

JOSHUA—WEEK 6

CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Joshua, Week 6 — Change in Perspective
The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)
On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

The source of the loss at Ai is rooted out. Achan confesses, and then he and his whole family are destroyed. Then Ai is destroyed. Everything and everyone is reduced to a pile of rocks.

God's holy purposes trump everything we might feel comfortable with.

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1 Joshua 7:16–21

So Joshua rose early in the morning and brought Israel by their tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. He brought the clan of Judah, and he took the family of the Zarahites; and he brought the family of the Zarahites man by man, and Zabdi was taken. Then he brought his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

Now Joshua said to Achan, “My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

And Achan answered Joshua and said, “Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it.”

The search method works. The LORD points out who the guilty party is. Achan is cornered.

But notice that Joshua does not offer Achan a deal. There’s no plea bargain. He simply says, “*Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.*” Joshua does not say what will happen if Achan comes clean.

This highlights an important biblical principle—tell the truth for truth’s sake. Many people make the case for truth on the basis that being truthful is ultimately beneficial. That may be true, but that’s not the real reason for telling the truth.

The real reason for telling the truth is that it’s the right thing to do, as per the ninth commandment. That seems simple enough, but it actually represents a seismic shift in perspective—from seeing everything in terms of “me” and “my goals,” to seeing everything in terms of the kingdom and the kingdom’s goals.

Telling the truth is the right thing to do because God says it’s the right thing to do. It’s not about me; it’s about God’s glory. Telling the truth honors and glorifies God. That’s the primary team goal. That’s why Joshua says, “*My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him,*”

We might think that Joshua is asking two things of Achan here: to give glory to God and to confess.

But it’s one thing—to give glory to God by confessing—and that’s exactly what Achan’s response does.

This shift in perspective makes salvation by faith alone beautiful.

If our works are done for the team, and not for our own salvation, they glorify God.

Conversely, if our works give us credit in some kind of “salvation account” that we have, then we’re really doing these works for our own benefit. In a sense, our charitable works aren’t even charity. They’re just work for pay.

That doesn’t glorify God at all.

2 Joshua 7:22–26

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver under it. And they took them from the midst of the tent, brought them to Joshua and to all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD. Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and they brought them to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, “Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.” So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.

Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So 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.

Achan’s full and complete confession is helpful, but not to Achan (at least not in this life). Everything having any connection to him or his sin is completely destroyed. A *great heap of stones* is even raised over the spot to commemorate the event.

This seems overly harsh but, once again, that depends on one’s perspective. From a secular point of view, Achan and his family need to be shown mercy. People who plead guilty are supposed to be given lighter sentences, right?

Yes, but from a spiritual point of view, what really needs to happen is a complete purging of the sin. Israel lost thirty-six soldiers in the first attack on Ai. That’s a far greater loss than losing Achan and his household.

Even greater than that, Israel lost the psychological advantage they had over the people of Canaan (whose hearts had melted when Israel crossed the Jordan quickly). That can have a great impact on future battles.

So, this harsh action is completely justified, even necessary.

This is reminiscent of the circumcision event right after the Israeli army crossed the Jordan. That action was useless (or worse) with respect to normal military objectives; it was purely for spiritual purposes. That highlighted the importance of restoring the covenantal practice of circumcision over preparing for war in the usual military sense.

But even that can miss the point. They didn’t circumcise everyone so that they would win battles; they circumcised everyone so that everyone would be circumcised. The covenant is an end unto itself.

Similarly, Achan and his family were not utterly destroyed so that Israel would win battles; they were utterly destroyed to purge the sin.

Winning battles is nice, and part of the LORD’s ultimate plan.

But the point of it all lies elsewhere.

3 Joshua 8:1–8

Now the LORD said to Joshua: “Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; take all the people of war with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves. Lay an ambush for the city behind it.”

So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night. And he commanded them, saying: “Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind the city. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready. Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city; and it will come about, when they come out against us as at the first, that we shall flee before them. For they will come out after us till we have drawn them from the city, for they will say, ‘They are fleeing before us as at the first.’ Therefore we will flee before them. Then you shall rise from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand. And it will be, when you have taken the city, that you shall set the city on fire. According to the commandment of the LORD you shall do. See, I have commanded you.”

Ai’s previous victory over Israel sets up the perfect trap. The king of Ai thinks they can do it again. Joshua will bait him into drawing his whole army out of the city. That’ll overextend them and make them vulnerable.

The city will be vulnerable too.

It’s perfectly ironic that God allows taking spoils from Ai. If Achan had just been patient and obeyed God’s commands, he could now have the very things he got in trouble for having.

This is the lesson on how to be a grown-up that we hammer into our children—jumping the gun does not work. God’s timing isn’t our timing, and when you fail to wait for God to keep His promises, you fail. It’s a failure of faith.

The classic example of this is when Abraham (the father of faith!) failed to wait for God to deliver on His promise of a son. Abraham’s (and Sarah’s) scheme of having a child through Hagar was one of the biggest blunders in history. It caused nothing but trouble in their household and even more trouble later.

But there’s an even larger lesson in this. That failure, which was a failure of faith, did not disqualify Abraham as the father of faith. His belief in God’s promise still stands.

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. — Genesis 15:6

We all make mistakes—sometimes big ones. That can trouble us, beyond the direct cost of our blunders. We can wonder what our mistakes mean. Aren’t there some mistakes that Christians must never make?

Yes there are, but that’s limited to cases of blasphemy. Don’t worry about the usual goof-ups.

4 Joshua 8:9–17

Joshua therefore sent them out; and they went to lie in ambush, and stayed between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua lodged that night among the people. Then Joshua rose up early in the morning and mustered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. And all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near; and they came before the city and camped on the north side of Ai. Now a valley lay between them and Ai. So he took about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. And when they had set the people, all the army that was on the north of the city, and its rear guard on the west of the city, Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley.

Now it happened, when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the city hurried and rose early and went out against Israel to battle, he and all his people, at an appointed place before the plain. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. And Joshua and all Israel made as if they were beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. So all the people who were in Ai were called together to pursue them. And they pursued Joshua and were drawn away from the city. There was not a man left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. So they left the city open and pursued Israel.

The king of Ai, fresh off his victory over Israel just a few days earlier, takes the bait. He thinks he's got them on the run and commits everyone to the pursuit of Israel.

There was not a man left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. So they left the city open and pursued Israel.

This is, of course, a fatal mistake. But it's important to understand what exactly that mistake is. This kind of "bridge too far" error is a manifestation of sin. At the heart of sin lies pride—thinking too highly of ourselves. That leads directly to overconfidence, which leads, in turn, to mistakes of overconfidence.

That's the king's mistake. Pursuing the Israelis is nuts. His pride causes him to do something he wants to do but doesn't need to do. He needs to protect his people, not go off on some wild goose chase crusade.

Ai is a city. Cities have walls. Those walls give the city an advantage over attackers. The attackers can't get in, and while they're trying, you can rain death and destruction down on them from the top of the walls. By leaving the city, the king and his army abandon that advantage and enter a level playing field.

But the king enjoyed his previous victory. He wants to bask in the glory again.

His ego is all that matters.

We're more prone to make mistakes when we're riding high and our ego is puffed up.

But we're not getting people killed. Our ego-driven mistakes are more likely to be words. It's amazing how often bragging is a bad idea.

Humility keeps our tongue in check.

5 Joshua 8:18–29

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the spear that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the spear that was in his hand toward the city. So those in ambush arose quickly out of their place; they ran as soon as he had stretched out his hand, and they entered the city and took it, and hurried to set the city on fire. And when the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw, and behold, the smoke of the city ascended to heaven. So they had no power to flee this way or that way, and the people who had fled to the wilderness turned back on the pursuers.

Now when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and struck down the men of Ai. Then the others came out of the city against them; so they were caught in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side. And they struck them down, so that they let none of them remain or escape. But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him to Joshua.

And it came to pass when Israel had made an end of slaying all the inhabitants of Ai in the field, in the wilderness where they pursued them, and when they all had fallen by the edge of the sword until they were consumed, that all the Israelites returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword. So it was that all who fell that day, both men and women, were twelve thousand—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as booty for themselves, according to the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation to this day. And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until evening. And as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his corpse down from the tree, cast it at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raise over it a great heap of stones that remains to this day.

Ai is now a heap forever—no survivors. We aren’t told what they did to deserve such an end, at least not in Joshua. But we were told in Deuteronomy.

“Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, ‘Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land’; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” — Deuteronomy 9:4–5

As brutal as this seems, it’s just.

People leave churches over issues like this. Christianity includes things like the doctrine of hell. Plenty of folks simply don’t want to hear about that. Some even go so far as to make sure they don’t hear about it by avoiding preachers who preach on tough subjects. If that means changing churches, so be it.

While that’s unfortunate, it’s not a fatal error. The PG-13 version of Christianity is still Christianity.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you take pride in your works?
2. How do you apply the kingdom perspective to your life?
3. What mistakes should we worry about?
4. When have you seen ego lead to grief?
5. What facts or doctrines make you uncomfortable?

Items for prayer: