

The Thrill of Victory, The Agony of Defeat

Joshua 7

Years ago, the opening theme of ABC's Wide World of Sports program had the following familiar line- "The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat." While the announcer said, "The thrill of the victory" there would be an image of someone or a team winning a sports contest and celebrating. The victorious person or team would change regularly from one program to another. When the announcer said, "The agony of defeat," the same image was used again and again. That image was of Vinko Bogataj taking a tragic spill on the ski jump. The first image depicting victory reminds us of Israel after the fall of Jericho. The second image depicting agonizing defeat reminds us of Israel after attacking Ai. It is after a major spiritual victory that Israel is most vulnerable to spiritual failure. Israel's high after Jericho which we looked at a couple weeks ago was soon followed by a very low point in the nation's history after their defeat at Ai. Though it is definitely more enjoyable to study and meditate on the victories of God's people in Scripture, it is vital that we give equal commitment to study and meditate on the failures of God's people so as to learn from their mistakes and not repeat them.

Have you ever made a plan to do something at work, began executing your plan, and then half way through asked yourself, "Maybe I should have checked with my supervisor first?" Have you ever started to do a project at home only to ask yourself in the middle of it, "Maybe I should have checked with mom or dad before I did this?" Have you ever made a plan of action for your life, began executing that plan, and then in the middle of what you were doing asked yourself, "Maybe I should have prayed about this first before going down this path?" Joshua 7 records for us the first of two occasions in the book where Joshua acts first before asking God for guidance as to what he should do. Had he checked with God first, the results might have been very different for Israel. However, he didn't and Israel suffers a humiliating defeat.

The disobedience of one man affects the whole nation (7:1)

The first word of verse one is "but" which signals to us that there will be a sharp contrast between the victory recorded in Joshua 6 and what we read about in Joshua 7. Israel acted unfaithfully with the devoted things. You will remember that all the spoils of war from the fall of Jericho are to be given to God. Only one man, Achan, decides to keep some of the spoils for himself. Even though it was Achan who disobeyed, the entire nation is held accountable. Instead of Israel enjoying God's presence helping them on to victory over the Canaanites, God's anger burns against them. Just as sure victory was Israel's when God was with them, sure defeat is Israel's when God is angry with them.

The defeat of Israel (7:2-5)

Israel's spies are self-confident, thinking they can handle this battle on their own (2-3)

The spies check out Ai and bring back their report and recommendations. There are only a few men there. From the spies perspective, the whole army doesn't need to be sent Ai. After all, what's the point in making all of the people weary when two or three thousand men should do? In other words, they conclude, "We can handle this one."

What a short memory we human beings have. Israel didn't take Jericho, God did! The battle with Ai is God's battle too, but Israel has forgotten.

Joshua sends troops into battle before checking with his Commander (4a)

Joshua forgets what he learned just before Jericho in his up close encounter with the Commander of God's army. God is the Commander in Chief over Israel, but Joshua acts as if he is. Joshua sends in troops without first checking in with and confirming his plans with God. Had Joshua stopped to talk to God first, he would have been made aware of the problem of disobedience and dealt with it before attacking Ai. Had Joshua stopped to talk to God first, he would have followed God's plan of attack as opposed to following the spies recommendation based on what they saw. Had Joshua humbled himself and talked to God before the battle, the situation would have been very different for Israel after the battle.

Achan fails to obey God's orders, resulting in a disheartening defeat for Israel (4b-5)

The men of Ai route Israel's forces. Israel marches up the hill to attack Ai and soon retreats down that same hill with the men from Ai in hot pursuit. 36 men from Israel are killed. As opposed to the hearts of the Canaanites melting in fear, it is the hearts of God's people that are melting and becoming like water.

Three failures lead to Israel's defeat:

We struggle with the same failures.

The failure to obey

We know what God wants us to do, but we do something else like Achan.

The failure of self-confidence

We have some success. Because of our success, we start to feel self-confident, which so easily leads to our presumption. We presume based on past victories that we can face the next challenges on our own. This was the mistake of the spies.

When we are self-confident instead of being God-confident, we essentially tell God, “I don’t need you right now, I can handle this challenge on my own without you.” When we are this way, Proverbs 16:18 warns us what will happen next, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

The failure to check with God before making and executing plans

Another way to describe this third failure is walking by sight instead of walking by faith. We jump ahead acting on our “brilliant plans” based upon what we can see without first consulting with God so as to express and demonstrate our trust in Him to lead us. This was of course Joshua’s mistake. God help us to avoid all three of these failures.

The lament of Joshua (7:6-9)

Israel’s leader who in chapter 6 was magnified is found in chapter seven mortified. Joshua has torn his clothes, sprinkled dust on his head, and fallen face down to the ground to express His lament to God.

Joshua blames God for what happened (7a)

“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?” Joshua’s response here sounds much like that of the unbelieving Jews of the previous generation when they found themselves in a tough situation that demanded faith. He essentially says, “God, this is your fault.”

He expresses regret for having followed God across the Jordan in the first place (7b)

“If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan.”

Warren Wiersbe writes about Joshua’s response here, “When you walk by faith, you will claim all that God has for you, but unbelief is always content to settle for something less than God’s best.”

Joshua is willing to settle for less as opposed to trusting God so as to receive so much more. At this point in time, Joshua fails to believe everything God has promised him. When we act in the flesh, when we self-confidently do things by our own best effort instead of acting in faith and trusting God, things can get pretty difficult and the things we say on such occasions can be quite ugly.

Joshua starts with the assumption that what has happened is God’s fault. Instead, he should have started his talk with God with the assumption that something is wrong with Israel and He is working to get their attention.

How do we respond when things in our life go haywire? Do we trust God and look for the lessons He desires to teach us? Or Do we start casting blame on and pointing fingers at God?

He recognizes God's name is at stake (8-9)

Joshua is right in His concern for God's name. If God's people are defeated, God's reputation would be damaged. It is a good thing for Joshua to be concerned that this not happen.

Joshua is wrong in his assumption that God would allow His reputation to be damaged in the way Joshua fears. There is no danger of the name of God's people being wiped out from the face of the earth; thereby damaging the great name or reputation of God. Such an assumption again demonstrates a lack of faith in all of the promises that God made to His people.

God's correction of Joshua (7:10-13)

God directs Joshua to stop lamenting his losses, get up off his face, and deal with the cause

God points out to Israel that the reason they suffered defeat is their disobedience

The problem is sin in the camp, not God. Was God unable to defeat the enemy? Joshua knew better. Did God deliberately lead Israel out into battle to be killed and suffer a humiliating defeat? Joshua should have known better than that. Did God change His mind about His promise to give Israel the land? Certainly not—God can't go back on His promises. The problem isn't God, but Israel's sin.

The LORD accumulates many verbs in describing how Israel is the cause of the disaster, not Him—Israel sinned, Israel violated God's covenant, Israel took some of the devoted things, Israel stole from God, Israel lied by acting obedient when they weren't, and Israel put the devoted things with their own possessions.

The Israelites were unable to stand against their enemies and were forced to run because they had disobeyed and been made liable to destruction. God would not be with the Israelites anymore, they would not again enjoy victory until they obeyed Him by destroying that which was devoted to destruction among them.

Someone might object, "Achan sinned. So why does God make all of Israel share the blame and the consequences of what he did?" Here we have a sobering reminder--Our sin does not only affect us personally. It negatively affects all those around us. Because of how defiant, deliberate sin affects God's people, it is not a personal matter that is nobody else's business. The corporate body of God's people is held responsible for dealing with it in their ranks.

We will suffer defeat when we deliberately disobey ourselves or tolerate sin in our midst

We will enjoy God's blessings only when we obey His revealed will

Just as the nation had been sanctified in preparation for crossing the Jordan, they again need to consecrate themselves in preparation for the process by which God will expose the guilty man in their midst.

The sinner is identified (7:14-18)

Achan thought no one would see Him. He hid, thinking he could get away with sin. However, as is always the case, God saw all that Achan did. God's approach towards indentifying the guilty party is methodical. First, He singles out the tribe of Judah, then the family of the Zerahites, then the household of Zabdi, and finally the culprit, Achan. The accusing finger of God gets closer and closer and instead of coming out and confessing his sin, Achan remains in hiding till he can hide no longer.

The confession of Achan (7:19-23)

Joshua calls for Achan to give God glory and praise

Achan should have done this by acknowledging God's right to rule and obeying Him

Instead, God receives glory and praise in Achan's case by dealing with his sin

Achan acknowledges his sin and the process that got him there

He saw, He coveted, He took, He hid.

Does this progression into sin sound familiar?

Genesis 3:6-8 (NIV)- "When the woman **saw** that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also **desirable** for gaining wisdom, she **took** some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they **hid** from the LORD God among the trees of the garden."

He saw

The progression into sin always begins with sight. We see something, either with our physical eyes or in our mind's eye that God forbids. At this point, we must deal with the problem if we are serious about having victory. Many times, we aren't responsible for the first look. Something just pops in front of us to tempt us. While in this case we aren't responsible for the first look, we are responsible if we choose to linger there. Instead of giving a second look, let's look to the Word of God for help and trust Him to help us look away.

He coveted

The second stage into sin is desire. If we look at that which is forbidden for too long, it will make its way into our heart and we will begin to covet. At this point, our attitude has become sinful.

Avoiding the act of sin is very hard to do when we get to this point. If this morning we find ourselves desiring something God has forbidden, if our attitude is sinful, let's confess our sin now. Let's ask God to change our desire away from what is forbidden and towards Him and His will for our life. Let's faithfully read His love letter to us so as to cultivate our love and desire for Him.

He took

David Dawson writes, "At this stage the act of sin is committed. Sin never just happens spontaneously. Sometime in the past it has been entertained in the mind and heart, and when the opportunity presents itself, the act is almost inevitable. At this point, victory has surrendered to defeat. " The need here is to confess one's sin in order that fellowship with God can be restored. Sadly, so often, instead of confessing our sin, we do what Achan did and try to hide.

He hid

Sin will cause us to want to run away from God in fear and shame. Just as my young children don't want to look in my eyes when they have done something wrong, we don't want to face God because of what we have done and often try to seek cover and hide.

Achan is designated as the guilty party, is forced to confess his sin, and the devoted things that belonged to God are found hidden in his tent where he said they would be.

The judgment (7:24-26)

God's judgment of Achan is severe. He, his entire family, all his possessions, and the things he kept for himself from the spoils of Jericho are all destroyed. Achan's disobedience brought "trouble" (Heb. "Achor") on all Israel, therefore God brought "trouble" on him, and Achan was buried in the Valley of Trouble.

At this point, some might raise the question, "Why is the punishment described here so severe?" Consider first the words of warning that Achan and all Israel had received not to take the devoted things in Joshua 6:18-19—"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. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury." God warned Achan that the penalty for disobedience would be destruction and God enforced that penalty. God is just as faithful in carrying out the judgments He warns us of as He is in carrying out the blessings He promises us. We are wise to take God's warnings seriously.

Another thing to remember when grappling with the severity of God's judgment of Achan is the fact that he committed a deliberate and serious sin at a critical point in Israel's history. When God is about to start something new with His people, He will sometimes reveal His wrath against sin in a dramatic, severe way.

God established only one condition for blessing Israel—destroy every living thing and bring the treasures to His storehouse. God defeated Jericho and therefore He deserves all of the spoils of the battle. God communicates clearly to Israel—the battle is His. While He will allow later spoils of the battle to go to His people—He wants them to realize that He is the One who will give them victory over the Canaanites.

In response to God's simple, clear instructions, Achan deliberately, defiantly disobeys God by taking for himself what belongs to Him and lying by acting as if he has obeyed when he hasn't. As the result, God judges him through instant destruction.

Achan's judgment reminds me of another case of instant death that occurred in the New Testament. You will remember in Acts 5 where Ananias and Sapphira are killed by God for lying to the Holy Spirit claiming they had given all the proceeds of a recent sale of their property when they had kept some back for themselves. They deliberately, defiantly disobeyed by lying. In both of these cases, God is launching a new age in the life of His people. In Joshua, Israel is just getting started in a previously pagan land. In Acts, the church is just getting started. In both of these instances, deliberate, defiant sin is committed. In both cases, the sin, if not dealt with would work to diminish God's name and reputation amongst His people. In both cases, the sin, if not dealt with, would work to minimize in others their concept of God's holiness, His authority, and the need to submit to Him. Given that God is starting something new with His people in both cases, it is necessary that the defiant sin be stopped cold, and that the guilty parties be judged severely to make them an example so others know not to go down the same path.

Achan's actions were in defiance of God's instructions and in direct contradiction to the lesson He was teaching His people—i.e. The battle is His. Achan is made an example and given severe judgment so as to keep Israel from going down a self-confident path—to remind them that if they are to succeed, they must acknowledge God's role and submit to His terms.

Not only is Achan destroyed, but so is the rest of his family. This begs the question, "Why did his family have to die too?" The text does not tell us, but we know from Deuteronomy 24:16 that innocent family members were not punished under the law for the sins of their relatives. It is apparent that Achan's family members were accomplices who aided him and apparently did nothing to discourage or stop him.

I think it is important to point out at this point what Achan and all his family died for. He died for 200 shekels of silver. That is about 5 lbs. In today's market, that is about \$1445 worth of silver. He died for a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels. That is about 1 ¼ lbs. In today's market, that is about \$23,000 worth of gold. He died for a beautiful rob from Babylon. It is impossible for us to know how much that was worth. Regardless, dying for around \$25000 is not worth it. We have here an important reminder about sin.

Sin always costs us dearly and delivers far less than we expected it would.

Sin has a diminishing factor to it. It always gives it's best in the beginning. It never gets better after that ... it only gets worse. [Mark Aulson]

Our disobedience to God never satisfies or produces what we expect

Our disobedience only works to ruin and destroy

We might not die instantly like Achan for sins we commit, but nevertheless, sin will always lead to some measure of ruin or destruction in our lives.

After Achan and his family are destroyed, a heap of large stones was piled over Achan. Just as a pile of stones was set up as a memorial at Gilgal to remind the people of Israel what God had done for them in the crossing of the Jordan, another memorial is established here. The heap of stones in the valley of Achor would serve to remind God's people to obey His word and of the destructive consequences of sin.

What lessons can we learn from this account?

Let's be careful when we are victorious recognizing these can be our most vulnerable times spiritually

Let's trust God with everything and avoid thinking we can handle anything without Him

Let's check with God first in prayer before each and every new challenge

Let's obey God's revealed will as opposed to disobeying it

Let's recognize the affects of deliberate sin and not tolerate it in our midst

Let's not deceive ourselves into thinking we can sin and get away with it-God sees-we can't hide from Him

Whatever stage we might find ourselves on in the progression of sin, let's get off that stage

Let's trust God to help us not to sin and confess the sins we do commit so as to experience the cleansing, forgiveness, and restored fellowship that have been made available to us by the shed blood of Jesus Christ.