

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-5 Sin Brings Defeat

Jesus said, “Whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open” (Mark 4:22). Nowhere in the Bible is this clearer than in the story of Israel’s loss at Ai. One man’s secret sin led to Israel’s defeat.

Joshua and the Israelites had recently experienced a mighty victory in the battle of Jericho. The walls had collapsed, and Israel had defeated the defenders of Jericho. Joshua’s fame spread throughout Canaan, because Yahweh was with him.

God had commanded that no one should take any spoils of war from Jericho. All the gold, silver, bronze, and iron was to go into Israel’s treasury. No person was to take anything for himself. But a man named Achan did so, and hid the treasures in the ground under his family tent.

Joshua’s next town to attack was up in the hills above the Jordan Valley. As before, he sent men to look around the region of Ai, east of Bethel. When they returned, they reported, “Not all the army will have to go to fight, for only a few people live there. A couple thousand fighters should be enough.”

So the fighters attacked up the valley to Ai, but were defeated, with about 36 dead. The Ai fighters chased the Israelite soldiers from the city gate for a long way. They struck many on the slopes which went down toward the camp at Gilgal. When the survivors returned, they told a sad story. When the people heard of the defeat, they became afraid. They must have thought, “What happened? How could our fighters have lost the battle? How could they have failed to defeat a small town like Ai? Especially after our great victory a few days ago at Jericho?”

Joshua tore his clothes as a sign of grief. He lay facedown before the ark all day until evening. The elders of the tribes did the same, and put dust on their heads—another sign of grief.

“Oh, Yahweh,” cried Joshua, “why did you bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan where we were victorious? Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies?”

Joshua continued to lament, “The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this. They will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great reputation?” (Josh 7:1-9).

Suddenly Yahweh spoke. “Stand up, Joshua! What are you doing down on your face? This has happened because Israel has sinned. I told the people not to take the devoted things from Jericho. But they have taken them, they have stolen from me, they have lied. That is why the Israelite fighters cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run. I have made them liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the devoted things among you.”

Yahweh told Joshua what to do. “Tell the people to consecrate themselves. Tell them, ‘This is what Yahweh the God of Israel says: someone has taken and hidden the devoted things. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.’”

Yahweh continued to speak, “In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe that I choose will present themselves clan by clan. The chosen clan shall then come family by family, and the chosen family man by man. Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all his belongings. This man has violated the covenant of Yahweh and has done an outrageous thing in Israel!”

Early the next morning, Joshua did as Yahweh had commanded. Israel came forward by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was chosen by God. The clans came forward, and one was singled out. The family of Zimri was chosen from this clan. Then Zimri’s family came forward man by man, and the man Achan was chosen.

Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Honor him by telling me what you have done. Don’t hide any longer.”

Achan replied, “It’s true. I have sinned against Yahweh, the God of Israel. When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, about 2 ½ kilograms of silver, and a bar of gold of about 600 grams, I coveted them and I took them. They are hidden in the ground under my tent.”

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to Achan’s tent. There were the stolen items, hidden under the tent. They brought the things to Joshua and spread them out before the people and before Yahweh. Then they took Achan, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, and all that belonged to Achan—his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had—to a valley about ten miles to the south.

Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? Today Yahweh will bring trouble on you.” Then the people stoned Achan and his family to death. Then they burned them and all his possessions. Later they heaped a pile of stones over what was left. That place has been called the “Valley of Trouble” ever since (Josh 7:10-26).

Now Yahweh said to Joshua, “Don’t be afraid; don’t be discouraged. Take the whole army, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. Do to Ai and its king what you did to Jericho and its king. This time you may carry off the plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set up an ambush behind the city.”

So Joshua sent his best fighting men to set up an ambush behind the city. “Be on the alert,” he said. “I will approach with the rest of the army. When their fighters come out against us, we will run away, as before. They will run after us, to strike us down as they did before. This is when you rise up and take the defenseless town. Then burn it down.”

It happened just as Joshua planned. The Ai fighters pursued the fleeing Israelites. Then Yahweh said to Joshua, “Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.” Joshua did so. It was a signal for the ambushers to take the town and burn it. The Ai fighters saw the smoke and turned back, but they were caught between the ambushers and the main army. The Israelite fighters chased down and killed all the Ai fighters and all the people in the town. They kept the plunder and livestock, however, as Yahweh had instructed (Josh 8:1-27).

This story is **important** because it shows us the awful consequences of greed and secret sins. Yahweh taught Israel early in the conquest period the lesson that their fathers and grandfathers had learned so bitterly during the wilderness years. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people” (Prov 14:34). The nation suffered defeat because of one man’s sin. Since Achan’s family probably knew of his theft, they were punished with him.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God gave Israel success when they were faithful to the covenant. Their military victories depended on God’s blessing more than on their good strategy and tactics.

To **review** this lesson, answer these questions:

1. Why was Israel defeated at Ai? [Pause]
A. If you said, “God was not with them in battle because someone had stolen plunder from Jericho,” you are correct.
2. Why did Joshua and the elders grieve before the Lord? [Pause]
A. If you answered, “They suspected that the battle had been lost because God had withdrawn his blessing,” you answered correctly.
3. Why were the Israelite armies successful in their second attack on Ai? [Pause]
A. If you said, “Achan’s sin had been uncovered and punished, so God was once again fighting for Israel,” you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to the story at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell the story in your own words as you remember it. You should spend at least 45 minutes in learning the story. You may need to have someone check that you are telling the story correctly. Memorize Proverbs 14:34: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people.”

Ask a friend who has never heard this story to listen to it. Israel’s success depended on her faithfulness to the covenant. According to the prophet Jeremiah, God is writing the new covenant on our hearts (Jer 31:33). This means that the Holy Spirit lives within us to guide us and to keep us from sinning.