

This lesson shows how sin can delay and even prevent God from blessing His people despite His promises. The LORD had promised to give Israel victory over their enemies in Canaan and yet sin caused Israel to be easily defeated by an inferior opponent. If we want God to be with us and bless us then we must endeavor to live lives pleasing to Him because God cannot and will not bless sin.

1 But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel.

“But the children of Israel committed a trespass [an unfaithful or treacherous act] in the accursed [devoted; banned] thing” – The LORD had just given Israel a miraculous and total victory over Jericho and no doubt the people were feeling pretty confident in the aftermath. However, the children of Israel had violated the LORD’s ban placed on the spoils of Jericho. Jericho was a sort of “firstfruits” of the cities that Israel would conquer in Canaan and as such it was to be given to the LORD. Yet someone had taken from that which was reserved for the LORD.

“for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing” – Everything in Jericho had been banned for personal use because it was devoted to the LORD, but one man, Achan, had taken something for himself. He literally stole from the LORD. The writer identifies the man here but Joshua and the people do not know the guilty party until v. 18.

“and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel” – One man committed the trespass but it caused the LORD to become angry with the entire nation. He could not bless them while there was sin among them. We may think our sin affects no one but ourselves, but it could be preventing the LORD from blessing our family, our church, our city, or our nation. Sin and its consequences are serious.

2 And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth-aven, on the east side of Beth-el, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai.

Ai was some 15 miles away from Jericho and, since it was the next target in the conquest of Canaan, Joshua sends spies to there to determine the strength of the enemy. There was nothing inherently wrong with Joshua sending these men since he had done the same with Jericho (Joshua 2:1).

3 And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few.

When the men returned, they reported to Joshua their military assessment of Ai. Since it was a small city (a population around 12,000 according to Joshua 8:25) the spies believed that only 2 or 3 thousand men would be needed to defeat it - no need to send their entire army. However, their assessment was based on human understanding and the assumption that their victory depended on the size of the force sent against Ai. We have no record that either Joshua or these men consulted the LORD on how they should proceed against Ai. Joshua made his decision on how to proceed based on the report of these men and apparently did not consult the LORD. Had he done so, the LORD would have no doubt notified him that there was a problem.

4 So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. 5 And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.

“So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai” – Joshua did not consult the LORD and so he did not know that the LORD would not be with them. He decided to send the largest number recommended by the spies (presumably to insure victory) but instead of victory, Israel suffered an embarrassing defeat.

“And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men” – Achan’s sin cost the lives of 36 men. The consequences of our sin go beyond just ourselves. Those that claim that their sin is not hurting anyone but themselves are sorely mistaken.

“for they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim [the breaches], and smote them in the going down [descent; slope]” – Israel’s attack was turned back at the gate of the city because the men of Ai chased Israel from the gate all the way to “Shebarim.” This location is unknown and commentators are uncertain if the Hebrew word is a proper name or merely a description. Evidently the path from the gate to Shebarim led down a slope and the 36 men were slain during Israel’s flight down this slope.

“wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water” – Where before they were confident enough in their own military strength that they thought 3,000 men would be adequate to gain victory over the city of Ai, the pendulum had swung the other way so that this humiliating defeat had caused them to lose all their confidence.

6 And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads.

“And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide” – Joshua is obviously quite taken aback by the news of the humiliating defeat. In an expression of grief, he tears his clothes and throws himself upon the ground in front of the ark for the remainder of the day. He doesn’t understand why the LORD would abandon them after giving such a glorious victory over Jericho.

“he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads” – Joshua is joined by the elders, who also exhibit the classic expressions of grief.

Verses 7-19: Joshua prays in vs. 7-9, seemingly blaming the LORD for abandoning them and putting them into a precarious situation. The nations of Canaan would hear of this defeat and gain enough courage to join forces to surround and destroy Israel. The LORD rejects this prayer and commands Joshua to stand and take care of the actual problem. Someone in Israel had stolen the “accursed” (devoted, banned) spoils of Jericho by acting deceitfully and hiding it among their belongings. Israel would not be able to have victory over their enemies until this sin had been dealt with and so the LORD gives Joshua instructions on how to identify the guilty party. The next morning Joshua follows the LORD’s instructions to locate the guilty man by narrowing the people down by tribe, then by family, then by household, and finally by man. Achan is identified and Joshua urges him to confess.

20 And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: 21 When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they *are* hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it.

“And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done” – Achan admits that he has sinned against the LORD and begins to describe what he has done.

“When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment” – This was apparently a beautiful and valuable garment that had come from Babylon or was inspired by Babylonian religions. Some commentators suggest that it may have been used for idolatrous worship. In fact, some believe that Achan may have found these items in a pagan temple in Jericho.

“and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight” – A shekel is estimated to be approximately a half-ounce, therefore 200 shekels of silver would be about 100 ounces and 50 shekels of gold would be about 25 ounces. At today’s prices the silver and gold would be worth over \$43,000, not counting the value of the Babylonian garment.

“then I coveted [desired] them, and took them” – The progression from temptation to sin continues. First he saw these things among the spoils, he desired them, and then he took them. **James 1:14-15** “*But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*”

“and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it” – Achan was not able to enjoy the things he had taken. He had buried them in his tent believing that he would have opportunity to enjoy them later.

22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran unto the tent; and, behold, *it was* hid in his tent, and the silver under it. 23 And they took them out of the midst of the tent, and brought them unto Joshua, and unto all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD.

Joshua sent men to retrieve the items from Achan’s tent. Achan had hidden them, thinking his sin was secret. But God had seen it and now Achan’s sin was laid out so that all could see. **Psa. 90:8** “*Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.*” **Psa. 139:11** “*If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.*”

24 And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor.

“And Joshua, and all Israel with him” – Joshua and all Israel were in complete agreement in obeying the LORD in dealing with Achan’s sin. His sin had cost the lives of 36 innocent men and the time had come to purge the sin from Israel.

“took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold” – They brought not only Achan but also the objects of his sin. The silver and gold were originally intended to be placed in the treasury of the LORD (Josh. 6:19) but now they had become tainted by Achan’s sin.

“and his sons, and his daughters” – It may seem unjust to include Achan’s family in the punishment but it’s likely that they were accomplices in hiding Achan’s sin. Achan’s wife is not mentioned, implying that she was no longer alive.

“and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had” – The purging of sin from Israel had to be complete. No one was to benefit from Achan’s sin by inheriting his possessions after he died.

“and they brought them unto the valley of Achor [trouble]” – The valley of Achor was chosen as the location where they would deal with Achan’s sin. The valley was likely given this name after this event (v. 26). The name “Achan” means “troubler” and the name “Achor” means “trouble.”

25 And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones.

“And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day” – Sin always causes trouble, sometimes immediately, sometimes later on. Joshua asks rhetorically why Achan (the “troubler”) had caused trouble for Israel and states that the LORD was about repay Achan with trouble on account of his sin and the trouble he had caused Israel.

“And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones” – Israel executes Achan, his family and all his possessions and then burned the remains afterward. They raised a heap of stones over his remains (v. 26) likely to serve as a reminder to Israel of the costs of sin. Thus the LORD’s anger over Israel’s sin was satiated. Why was Achan not given an opportunity to repent, offer a sacrifice, and be forgiven for his sin? The LORD knew the man’s heart and the blatant disobedience of the clear prohibition against the taking of the spoils of Jericho. After seeing 36 men lose their lives because of his sin, Achan also had not repented and confessed his sin before he was exposed despite having the time and opportunity to do so.