

JOSHUA—WEEK 5

WINNING AND LOSING



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Joshua, Week 5 — Winning and Losing
The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)
On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

The LORD orders everything in Jericho to be destroyed, except Rahab's family. But Achan takes some of the spoil for himself. This breaks the covenant, and Israel loses a battle and 36 men. Now Israel has the awful task of finding who did it and restoring the covenant.

This is going to get ugly.

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1 Joshua 6:17–21 (ESV)

“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. 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. But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.” So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.

This passage troubles people. So does this award winning photograph.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/leopard-seal-hunting-gentoo-penguin-also-snags-first-place-in-world-nature-photography-awards-180979715/>



The cold truth is that almost every living creature meets its end in the jaws of a predator. Everyone who worships the creator of the universe must come to grips with the fact that this is the universe He chose to create. That includes things like carnivores.

The command to devote to destruction everything and everyone in Jericho seems extreme. However, the people there did things as wicked as burning their children as human sacrifices.

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.” — Deuteronomy 18:9–12a (ESV)

That passage lends some justice to what is about to happen to them. But note that the penguin above was a carnivore itself. In an analogous way, this won't be the first time that the people of this land have been completely dispossessed. As we read in Deuteronomy 2.1-23, the Canaanites had a history of brutalizing, oppressing, and displacing one another.

The point is that God determines what's right and what's wrong. We don't get to decide.

Those who worship a God who would never have created this world, don't worship the One who did.

But Joshua had said to the two men who had spied out the country, “Go into the harlot’s house, and from there bring out the woman and all that she has, as you swore to her.” And the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab, her father, her mother, her brothers, and all that she had. So they brought out all her relatives and left them outside the camp of Israel. But they burned the city and all that was in it with fire. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. And Joshua spared Rahab the harlot, her father’s household, and all that she had. So she dwells in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua makes sure that Israel keeps the promise it made to Rahab. She and all her family are spared.

But it gets better. Rahab becomes a part of the covenant—a very important part. She’s King David’s great-grandmother.

Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David the king. — Matthew 1:5–6a

This is a simple yet beautiful example of the LORD’s long term plans. It also shows how anyone can become great in the kingdom of heaven.

But there’s one more twist, and this one might be the most glorious—Rahab never loses the label “harlot.” Rahab the great is still “Rahab the harlot.”

The Bible doesn’t just allow for people’s “warts,” it embraces them. Scripture’s greatest heroes aren’t perfect; they’re normal people who do great things. Normal people have normal faults and scripture seems to make a big point of showing those faults.

This completes the picture of how anyone can become great in the kingdom of heaven. Anyone.

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven comes more from gifts than from talents. The problem is how to tell them apart.

Our personalities are formed when we’re very young, long before we are given any spiritual gifts. Our talents ground our self-image. We see ourselves in terms of our natural gifts, not our spiritual ones.

But the Holy Spirit brings in something new, something magnificent. (See 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 27–30 and Romans 12:6–8.) It takes a while to even recognize it’s there, much less figure out exactly what it is (especially if your “package” includes multiple gifts).

Others can see our gifts far better than we can. The best way to determine your gifts might be to buy your pastor lunch. There you can just ask, “What are my spiritual gifts?”

Be prepared to be surprised.

3 Joshua 6:26–7:5

Then Joshua charged them at that time, saying, “Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates.”

So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout all the country.

But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel.

Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth Aven, on the east side of Bethel, and spoke to them, saying, “Go up and spy out the country.” 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, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few.” So about three thousand men went up there from the people, but they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six men, for they chased them from before the gate as far as Shebarim, and struck them down on the descent; therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water.

Joshua now adds to the command to devote everything (*the accursed things*) in Jericho to destruction. The city of Jericho is accursed itself and must never be rebuilt. Joshua even lays out a strikingly extreme punishment that will befall anyone who rebuilds the city. It’s a permanent curse.

But then Achan violates the original command to devote everything to destruction. He takes some of *the accursed things* from Jericho.

And the punishment for this is strikingly extreme. Israel loses a battle—and many men.

Even worse, their courage melts. While the text doesn’t say that all their enemies were encouraged by Israel’s defeat at Ai, how could they not be? Suddenly, they see that Israel isn’t invincible.

The psychological advantage Israel had over their enemies is shot. As was pointed out earlier, this advantage is immensely valuable.

Now it’s gone.

The book of Joshua keeps getting back to the same lesson—we don’t get to define right and wrong; God does.

Here we see a minor theft lead to monstrous consequences for an entire nation. People who don’t even know about the theft are killed.

This is going to get worse before it gets better.

4 Joshua 7:6–11

Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, “Alas, Lord GOD, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all—to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Oh, that we had been content, and dwelt on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies? For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will You do for Your great name?”

So the LORD said to Joshua: “Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff.

Joshua understands what this means. Something is deeply wrong and everything is in jeopardy. He knows this has nothing to do with the strength of his army. It’s all about God.

So, he prostrates himself before the ark and asks what in tarnation is going on.

Joshua doesn’t have to wait long for an answer. The covenant has been broken and this defeat is the result. Some of the accursed things have been stolen. Instead of devoting them to destruction, or putting them in the treasury, they have *put it among their own stuff*.

The reader may be wondering, “What were they thinking?” This incident is one of the best examples of sin in action. It doesn’t make sense.

Everyone involved in this grew up eating manna. They all crossed the Jordan on dry ground. They’ve seen so many miracles they’ve gotten used to them.

So when the LORD says that everything in Jericho must be devoted to destruction, you might expect them to just do it. No one could be stupid-crazy enough to disobey such a simple command from their benefactor, right?

Well, no. There apparently are some who think they can skim a little off the top and no one will notice.

But someone did notice—the all-powerful Someone.

Belief is not simply black and white. Certainty is different from just thinking that something is true.

And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel.”
— Acts 12:11a

Faith grows over time, in both range and depth. What one believes, and how strongly one believes those things, even moves up and down. This is normal and should not scare us. Uncertainty should be treated like uncertainty. It should inspire us to dig deeper and search to understand more.

Unfortunately, in this case, some idiot has “bet the farm” on one piece of the faith being false.

5 Joshua 7:12–15 (ESV)

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.” 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.’”

Thus begins a manhunt for the perpetrator. Nowadays, we’d use a metal detector or something. These guys do it by casting lots. God will show them the way.

Thus, the search becomes another faith-building exercise. The perpetrator(s) must be hoping that the search doesn’t work. Their faith clearly has some holes in it. If they thought they’d be caught, they wouldn’t have stolen the *devoted things*¹ in the first place.

But if the search by lots does work, then everyone will see everything confirmed. Someone really did take some of the *devoted things*. The LORD knows who it is and can reveal this through lots. That really is why they lost the battle (and thirty-six men).

No joke.

It’s curious how faith needs “booster shots.” These people have seen many spectacular miracles. You’d think that would have built their faith up plenty, yet the LORD orders up a booster.

One of the great beauties of the Old Testament is how it paints a detailed portrait of sinful human nature and of how that sinful nature messes up everything. We see astounding goof-up after goof-up and wonder, “How can anyone be like that?”

Then it hits us. We’re no better. The Old Testament is a portrait of human nature—not somebody else’s nature.

We need boosters too.

¹Note: the reader may wonder why the *accursed things* in previous DEEPs are called *devoted things* in today’s. They’re the same; the difference is a change in translation. The Hebrew word translated in the ESV here as *devoted things* (קִרְיָהּ kher-eem) is translated as *accursed things* in the NKJV, which was used previously. The ESV translation is preferred for today’s DEEP because it includes the implied detail, “by lot,” in verse 14. The NKJV is the standard translation for the DEEP.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What facts of nature most trouble you?
2. Do you know your spiritual gifts?
3. What's the most unjust punishment in our society?
4. What's your favorite story of dumb criminals who set themselves up to get caught?
5. What has happened to boost your faith?

Items for prayer: