

# Holiness and blessing

Joshua 7-8

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In the beginning of the book of Joshua, God helped the children of Israel cross the Jordan River. It was at flood stage, but God stopped the water and they crossed on dry land. God then helped Israel fight the great walled city of Jericho. In Joshua 6, we see how it happened.

God instructed Israel to march around the city of Jericho, one time a day, for six days. It included the people, the soldiers and even the priests and the Ark of the Covenant. On the seventh day God instructed them to walk around the city 7 times. Once finished, they would blow the trumpets and shout, and the walls of Jericho would fall down. Joshua gave these instructions (Joshua 6:18-19):

*“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.”*

The trumpets were then blown, the people shouted, and the walls of Jericho fell. Israel destroyed the city and it was a great victory. Chapter 6 ends saying, *“So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.”*

What appeared to be a glorious time for Jericho, then suddenly, changed. Chapter 7 begins with these words: *“But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things.”* Israel had been warned that if they took anything from Jericho for themselves, it would make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and would bring trouble upon it.

As we continue reading, we see that an Israelite man named Achan had taken some of the devoted things from the city of Jericho, and now *“the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel”*. It would be a costly sin, but at this point in the story Joshua and the others did not know that there was sin in the camp.

After defeating Jericho, Joshua and the people of Israel turned their attention toward the city of Ai. Like before, Joshua sent out spies to learn more about the city. The spies returned and told Joshua of how small the city was. Surely, they only needed to send a small number of their army.

So, that is what they did. Joshua sent three thousand men to fight against Ai. Once the battle began the soldiers of Israel fled from the men of Ai, and in the process 36 Israelite soldiers were killed. Once hearing this report the ***"hearts of the people melted and became as water."*** This had been the description of the people of Jericho (Joshua 2:11), and now because of their sin it had become true of Israel as well.

When Joshua heard the news, he tore his clothes and fell on his face in front of the Ark of the Covenant, alongside the elders of Israel, until evening. During this time of anxiety and confusion, Joshua questioned why God would let Israel come this far only to be destroyed by the Canaanites. He questioned why the people of Israel could not have been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan River. He was speechless before God as he sought for an explanation why his soldiers had fled from battle. He feared now that the Canaanites would hear, gather together and completely destroy Israel and its name from the earth. And worst of all, what would happen to the great name of Yahweh?

It is interesting that God allowed Joshua and the elders of Israel to remain on their faces in His presence until evening. But in God's timing, He spoke.

***"Get up! Why have you fallen on your face?"*** To God it was very simple. Israel had sinned. They had taken some of the devoted things. Therefore, of course the people of Israel could not stand before their enemies. They fled from their enemies, because they had become devoted to destruction instead of being devoted to God.

In this story we see that everything and everyone is devoted to something. We are either devoted to God or we are devoted to destruction. Up until this point Israel had been set apart as devoted to God. Because of this, God had helped them to cross the Jordan River and to defeat Jericho. Now that they had distanced themselves from God through sin, they were now devoted to destruction. Blessing is a natural result of walking in intimacy with God. When we dwell in the presence of God, we have access to the resources of God and experience the blessings of God. Sin separates us from God, His resources and His blessings.

Was that not what God had told them back in Joshua 6:18-19? If they took any of the devoted things, the camp of Israel would become a thing for destruction and would have trouble. That is the consequence of sin. Isaiah 59:2 tells us very clearly that sin separates us from God. Romans 6:23 tells us, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** We can either choose life or death. If one chooses to belong to sin instead of God, then they are refusing to be devoted to God and are choosing to be devoted to destruction. We see this choice very clearly in this story.

It may be helpful to point out that at this point Joshua knew nothing of the sin. That is what probably made the situation so confusing. He thought they were walking in holiness, but there was hidden sin in the camp. Praise God for His mercy to His people. Before it was too late, God revealed the problem and removed the sin from Israel.

At times our lives are like this. As far as we know we are relating well to God, but in reality we are not. Maybe it is a spiritual blind spot, a sin that we are not even aware of. Maybe we have grown insensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and are guilty in various areas. Then, through a Bible

verse, a difficult situation, or a courageous word from a good friend, we become aware of our sin. Then it is time to repent and remove the sin. God was now going to lead Israel through this process.

God had Joshua tell the people to consecrate themselves, because they would not be able to stand before their enemies if they still had the forbidden devoted things in their midst. The following day Joshua brought each tribe before God, and God singled out the tribe of Judah. Joshua then brought the clans of Judah before God, and God singled out the clan of the Zerahites. Joshua then brought the clan of Zerahites before God, and the family of Zabdi was taken. Joshua then brought the family of Zabdi before God, and the household of Achan was taken.

Joshua then confronted Achan, and he confessed to having taken a beautiful robe, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels from Jericho. He told how he had seen them, coveted them and taken them. Like it is written in James 1:14-15, *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*

Achan was then taken with his family and all that he had. They were put to death, burned, and a great heap of stones were put on them, *“that remain to this day”*. Achan had chosen to be devoted to sin and destruction, and so he was.

There now were two heaps of stones in the Promised Land. One that commemorated the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, and now the second, that reminded the people of the cost of sin. We must realize that both came from God’s hand. He is a God of both grace and justice.

Once Achan’s sin had been paid for and removed from the camp of Israel, God turned their attention back towards Ai. God instructed them to attack Ai again. God declared that He had already given it into their hands: the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land.

God instructed them to set up an ambush, so that is what they did. Joshua sent part of his army behind the city of Ai in hiding. Joshua led the rest of the army to come against Ai from the front. When Ai’s men came out to fight them, Joshua and his men fled, like the soldiers had the first time. The soldiers from Ai pursued them. Once the fighting men had left the city, the soldiers in ambush attacked, captured and destroyed the city of Ai. Once they could see the smoke of the city, Joshua and his men turned to fight the men of Ai. Attacked from the front and the back, the men of Ai were defeated. That day God brought a great victory.

From this story we see several more lessons to be learned.

When we look back at this story some may ask, “Why was God angry at all of Israel, when only one man had sinned?” That would be a likely question, especially if you are from a culture that champions individualism. This is how much of the west views the world. We seek to be unique individuals with our own lives, our own futures, our own desires and our own dreams, but the cultures in the Bible did not think like that. Even when they first introduced Achan, in Joshua chapter 7, he is described by telling who his father, grandfather and great-grandfather and tribe was. Everyone was connected and identified with others.

Think of it this way: If you are playing football and one of your teammates breaks the rules, who gets punished, the person or the whole team? Both. Maybe your teammate gets a yellow or red card,

while the other team gets a penalty kick that hurts your whole team. In the case of Adam and Eve, they sinned, and the sinful nature was passed down to all generations. In the book of Revelation, entire churches were threatened with discipline because they would not remove the sin in their congregation. In 1 Corinthians 12, we see that even the churches are seen not merely as a group of individuals but as the body of Christ. They were different parts whose identity and purpose only became meaningful once they functioned as part of the body. ***“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”***

It is as we begin to see the church, our church, from this perspective that this story of “sin in the camp” becomes even more applicable to our lives. Yes, we want to be holy and blessed as individuals, but this also applies to us as a church. As we grow in our faith and our holiness as a group, we become a body of believers who draw near to God and pull under his umbrella of blessing.

I say “umbrella of blessing” because it is through holiness that we draw near to God, and it is in drawing near to God that we experience the blessings of intimate relationship with the Father. It is like a child in a rainstorm. As long as he stays near the Father, He gets both the father and the umbrella. If he chooses to move away from the father, he moves away from the cover of the umbrella as well.

Blessing is connected to God’s presence. As we see in Isaiah 41:10, ***“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*** As we remain in the presence of God, we gain all that He is. The key is abiding in Him. Sin separates us from God, so the key to an intimate relationship with God is holiness.

Israel were the chosen people of God. They were the children of promise. This was their identity, but it did not insure the blessings of God. It was only when they walked in holiness that the blessing was experienced in all its fullness.

By faith we have been made right with God. Christ’s death and resurrection has paid for our sin. We are now counted as holy in the eyes of God. That is our identity in Christ. The next step is to walk in holiness.

Philippians 2:12 instructs us to, ***“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*** We are to pursue holiness in our daily lives, while knowing that all holiness and blessing are both a work of God in our lives.

This does not mean selfishly trying to be holy in our own strength so that we can get God to bless us. God Himself is the blessing.

Pursue holiness with all of your heart, but realize that the law is the work of God. The exposure of sin is the work of God. The conviction of sin is the work of God. A repentant heart is the work of God. The desire for holiness is the work of God. The faith to believe is the work of God. The resulting holiness is the work of God. Holiness that results in blessing is the work of God.

Realizing that it all is a work of God, may we bow our hearts today and confess our sin. Cry out for forgiveness. Pray to be made holy. And rest in His ability to bring it to pass. In Him we find both holiness and blessing.

### Discussion questions:

1. What in this lesson was most interesting to you?
2. Work together as a group to retell the story of Israel and the city of Ai.
3. What from the story was most meaningful to you?
4. Can you think of an example where the sin of one person hurt others?
5. Can you remember a time that you were guilty of doing something wrong that you had been unaware of?
6. As a church how might we pursue holiness?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this sermon?
9. How can we pray for you about that?