



POTENTIAL FOR FAILURE

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

Catalog No. 1162

Joshua 7:1-26

Ninth Message

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January 18th, 1998

All Christians have one thing in common: We are prone to wander. Every one of us has the potential to fail spiritually. In the words of George MacDonald:

Alas! how easily things go wrong!
A sigh too deep or a kiss too long,
And then comes a mist and a weeping rain,
And life is never the same again.

The book of Joshua describes Israel's conquest of the land which God had given them. We have already looked at the story of the fall of Jericho; and as we dig further into this book we will come to other miraculous victories by Israel. But, as we will see, in the midst of taking new territory, the nation has to take time out to deal with sin and failure in the camp.

Like Israel, we, too, must take new territory. We must defeat spiritual enemies in the process of taking possession of our life in Christ. And, like Israel, God leads us into battle and gives us wonderful, unlikely victories. As we walk in the Spirit we begin to develop a rhythm of worship and warfare. However, sin can draw us down in an instant. At any point we are vulnerable to walking in the flesh and experiencing failure and defeat. So that we might live righteously in the land, therefore, we must learn how to deal with failure in a godly way. This is the story of Joshua 7.

Verse 1 sets the scene:

But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the Lord burned against the sons of Israel (Josh 7:1, NASB).

Here the mood of victory changes. For the first time in this book, Israel is in trouble. This man Achan has taken some things which were "under the ban" that was placed on Jericho by the Lord (6:17-19). Everything in Jericho was to be destroyed except the gold, silver, bronze, and iron; these were to be given to the Lord to be placed in his treasury. Although the sin is Achan's, all Israel is said to have "acted unfaithfully," as one person. This word is used to designate a violation of religious law as a conscious act of treachery. It bespeaks unfaithfulness to a covenant contract, breaching a trust, and acting under cover. God is in a covenant relationship with Israel, and the nation has transgressed that covenant. The fact that all Israel is implicated indicates the importance of the corporate identity of God's people.

The result is that the anger of the Lord burns against the sons of Israel. This isn't a slow burn; the Lord's anger blazes, as we will see in verses 2-5:

Now 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." So the men went up and spied out Ai. And they returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not let all the people go up; only about two or three thousand men need go up to Ai; do not make all the people toil up

there, for they are few." So about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. And the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim, and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

Thus Israel's first attempt at conventional warfare ends in failure, and they suffer their first defeat in the land. Appropriately, the word Ai means "the ruin." It is here that Israel almost comes to ruin. The location of Ai is uncertain, but it probably was in the hill country, above Jericho, on the road to Bethel. Three roads from Jericho led into the interior of the land. The southern road led to Jerusalem. Certainly, Joshua did not want to go there until he had first established a base of operations. The northern road led to Ophrah; the middle road to Bethel. Ai was east of Bethel, probably about twelve miles from Jericho.

There are other problems here apart from the sin of Achan. The leaders of Israel do not approach the battle at Ai correctly; Joshua violates holy war by sending spies and initiating conflict without consulting the Lord (Num. 27:21); and Joshua was supposed to stand before the priest, who would inquire of the Lord for him. The spies violate holy war by counting on thousands and not all Israel. The word thousand might mean a "contingent" of fifteen men. If that is the case, then the loss of thirty-six men constituted an eighty per cent loss to the nation. In any case, the spies are over-confident. They think victory will come easily, therefore they fail to demonstrate faith. In the wilderness, Israel lacked faith in entering the land initially, because they thought the enemy was too strong; here, they lack faith because they think the enemy is weak. Further, Joshua commits a tactical blunder in attempting a frontal assault against a city at a higher elevation than Jericho.

The result is a humiliating defeat. The hearts of the people melt and become as water. This phrase is used of the enemy in 2:11 and 5:1. The tables are turned. Now it is the sons of Israel who are fearful. In five short verses, the narrator brings an end to the story of unbroken success of the previous six chapters.

This account highlights a number of spiritual principles. First, one person's sin can affect the entire community and cause the whole church to suffer defeat. The church as the body of Christ has a corporate identity, just like Israel. Our health as a body depends on the health of each individual member. We never sin in isolation. My sin affects you; your sin affects me. Sin cannot be quarantined to protect us from being infected. Holiness is a corporate responsibility. We are reminded here of Romans 5, where Paul declares that through one man, Adam, sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men.

There is a second principle. The result of sin is defeat in our personal lives and in the life of the church. God hates sin; his anger burns against it. When we go out into spiritual battle, we might think that as God's people, he is with us and we are assured of victory. We have all the correct labels on our

Bibles; we have the latest bumper sticker on our cars; we wear our T-shirts; our attendance record at church is perfect. But we are wrong to think that these things will insulate us from defeat. When sin is in the camp or in our hearts, God uses our enemies to humble us.

Third, as we enter into holy war against sin and darkness, we must never do so without first going before the Lord. Israel had just enjoyed a great victory at Jericho; there they had gladly taken advantage of the might of the Lord. At Ai, however, they did not think the enemy was that formidable. The time we are most likely to suffer defeat is immediately following a great victory; that is when we are least likely to depend on God. I have seen this happen in my own life. After a victory, I let down my guard. For example, I labor over a morning of preaching, because I feel completely inadequate for the task; but God faithfully carries me through. Later in the day, when I'm fatigued, I sometimes allow my selfish desires to rule me. I argue with my wife or I become angry because something is not working out for me. The lesson is clear: we must be vigilant following a victory.

We are in trouble when we think we will have an easy victory; when we think a battle will not take the full force of faith; when we fail to consult with God; when we underestimate the strength of the enemy. The first requirement in holy war is to come before God. If we do not worship first, defeat is staring us in the face. There are no easy victories over sin and temptation. Victories over sin and addictions require spiritual discipline and God's grace. We must never think we can do it on our own.

This brings us to Joshua's response. Verses 6-9:

Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and the put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord GOD, why didst Thou ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies? For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what wilt Thou do for Thy great name?"

Joshua and the elders tear their clothes and fall down before the ark. In total humility, they cover their heads with dust. Would that we exhibit such humility before the Lord when we are confronted with our sin and defeat! The ark was very prominent in chapters 3, 4 and 6. It was the place of sacred inquiry (Judges 20:18, 23, 26-27). However, there is no mention of it in the first five verses of this chapter.

Joshua comes perilously close to blaming God for the defeat, just as Israel had done in the wilderness (Exod. 14:21; 16:2-8) when they wanted to return to Egypt. He even goes so far as to think he might have made a mistake by crossing the Jordan. Israel "turned their back" before their enemies. They are on the run. Joshua is fearful that the Amorites might attack and destroy the Israelites, who were trapped by the swollen Jordan.

It is hard to believe that Joshua thought these things and questioned God's leading and guidance. Here is a man of faith, a disciple of Moses, who has followed God for more than seventy years. He has seen God do amazing things in leading the nation out of Egypt. He was willing to enter the land by faith when he was sent in as a spy. He saw God provide for Israel in the wilderness for forty years. He experienced great victories over Og and Sihon, kings of the Amor-

ites. He witnessed the crossing of the Jordan river; he saw the walls of Jericho collapse. But now at the first sign of trouble, he is rethinking the past.

I can relate to how he was feeling. Over the years, whenever I get into trouble or fall flat on my face, I wonder to myself, why did I ever leave Nebraska? When I quit working as an engineer and became a pastor and something went wrong, I would ask myself, why did I ever quit engineering? Have you ever asked yourself questions like, "Why did I take this job? Why did I marry this person? Why did I move here?" At the first sign of trouble we're ready to bail out. When we suffer defeat, we question God's leading. We think we are in the wrong place. We lack confidence. We feel impotent against the enemies of sin and evil. We want to abandon the whole operation. Joshua is just like us, even after his years of faithful service to God and to Israel.

Joshua comes close to being the recipient of divine anger, but then he does something very clever. He calls into account the name of God. This shows either his complete understanding of God's plan or else his extreme shrewdness. This is the same logic that Moses used in Numbers 14. Joshua reminds God that his name, his reputation is at stake; and that if Israel is wiped out, that reputation will suffer shame (Ps. 74:10).

God replies by first asking Joshua a question. Verses 10-15:

So the LORD said to Joshua, "Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things. Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand before their enemies, for they have become accursed. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things under the ban from your midst. Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the LORD, the God of Israel, has said, "There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you have removed the things under the ban from your midst." In the morning then you shall come near by your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the LORD takes by lot shall come near by families, and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. And it shall be that the one who is taken with the things under the ban shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel.'"

God asks Joshua one of those million dollar questions: "Why is it that you have fallen on your face?" God calls on him to deal with the facts. He tells him get up, to stop moping around, feeling sorry for himself. There is sin in the camp, and he must deal with it. Prayer and mourning is unacceptable until the impediment is removed. The problem is not with God, his promise or his leading; the problem is with the sin of Israel.

God tells Joshua that the sons of Israel have violated the covenant concerning devoted things, according to Deut. 20:10-18. They have stolen what is the Lord's and attempted to deceive both him and themselves, a "disgraceful thing" (v. 15). God makes it clear to Joshua that as a consequence of acting faithlessly, Israel is now under the curse, and this is why the nation suffered defeat.

Through Joshua, God commands Israel to consecrate themselves again and make themselves holy before the Lord by re-

moving the devoted thing from their midst. We cannot continue in our life of faith until sin is purged and we purify our hearts. God will not be with us to help us take on new territory until the impurity has been removed.

The procedure for Israel is to come tribe by tribe, family by family, house by house, man by man; then the guilty party will be taken (literally, "captured"). This is an interesting expression. The word is used of seizing towns, people, spoils, even a kingdom. Prov. 5:22 says the wicked are captured with the cords of their own sin. Achan seized the spoils, but this act becomes the very means of his own capture. Our sin weaves a web of entanglement that captures us. That is why God says we must capture sin before it captures us.

Joshua's response is quick and decisive. Verses 16-23:

So Joshua arose early in the morning and brought Israel near by tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. And he brought the family of Judah near, and he took the family of the Zerahites; and he brought the family of the Zerahites near man by man, and Zabdi was taken. And he brought his household near man by man; and Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, was taken. Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I implore you, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me." So Achan answered Joshua and said, "Truly, I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it."

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was concealed in his tent with the silver underneath it. And they took them from inside the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the sons of Israel, and they poured them out before the LORD.

Now the right order of things is re-established. God speaks, and Joshua obeys, rising early in the morning to do what God commanded him. He doesn't wait a day or a week. He gets right after it and follows the procedure given to him by God, executing the Lord's order with great care.

Through a process of elimination, Achan is chosen, although we are not told exactly how. Notice that this is the reverse order of verse 1. Here all Israel becomes part of the process, every tribe, family and house. The issue is very serious. When Achan is chosen, he confesses, enumerating the objects under the ban that were taken: a beautiful robe from Shinar, which is in Babylon; 200 shekels of silver (about 6 lbs); and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels (1-1/4 lbs). Achan reveals the process of temptation and sin: he saw, he desired, he took. He also reveals his misunderstanding of holy war, referring to the devoted things as spoil or plunder. To Achan, Jericho was a prize he had earned, not something that had been won by the divine King. Achan is convicted. Joshua's messengers dig up the herem and bring it him; and they pour it out before the Lord.

Achan is a model of how sin operates in our lives. The process of temptation and sin never changes: we see, we covet, we take. This is the exact road that Eve took in the Garden of Eden: she saw that the tree was good for food, that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable (the same word) to make one wise; then she took and ate. Desire means to covet, to have an "inordinate, ungoverned, selfish desire." This is what is prohibited in the tenth commandment. In the

temptation process we rename sin, changing it into something we think God would want us to have or something we have earned. When we begin to regard possessions as our own rather than the Lord's, then we are in trouble. The same sin is repeated in Acts 5, with Ananias and Sapphira. Everything we have belongs to the Lord and to our brothers and sisters. We don't own or possess anything, not even our children.

Finally, Achan and his entire household are judged. Verses 24-26:

Then Joshua and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the mantle, the bar of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent and all that belonged to him; and they brought them up to the valley of Achor. And Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day." And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the valley of Achor to this day.

Since the herem was hidden in the tent, probably with the full knowledge of the family, Achan's entire family are considered to have broken the covenant. All of them are stoned to death; everything is burned. Our sin affects the church, but it affects our own family in particular. A large pile of stones is raised upon Achan as a memorial. Two different words are used for stoning. One refers to the act of stoning as a form of capital punishment; the other refers to casting of stones upon the bodies after they had been burned, for the purpose of erecting a memorial pile. This recalls the memorial stones that were erected when the nation crossed the Jordan. The judgment is very severe, just as it would be with Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament. In both cases, the birth of a nation and the birth of the church, the first occurrence of sin receives the harshest judgment.

All of this takes place in the valley of Achor, some distance from both Jericho and Gilgal, emphasizing the concern to remove the impurity from Israel's midst. Achor means trouble, disturbance, disaster. Joshua said to Achan, "Why did you trouble us? The LORD will trouble you." Notice that all Israel participated in the stoning. His was a corporate sin, demanding a corporate consecration. Finally, God's response to Israel's obedience was to turn away from his burning anger.

Living in the land does not mean we will never have to deal with failure. It is foolish to think we can't fail. We are frail and unfinished. No matter how willing the spirit, the flesh will always be weak. Living in the land demands we deal with failure in a godly way. C. S. Lewis put it this way: "No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home...The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give up." No failure is final unless we give up.

How do we deal with sin in a godly way that restores our relationship with the Lord and preserves the health of the community of faith? Here are some thoughts.

First, we should not be afraid to face our sin. We must be strong and courageous, realizing the damage that sin can cause, and that defeat will be prolonged if we do not deal with it. If we remain silent, our body will waste away. Sin cannot be swept under the carpet. It needs to be exposed and dealt with. As David Roper says: "We must stop fighting for our sin and start fighting against it. The way to begin is to face the fact of our failure. The Lord won't and can't heal any-

one who minimizes his sin.”

Second, we need to deal with sin quickly and decisively. Even though we are humbled, we need to rise up early in the morning and deal with our wrongdoing. We should not procrastinate, mope or worship until we have done this. This is the theme of Matthew 5:23-24: “If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

Third, we must be willing to confess our sin to God and to the community. Joshua asked Achan to give glory and praise to God by confessing his sin rather than hiding it; and Achan responded by saying that his sin was transgression against the Lord, the God of Israel. The word confess carries with it the idea of praise. When we confess our sin, we acknowledge the sovereignty and holiness of God. Confession elevates God to his proper place and puts us in ours.

Repentance and confession are the means by which believers find restoration and reconciliation. Once sin is acknowledged and brought to the light, it loses its power. We want to keep sin in the dark, hidden, because we think if it is exposed, we will be rejected. The opposite is true, however. Confession becomes a reason for praise and glory to God. Through confession, our intimacy with God is restored and even enhanced. That is what James says: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (5:16).

Fourth, we need to be utterly ruthless in killing sin. This is what the church fathers called mortification. Once we acknowledge and confess our sin, then we need to completely kill that which is devoted to destruction. We are to “put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit” (Rom. 8:13); to completely lay aside the deeds of the darkness, and make no provision for the flesh. We are no longer people of the flesh, living under law. We are Spirit people, living under grace. We must put on the armor of God, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and walk in the Spirit. We must simply acknowledge sin, call it what it is, ask for forgiveness, and go and sin no more.

To help us in this regard it is not wrong for us to build memorials to our disasters so that we will remember not to travel the same road again. For Israel, the memorial in the valley of trouble would be just as effective as the memorial stones at the Jordan river. That is why we have memorials to the Holocaust; we never want to go down that path again.

I have a memorial stone that I carry around with me. Some years ago, I was a sports fanatic. I wanted to be out all the

time, playing football, basketball, whatever was in season. One day I separated my shoulder playing rugby. It never healed properly, and I was left with a lump on my shoulder where my clavicle had popped up. This was the beginning of God changing my whole perspective on sports. The lump became a memorial stone to me. God had begun to heal me of my wrong desires. Every morning when I get out of bed I see God’s memorial to me, and I thank him for it. I thank him for caring enough to change me. It is a reminder that I’m headed for trouble if I don’t follow him.

Finally, we need to trust God’s promise of forgiveness and restoration. Joshua addresses Achan with a loving term, calling him “son.” Even though Achan was addressed as “son,” and his confession would glorify God, he was under the curse of death. Sin had to be judged, and the sentence carried out.

As sinners, we, too, are under the curse of sin, which is death. However, Jesus became a curse for us and redeemed us from the curse of the law. God condemned sin in the flesh by sending his Son, and he died the death we deserved. Just as through one man sin entered into the world, “so through one act of righteousness [by Jesus] there resulted justification of life to all men” (Rom. 5:18).

John wrote, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). In the book of Hosea, God promised Israel that the valley of Achor, the valley of trouble, would become a door of hope to them. Not only are believers called sons and daughters, confession leads us to grace, forgiveness, and life. God is the God of fools and failures. He is the God of second chances. Sin may have consequences that we have to live with for the rest of our lives, but when we deal with it, it can work for our ultimate good, opening doors of hope for us. God takes the worst that we do and makes it part of the good he has promised. He uses sin to purify us, cleanse the church, and bring us closer to him and one another. He uses confession and prayer to make us more dependent on him and create oneness in the body.

I want to end by quoting the words of David Roper in this regard: “God doesn’t look for perfection; He knows the miserable stuff of which we’re made. The godly will surely sin and just as certainly their sins will be found out. God reveals our waywardness to heal us. We will notice defilement because He will show it to us; such work in us is the sign of His presence. And when that sin is faced and repented of, it is forgiven. Then we can go on. And going on, after all, is what matters. God doesn’t require perfection, only progress.”

May God allow us to be courageous to expose our sin and deal with it in a godly way.

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