobedience of even one person. This process of investigation and discovery suggests the seriousness of Achan's sin, and the corrosive corrupting influence of sin in a community. God said that somebody has done something in secret that is going to affect the future of the whole nation. Somebody in disobedience has taken things that were placed under the ban. It's a very serious issue, but God works through Joshua's spiritual sensitivity and willingness to cooperate in the process. And Achan is discovered.

In Achan's public confession of his sin we see the pattern that leads to spiritual self-defeat. He says first of all that he saw the valuable articles – a beautiful Babylonian robe, the silver money, and a bar of gold. The second thing he does is reclassify them: He calls them “*spoils.*” But they weren't spoils of war for the soldiers; they belonged to the Lord and were part of his treasury. The third thing Achan says is that he “*coveted them.*” This tells us where his focus was. He was thinking about himself and what he wanted rather than rejoicing in the great spiritual victory that God had won, and the privilege he had of being part of the people of Israel in the battle of Jericho. Fourth, he says he took the articles, which would have required covertly sneaking them out of the city without anyone seeing them. The last thing he says is that he hid the treasure, thinking he could get away with his sin by hiding the plunder.

God had made it clear previously in Joshua chapter six that every living thing in Jericho was to be put to death and all things that were of value were to be dedicated and given to the Lord's treasury. The point God was trying to make is that everything belongs to Him; He is sovereign and holy and holds absolute total authority over all of creation and He is to be honored with and by everything. Achan's personal sin was more than wanting more stuff. His greater, deeper sin was his blatant discontentment with God. That kind of discontentment surely wasn't going to be fulfilled by living on top of a hole in the ground hiding a lot of stolen valuables. Rather Achan's personal sin of discontentment was a discontentment with God's authority and rule and reign over his life. He “*coveted*” the valuables because he was not satisfied with what God had given him. Living with Achan's discontentment will always cause us to “*covet*” the things of the world. God's Word clearly defines coveting as idolatry - replacing the supremacy and centrality of God with something we think will satisfy. Discontentment is rebellion against the Kingdom of God, the rejection of God's rightful power and position in life, that will cause us to covet things of this world, that ultimately leads to fatal repercussions. We are experiencing this kind of discontentment in our world today.

*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. Joshua 7:24-26.*

There is a severity of God's judgment that comes with our discontentment with God. In refusing to submit to the authority of God and to trust and obey the ways of God - *Achan stepped away from God's promises and into God's judgment.* It's not by coincidence that the root meaning of Achan's name is “*trouble.*” That's why Joshua asks this anguished question, “*Why did you bring trouble on us?*” And then the sad, final sentence, “*The Lord brings trouble (judgement) on you today.*” In the culture of our day we are shocked at the horrific punishment Achan and his family received here for Achan's sin. Why such a severe penalty? Because sin is really, really serious. Try as we might to see God's judgment here as unreasonable and too far reaching, the truth of God's Word speaks otherwise. Romans 6:23 tells us that “*for the wages of sin is death.*” The severity of the judgment is an index to the enormity of sin.

This is why Jesus Christ sacrificed his life on a cross in our place for our sins – so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back into the relationship with God we were created for. Sin is serious business to God, and it should be serious business to us too. The problem is - it's not. You see the problem here is not the punishment Achan received - the problem is we don't see sin to be so serious that it leads to death or that it requires death. And so we try to treat the cancer of sin with vitamins; but God's Word tells us that the cancer of sin requires dramatic, radical surgery with something like - *a cross.* But that's what the Bible tells us. The wages of sin is really death.

There cannot be any ground of neutrality toward sin for us. Our problem is that we don't believe that. We think that we can keep sin under control, limit its influence or our involvement. But we don't realize that in reality we will fall under its control little by little, and it will master us. That's the point of the Achan and Ai story for the nation Israel, and for us today as well. This story tells us that we can't have a temporary relationship with sin, we can't play with it, we can't go just so far and then cut it off, because it will destroy us. *"The wages of sin is death"* - is not so much physical death, as it is spiritual death, a death-like state that sets in our soul when we allow sin to control us - with frustration, anger, anxiety, guilt, impatience, boredom, and misery. These are the results of the sins that we cling to. The bottom line for us is that we cannot allow Achan to live. Israel acted decisively toward sin. God calls us to deal with the sin in our own lives in the same way.

Just as Achan suffered the consequences of refusing to submit to the authority of God, so God's people as a whole were defeated by refusing to obediently trust in the ways of God. In fact our text today states this not so much as a comparison but rather as a cause and effect, in other words saying – *if individuals within the family of God refuse to submit to the authority of God's Word, the family of God as a whole will not obediently trust the ways of God* - and the enemy will defeat us with the smallest of armies. The enemy of our souls is our selfish, sinful nature. Just like Israel, we way too often underestimate the strength of our sinful nature and we way too often overestimate our own strength against sin. Sin is stronger than we are, stronger than all of us put together, and we will lose without a continuous dependence on God.

This is the Christian life. We are at war with the world and with the devil – and with the sin within us. Even for those of us who have surrendered our hearts and lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior – the battle for victory in our own hearts will continue. The apostle Paul speaks of this in Romans 7:22-25: *"For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* We are to be about the business of fighting the battle against sin until we die.

While we have been promised victory in Christ, that victory is conditional on our passionate desire for victory. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus said: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."* The danger we face in our battle against sin is the temptation to stop short of complete victory – backing off, slowing down, settling for less than what God has promised. Hunger and thirst for righteousness must mark our lives. We must never get over fighting against our sin. Until the war is over and God calls us to that glorious place of the long awaited Land of Promise - we are to fight the good fight of faith. We must see the battle through to its conclusion or the battle will be lost. Jesus said: *"The one who endures to the end will be saved"* (Matthew 24:13).

Yesterday's victory does not make us immune to today's defeat. The Bible tells us that the devil is prowling about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour. He knows our hot buttons and the soft spots of our underbellies that at work against us in the weaknesses of our flesh. While the devil only has as much power as we are willing to give him, our sinful nature is more than willing to give him everything he needs to empower us to defeat ourselves. As sinners our natural inclination is to justify our means, rationalize our agendas, vindicate our excuses and excuse our sins. In reality, the battle we all face every day is not so much against the devil and the world as it is against ourselves - and we will defeat ourselves every time our focus is not on God.

But while we all may know this, we do not part with our sin easily. In the writing of his *Confessions* Augustine admitted that as a young immature Christian he often prayed: "O God, give me chastity, but not yet." Preaching and teaching on sin is never a pleasant task; when I do the reality of my own sin becomes even more real. Thanks! It would be easy just to quit fighting and give in to whatever.

But, brothers and sisters, we were not created for sin and defeat; we were created for holiness and victory. Some years back, the devil talked a young couple in a garden into trading the glory of God for the shame of sin. But that was then; this is today. That dog don't hunt here anymore. My Bible tells me in that, *"the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Because we are sinners who live in a fallen world we will often know the agony that comes with defeat. But Jesus said: *"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

Yesterday's victory does not make us immune to today's defeat, - *but in Christ today's defeat can be tomorrow's victory*. Revealed sin should not cause us to hang our heads forever. In Christ, God has not only revealed our sin, He has also destroyed its power. Jesus went to the cross to reveal the depth of the depravity of our sin – and then he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin and cleanse us from sin and heal us from sin --so we might live with God forever! Hear the Word of God from Joshua 7:13 in our text for today: *"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.'"*

The word *"consecrate"* in here means to "sanctify, dedicate, separate, make holy for the purposes of God." Basically *"consecrate"* means to separate yourself from sin and give your heart to God. God is saying to us: "Rise up! Stand up! Move! Separate yourselves from your sin and fill your lives with Me. There are things in the lives of My people that must go. You will not see victory until you have removed them!" As in the words spoken by God in 2 Chronicles 7:13: *"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

In Hawaii, because of the time difference with the continental United States, NFL's Monday Night Football is actually played in the mid-afternoon there, but the local television stations delay the broadcast until 6:30 PM in the evening. Lyle Arakiki is an avid football fan who lives on the islands; so much so that he cannot wait for the evening broadcast. When his favorite teams play, Lyle listens to the game on the radio, which broadcasts it live. Then, because it's his favorite team, he watches it again on television later on. Lyle says, "If I know my team has won the game, it influences how I watch it on television. If my team fumbles the ball or throws an interception, I feel sad, but I know it's not a problem. I think, 'That's too bad, but it's okay. In the end, I know we'll win.'"

In Christ, we win in the end. In Christ we have won the game and that should dramatically influence the way we live our lives. No matter what the score is right now, Jesus rose from the dead. Regardless of how the game seems to be going, we know it will end with victory. But, don't take that for granted. Sin is enemy all around us and inside of us. Sin is deadly serious business. Yes, Romans 6:23 does say: *"The wages of sin is death"* but it also goes on to say *"but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!"* And to that all God's people said: "AMEN!"

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