

The battle Joshua never fought

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Date: 03 March 2019

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[0 : 00] The reading today comes from Joshua 7, which can be found on page 219 of the Church Bible. That's Joshua 7 on page 219.

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-Avon, 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 three thousand men went up there from the people. And they fled before the men of Ai.

[1 : 08] And the men of Ai killed about thirty-six of the men, and chased them before the gate as far as Eberim, 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 had turned their back 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?

[2 : 19] 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 have taken 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.

[3 : 31] 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 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 were 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. And then Joshua said to Achan, My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him.

[4 : 39] 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 Shinnah and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing 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. 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 Achan. And Joshua said, Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today.

[6 : 03] And all Israel stoned him with stones, and they burned 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 that place is called the Valley of Achan.

Good morning, everyone. Do take a seat. And I think you'll find it a help. If you would turn back to page 219, where you'll find Joshua 7.

And we're going to be looking at the second part of our two-week series in Joshua chapter 6 and 7 this morning. But before we do that, let me lead us in prayer.

Some words from 1 Corinthians chapter 10, where Paul is talking about the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament. He tells us this. He says, Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come.

[7 : 13] Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall. We thank you so much, our Heavenly Father, that everything that was written in the Old Testament was written down for our instruction.

And we pray, therefore, this morning, as we look at this uncomfortable passage together, that you would help us to be those who take heed, lest we fall.

Please help us to listen to the warning of this passage and to understand more of your holiness, more of our sin. And therefore, more of the wonder of your salvation.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, one of the poignant things about travelling around Britain is that wherever you go, you find war memorials.

Whether it's the Cenotaph in London, or inside a churchyard, or a memorial in a small village, every place in our country seems to have a monument to remember those who died in war.

[8 : 21] And it's poignant, because the sheer number of names on these memorials reminds us that the whole male population of certain villages was wiped out during the World Wars. And it's good for us, I guess, to stop and read those names and pledge to preserve the freedoms for which they died.

You see, monuments are designed to help us remember and learn from the past. And they're nothing new. Because it's very interesting, I think, that in the opening chapters of Joshua, we're told about two monuments that the people of Israel erect.

And they're similar in form. I think that's something we're supposed to notice. So first of all, we haven't looked at it, but back in chapter 4, after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan and entered the land, Joshua had set up 12 stones in Gilgal as a perpetual reminder of how God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the land.

Perhaps just flick back with me to the end of chapter 4, page 217. And let me read from verse 20. Joshua 4.20. We're told, And those 12 stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal.

And he said to the people of Israel, When your children ask their fathers in times to come, what do these stones mean? Then you shall let your children know, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.

[9 : 48] For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over. So the stones at Gilgal were a bit like a war memorial in this country.

They were erected to remind Israel of how God had saved them. And they were to tell their children their meaning, just as we might teach our children about the war when we pass a war memorial today.

And like Israel, we too need to remember God's rescue at the time of the Exodus. Because the experience of Israel in the Old Testament is a scale model of what God has done for Christians. How he's rescued us from slavery to sin so we can one day enter the promised land of heaven. It's wonderful news that we must constantly remind ourselves of.

But the Christian message is double-edged. Because in Joshua 7, we get a second monument of stones. And this monument reminds us that we need to remember not only God's salvation, but also his judgment.

[10:58] Look with me at the end of Joshua 7 and verse 25, near the end of our passage this morning. Joshua 7 and verse 25. Halfway through that verse.

And all Israel stoned Achan 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.

That remains to this day. You see, the second heap of stones was still there many years later when the book of Joshua was written. And presumably, it was there for the same reason the heap of stones in Joshua 4 had been preserved.

So that people would see it and remember what God had done. Remembering this time not his mercy, but his anger. These stones at the end of Joshua 7 are a warning for us.

And if we're to have a balanced and biblical view of who God is and are to live rightly in his world, we need to remember both sets of stones, both monuments.

[12:11] So let's dive into this very disturbing passage and see exactly what it is God wanted the Israelites and us to remember. We're going to notice two things. Together you'll see the headings on the handout.

Here's the first. The seriousness of sin. The seriousness of sin. I wonder how you think of God, what you think he's like, surveys show that roughly 90% of people in this country still believe in God and over half the country on the census claim to believe in the Christian God.

And yet, if we're honest, even though they may believe in him, many of those people, and indeed we ourselves too often, ignore him much of the time. And I think one of the reasons is because we have a rather domesticated view of God, seeing him more like a pussycat than a lion, perhaps. We think he's like a kindly uncle who will pander to our every whim and just turn a blind eye to our faults. We think he's a soft touch. But that's not the God of the Bible because the one true God is perfectly holy.

We were just singing about that, weren't we? And cannot tolerate sin. We saw that last week in Joshua 6, the previous chapter. We saw the horrific slaughter by which God himself judged the people of Jericho when he ordered the Israelites to destroy everyone and everything in the city.

[13:44] So God is no soft touch. Do you remember those words of Mr. Tumnus to Lucy in the Narnia Chronicles? He's not a tame lion, said Mr. Tumnus.

No, but he is good, said Lucy in reply. He's not a tame lion. The words were, of course, used to describe Aslan, the Jesus figure in the Narnia stories.

And they remind us God is no soft touch and yet he is good. The judgment he executes is just. He cannot tolerate sin and must punish it.

And we see that to be true again this morning in Joshua 7. This time, not in the judgment of pagan Jericho, but much more surprisingly in that experience by Israel, God's own people.

You see, Joshua 7 forms a pair with Joshua 6 and together they teach us that God doesn't show favoritism. The rightful anger God unleashes against Jericho in chapter 6 is also unleashed towards Israel in chapter 7.

[14:52] Being a member of God's people outwardly, being baptized or confirmed, going along to Grace Church doesn't help us if we're not actually seeking to put God first.

So just as one Gentile woman and her family are spared in chapter 6, so one Israelite and his family suffer judgment in chapter 7. Again, we see that the distinctions in these chapters aren't ethnic but concern disobedience to the word of God.

Rahab obeyed and was saved. Achan disobeyed and his churchgoing didn't help him one bit. And that's because sin is serious.

As a preacher, there's a temptation to make all kinds of excuses and caveats for the severity of God's judgment here. But the facts are clear. This guy, Achan, disobeyed God's word and his punishment was a death sentence.

Let's remind ourselves of what happened. Chapter 6 ends on a real high. But tellingly, chapter 7 begins with the word but. But.

[16:06] A great triumph is followed by a great fall. And in passing, I think there's a lesson for us there. Because so often we're at our most spiritually vulnerable just after a great triumph.

We've been involved in some area of Christian service or we've led a good Bible study or we pat ourselves on the back for talking to a friend about Jesus or inviting him along to a talk and pride comes before a fall.

Before we know it, we've fallen into some kind of sin. The Old Testament nation of Israel is a picture of the Christian church in the New Testament and the story of church history is of how great progress is so often spoiled by significant setbacks often caused by some kind of sin or division within the church.

So we must be on our guard. Anyway, in verse 2 Joshua prepares for battle number 2 and on paper it looks like a repeat of the first battle, the battle that never was.

Once again, spies are sent out as they were prior to Jericho and as readers we expect to hear of further triumph but this time it's a disaster.

[17:20] Have a look down with me at verse 4. 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 36 of their men and chased them before the gate as far as Sheberim and struck them at the descent and the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

The same description used of the people of Jericho earlier in the book. So Israel is routed and 36 men die.

The victor becomes like the vanquished and Joshua who are verses 17 and 18 of chapter 6 which we looked at last week.

Do you remember God's warning there? Chapter 6 verse 17. The city, that's Jericho, and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction, the people were told.

Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers whom we sent. 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.

[19:07] The Israelites were clearly warned that if they didn't destroy everything and everyone in Jericho they too would be destroyed. And if one person took the devoted things, what belonged to the people of Jericho, well then all Israel would suffer.

You see, Israel weren't to destroy Jericho for the sake of their own gain in the way that we read about so often in world conflicts today where opposing sides loot each other's property. No, as we saw last week, their conquest wasn't to be about their gain so much as an expression of God's judgment.

And that judgment meant everything had to be destroyed. Israel weren't to take any of Jericho's possessions. But Achan didn't listen.

Look at his confession in verse 21 of chapter 7. He tells Joshua, When I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them.

And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath. Now we're supposed to notice the parallels here with the last time God's people had found themselves in God's special place.

[20:32] Not the promised land of Canaan, but way back in the Garden of Eden. Because just as remember in Eden, Eve also saw the fruit and took it.

Here Achan saw these attractive looking items and took them. both of them then sought to hide their crime. And just as Eve believed Satan's lie, you will not surely die.

Achan also must have thought God wouldn't know or wouldn't mind if he just took one or two things from Jericho. After all, there were only a few small items. But he was wrong.

God was angry. In fact, we're told he burned with anger against the whole people. Look at verse 12. Therefore, because of Achan's sin, the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies.

They turn their backs before their enemies because they have become devoted for destruction. They have become devoted for destruction. God was angry because the people he rescued had become like the people of Jericho.

[21 : 44] They too now deserved to be destroyed. And they were no better than Adam and Eve. That's the point of the repeated language. Yes, they were now finally in the promised land, but straight away, even in the land, we see that Genesis 3 hasn't yet been reversed because that fundamental problem of sin still remains.

Within a couple of chapters of entering the land, we're shown this isn't going to be the final solution to humankind's problems. Someone other than Joshua will be needed for that.

Sin still needed dealing with. You see, sin is very serious.

It carries a death sentence. It makes God rightfully angry. And the hard truth is that you and I are no better than Achan.

Each of us disobey God's word in different ways day after day. The frightening thing about Joshua 7, I think, is it teaches us that God sees everything. I think that's the reason we get the identity parade of verses 14 to 18 with a dramatic description of how God whittles down the suspects until he correctly picks out the guilty man from among them.

[23 : 03] No one else knew of Achan's sin. But God sees all our thoughts and actions and words, even the private ones.

He knows about them just as he knew about Achan. And Jesus teaches us that one day these things will all be brought to light. Do you remember his words in Matthew 10? There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known.

Do you find that a frightening prospect? I do. God saw Achan's sin and he sees ours and it's serious. Now I don't think that means we're to expect this kind of judgment to be common in our own day.

We don't live in a theocracy, a nation directly under God's rule where his judgment is issued immediately. Although let's not forget that in Acts chapter 5 we meet the New Testament, Achan's, because there the growth and success of the early church is suddenly halted by the age old problem of sin.

The sin of two people called Ananias and Sapphira who lie to the apostles and are struck down dead as a result. But I think that event is similar to this one in Joshua 7.

[24 : 21] Both incidents are warnings or foreshadowings of the future judgment. Reminders that we're all by nature under a death sentence because of our sin.

That God's people are not immune from sin and its effects and that sin is very damaging amongst his people so cannot be allowed to go unchecked. We'll see later that there's hope, forgiveness on offer, but we must first recognize the serious consequences of sin.

sin. And the application must be for us to root it out as Israel have to do here. We must destroy sin from our lives.

You see, what was it Achan was holding on to? He was holding on to some of the devoted things, things associated with wicked Jericho, a city that displeased God. He wouldn't let go of things God wanted to judge.

And I guess we're like Achan when we hold on to the sinful things of this world, things that are under God's judgment, the values or behavior that characterize those who don't know God.

[25 : 30] We're told to put to death worldliness and yet many of us have our pet sins which we know to be wrong but hide away in our tents, as it were. We fail to cut sin out of our lives, thinking a little sin doesn't matter.

And Joshua 7 warns us that we can't willfully hold on to a little bit of Jericho, a little bit of the world, and at the same time claim to be a part of God's people.

I don't know, maybe there's an area in our lives where we're being dishonest, financially or professionally perhaps. Or maybe like Achan, it's lying and coveting that we tolerate.

They're so commonplace in our world now that we so easily see them as trivial. Or it could be a sinful relationship we're persisting with, or sexual sin. Or it could be something corporate we need to root out of the church family, or our growth group, or prayer triplet.

Joshua 7 is a very corporate chapter. Perhaps pride, or grumbling, or gossip that's taken hold. And the warning is if we let deceit, or materialism, or lust, or pride stay in our tent, we'll meet a worse fate than Achan one day.

[26 : 45] So let's be ruthless with our sin, and take drastic action to root it out, to kill it before it kills us.

As is often said, the sin that takes you to hell isn't the one you're fighting, but the one you've stopped fighting. What radical action do we need to take to put an end to sin in our lives, I wonder? Will we do that this week? So let's not forget the seriousness of sin. Which leads us on to our other heading this morning, more briefly.

And sorry, apologies that it's different from that on the handouts, but our second heading is the removal of sin. The removal of sin. In Hebrew writing, very often the author places his main point in the middle of a sandwich.

And Joshua 7 is a good example. the chapter is bookended, sandwiched by references to God's anger, if you have a look. Burning against Israel in verse 1 at the beginning, and then being turned away in verse 26 at the end.

[27 : 55] And the middle verse at the heart of the sandwich forms the focal point of the chapter. Have a look with me at the second half of verse 12, which comes in the middle in the Hebrew. group. God says, I will be with you no more unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.

You see, the effect of Achan's sin was that God would no longer be with his people, not until they removed the sin from their midst. One of the puzzles of Joshua 7 for the modern reader is that all Israel seemed to be held responsible for Achan's sin.

In verse 1, we're told the people of Israel broke faith. And in verse 11, Israel has sinned. Now, there may be hints here that Israel as a whole were getting slacked spiritually after their victory in Jericho. One or two things in the text perhaps hint of that. But the Bible also seems to affirm a corporate dimension to God's people. We're responsible for one another. We're a family.

So one person's sin affects all of us. You see that playing out, don't you, when the whole church is brought into disrepute because of a high profile scandal involving one Christian. Well, I've heard people talking about a particular church having a bad reputation because of something one member of the congregation once said.

[29 : 19] From God's perspective, when Achan sinned, Israel sinned. I guess we use that kind of language ourselves. We say Germany went to war in 1914, even though it was really their leader, Kaiser Wilhelm, who did so, or that Britain won 10,000 meter Olympic gold in 2016, even though it was only Mo Farah who ran the race.

One person's actions can stand for and represent a whole people's. And I think we Christians in the West would do well to remember this corporate dimension to God's people.

Because we can be so individualistic that we neglect our responsibility to one another, and too quickly forget we're partly responsible for how each other's doing in our Christian lives.

Remember those words in Hebrews 3, see to it brothers that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. We all have a responsibility to one another so that if one of us falls, it will affect us all.

And that means that one of the most loving things we can do with one another is to be willing to gently challenge one another where necessary so sin isn't able to harden our hearts.

[30 : 38] We're back to Joshua 7 and verse 12. Because the frightening thing here is that God threatens to remove his presence from his people unless they remove the sin from their midst.

And that warning wasn't just for the Old Testament people of God. In his letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus warns the churches he'll remove his lampstand from them if they don't repent, his lampstand being a symbol of his presence with them.

He tells the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira that if they don't expel from among them those responsible for false teaching and sin, he'll remove his presence from them. I'm sure that's what's happened to countless churches up and down our land which are dying because Jesus is no longer present, because sin and false teaching were tolerated and even sometimes celebrated rather than removed.

And it's Joshua 7, 12 all over again isn't it? God removes his presence if sin is allowed to go unchecked. I think this chapter in a sense explains and points forward to the New Testament's teaching about church discipline, that if someone won't repent of flagrant sin, the New Testament actually says they must be removed from the life of the church, at least for a time, as Achan had to be removed from Israel because otherwise their sin will spread.

Think about Achan. If God had turned a blind eye, he and others would have thought that they could get away with doing whatever they wanted. And such is the human attraction to sin that it would quickly have spread.

[32 : 19] But in his love, God rooted out the sin before it could contaminate others. God would have to be to associate with sexually immoral people, referring to those within the church, and to expel the wicked man from among you.

When a culture of grumbling or gossip or a lack of respect for the leadership begins to spread in the church, it can be disastrous. Think about what happened to the generation before Joshua, earlier in Israel's history.

And God couldn't allow the same thing to happen again. And we also must nip it in the butt while there's still time. So this monument that's set up at the end of Joshua 7 is designed to be a sobering warning.

Because it reminds us that sin is very serious and will have terrible effects on ourselves and our churches if left unchecked. We must root it out of our own hearts and our fellowships.

But I want to finish with the good news of the Christian gospel. Because most war memorials actually bear witness to another memorial, to a greater sacrifice, even than that of those who have given their lives in war.

[33 : 41] Because on pretty much every war memorial in this country can be found a cross. And the cross reminds us that Jesus too suffered a death sentence. Like Achan, he was killed by his own people.

And like Achan, God's anger at sin was turned away when he died. But unlike Achan, Jesus didn't deserve to die.

He was sinless. And yet Jesus died so that Achan's might be spared. So people like you and me might escape punishment. Joshua 7 shows us what we deserve, that we have no claim to enter the land or be part of the land ourselves.

But the cross means we can be spared that fate if we turn from sin, because Jesus himself removed our sin by bearing it upon himself. He has already died our death that we might be forgiven.

And the stone rolled away from his empty tomb testifies to his triumph over death, a stone that is a far greater monument than the stones at Gilgal and the Valley of Achor.

[34 : 51] It's the wonderful news that we have to share with those around us at the beginning of this Real Lives Week. In fact, I guess the cross is a bit like both of the memorials in Joshua, because it reminds us at the same time of both the seriousness of sin, as we remember sin cost not only Achan but also Jesus his life.

And yet it also assures us that we can be rescued from sin and so be a part of the promised land of heaven. Jesus has dealt with the age-old problem of sin that still remained even after the people entered the land.

The fire of God's just judgment has already been kindled against his innocent son, and so mercy can be ours. Let's thank God for and remember that wonderful truth.

Shall I lead us in prayer? Then the Lord turned from his burning anger.

Our Father, I guess all of us find this passage chilling and uncomfortable and disturbing. We know that in so many ways there is so much of Achan in us and that we deserve to face your burning anger.

[36 : 15] We pray therefore that you would help us not to take sin lightly, that we would root it out from our own hearts and from our fellowship where we need to do that in the right way. But above all this morning, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that when he willingly chose to die, you turned from your burning anger against us because he suffered the fate in our place.

And we pray that just as the people of Israel were to remember these events, that you would help us this week to remember that great victory of the Lord Jesus, to be grateful for it, and therefore to seek lives that are devoted to the Lord Jesus in response.

And we ask it for his namesake. Amen.