

Learning from Losing

David H. Roper

Ai was a little town about twelve miles west of Jericho, up in the central highlands--a very important strategic objective, from the standpoint of the conquest of the Land. Ai, along with its sister-city, Bethel, straddled the north-south caravan route through Canaan. This was the only way armies could travel north and south in Canaan at the time, so it was very important that the Israelites take this place. This was also Abraham's second campsite when he came into the Land from Haran. Thus this particular location was not only strategic from a military standpoint; it also held rich historical associations. So the Israelites were eagerly anticipating victory as they marched toward the city from Jericho.

Ai is a very interesting little city, although there seems to be some confusion surrounding it. From the 1930's on, there has been extensive archaeological excavation of Ai, but no one has ever been able to find any evidence of an Israelite invasion. There is no destruction layer corresponding to the time you would expect the Israelites to have arrived in the Land. They have found such a layer dating from much earlier--about 2200 B.C--a little before the time of Abraham. But there is no indication that the Israelites ever conquered the city, or that there actually was a walled city there at that time. This has caused quite a bit of confusion. Liberals say, "See, we told you so! Joshua is a book of fables!" Conservatives say, "No, you're simply digging in the wrong hill."

But I would like to suggest another theory which, I think, gives the story a bit more impact. The name "Ai" is not really the name of a city nor a geographical location; it is a description. It means "the ruin." All the way through the Old Testament, wherever that name occurs, it is always used this way--"the ruin"--with an article in front of the noun, and it always seems to refer not to a city but to a pile of stones, or a ruin. When Abraham came into the land of Canaan, Genesis says, he camped between Bethel and "the ruin". So I believe that at the time Abraham lived there it was one of these flat-topped hills, or "tells", that you find all over the Near East -- a ruin even then. But at the time of the conquest, when Joshua and the Israelite army invaded Canaan, there was a group of nomads, shepherds, who were camping on top of this tell. There was no walled city there, nor any city of any size at all, but only the temporary structures--shacks, huts, and tents--that semi-nomads would use for homes. This helps us to understand something of the attitude of the Israelites, as they go on to say later in the account, "It is small, insignificant; it will be easy to conquer." After all, if they could take a city like Jericho, with its great walls, how much more easily could they take an undefended, unwalled shanty town! This, perhaps, was what was behind their over-confidence.

The Jews were master story tellers. One device story tellers use to stir up interest is to get the hearers on the inside of the story, so that they know something no one else knows. If you have ever watched Columbo on television, you know that this is one of the devices the producers use. They show you the occurrence of the crime, so you know who the culprit is. But Columbo does not know; he sort of blunders his way through, and does not appear to know what he is doing. But you know, and this is one of the elements which make that series so interesting. This is what the storyteller did in Joshua 7. He begins by letting you in on something that Joshua and most of the Israelites do not know: who the culprit is. He is named in verse 1:

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.

Achan is the culprit. He took some things from Jericho that were forbidden to him and, as we will read later, he

hid them in his tent without anyone's knowledge. This was in direct violation of what God had told the people in chapter 6, verse 18:

But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, lest you covet them and take some of the things under the ban, so you would make the camp of Israel accursed [or, "under the ban"] and bring trouble on it.

If they took any of the articles--furniture, apparel, or precious metals--that belonged to the Canaanites, instead of devoting these things to the ban, then Israel itself would be under the ban. They would be devoted to destruction. God told them when they came into the Land that they were to exterminate the Canaanites, and to destroy everything that belonged to them. So we see here at the outset that Achan defied this command. Israel was told that there would be trouble if this occurred, and, in defiance of even that consequence, Achan took some things which were under the ban and hid them in his tent.

It has bothered people that the kind of Lord whom we know would take this kind of action against anyone, that he would tell his people utterly to destroy an entire civilization. And yet there is no question but that this was indeed his command. There are some facts we need to know about this. The first is that there were Canaanites who worshipped the Lord. They came to the Israelites and were assimilated right into the nation, because they believed that the Lord was God. Their names occur throughout the history of Israel. One, as we saw in our last study, was Rahab. One of David's best friends, Uriah, was a Hittite, a Canaanite. And there must have been many more. We know that this is God's desire. Wherever he finds an open and responsive heart, he always responds.

Secondly, we know that God waited for hundreds of years before he destroyed this civilization. In fact, he waited while his own people were slaves in Egypt. God told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in Egypt for four hundred years -- until the iniquity of the Amorites was complete, until they filled up the full measure of their sins. God left behind for the Canaanites the truth that the patriarchs believed and taught. And he left behind men like Melchizedek, and others, who were sources of light and truth. For six hundred years, from the time when God told Abraham until the conquest, they had many opportunities to respond to the truth. But despite all this, by the time the Israelites entered the Land, the whole civilization was decadent. Either they had to be exterminated, or they would exterminate the nation of Israel. There was no other option. Either they would be mastered, or they would become the masters.

And so the Israelites were told to devote them to destruction, i.e., to offer them up, as it were, as a great burnt offering. Their cities, and everything that belonged to them, were to be destroyed. But in violation of the ban, Achan took some of the things and hid them in his tent. Now we have this inside information, and the story begins to unfold:

Now Joshua sent men from Jericho at 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 to 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.

Joshua began by doing as he had in the past. He sent spies ahead to reconnoiter. This was the pattern he had followed when they conquered Jericho, and it seemed the reasonable thing to do. Now, we are not specifically told here that Joshua did not consult the angel of Jehovah, but there is no mention of any instruction given by the Commander-in-Chief, the angel of the Lord, who was responsible for the campaign. It does not appear that Joshua talked to him, but that he acted on his own. It seemed the reasonable thing to do - after all, this is the way they had operated in the past. Had he consulted the Commander-in-Chief, he would have been given entirely different instructions, as we will see later. But because Joshua himself was uninstructed, he acted according to the most

reasonable pattern he had available to him: what he had done in the past.

But as we know, God seldom does things the same way he has done them in the past. The one thing predictable about the Lord is that he is totally unpredictable! You never know what he is going to do. He says, through Isaiah, "Don't ponder the things of the past; I'm going to do something new." I often think of that verse in the light of the modern trend toward nostalgia--which I think is on the way out; I saw a graffiti the other day which said, "Nostalgia ain't what it used to be!" But we all do tend to look back and get our direction from the way things have been done in the past. I had a professor in seminary who told me that the theme song of the church ought to be, "As it was in the beginning, henceforth, and ever shall be, world without end." The way we have always done it is the way we will continue to do it. We perpetuate the past, and the patterns of the past, instead of discovering from the Lord the innovative and creative thing he wants to do. The Lord had something else in mind that he wanted to teach Israel, and Joshua, at this point, missed it.

So he sent the spies into the land, and they gave their report. The men went up to take Ai, and were disastrously defeated. It appears from the account that they even lost the ground they had gained earlier. They were chased all the way back down the rocky gorges to the Jordan river. They could have stopped at that point and said, "Well, we won one and lost one; we'll try someplace else." But they could not; they had to face the men of Ai. They knew that either they had to master that enemy or they would be mastered by that enemy. And the people gave way to despair, and felt that they were defeated:

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 they 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! Oh 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?"

Does that not sound like us? Joshua begins by blaming the Lord: "It's all your fault! You're the One who brought us over the Jordan!" Then he gives way to self-pity: "Oh, if we'd only stayed on the other side of the Jordan!" Of course, his memory was short, because things were grim on the other side of Jordan, but this he had forgotten.

I have seen this same experience in my own life and in the lives of many young believers. We come out of the world, and initially there is such confidence in the Lord. There are times of great victory and accomplishment. Then we discover that things are not working out. Some disaster strikes us, and we begin to fail miserably. And we think, "I was much happier as an unbeliever. Things were much better then. I didn't have the guilt, I didn't have the pressure, I didn't have the demands And our memories are short. We forget the guilt, we forget the pressure, we forget the death in our lives; we think it was better back there.

You see, we have not yet learned how to fight in the Land. This is what God had to teach his people--that there is another way to operate. When we come into the Christian life we often come in with all of the old confidences, all of the old dependence upon our own abilities, and we try to act on that basis. God leads us into failure in order for us to understand that there is another way of operating, another way of living, a whole new basis for living in the Land. And the only way we can learn this is through defeat. This is what happened to Israel. And they knew they were defeated, on the run; they admitted it. And God responded, because this is the sort of Lord we have. He was not going to leave them in defeat; he was going to tell them the next step:

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; they turn their backs before their enemies, for they have become accursed. I will not be with you any more 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.'"

There is an interesting play on words in this section. Joshua says to the Lord, "It's your fault, because you brought us over the Jordan." And the Lord says, "No, it's your fault, because you have crossed over the covenant." That is, "You are the ones who transgressed. It's not my fault; it's your fault." There is a principle here which is spelled out in great detail in the New Testament. It is this: sin will either master us, or we will master sin. The first statement of this principle is found in the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain began to resent his brother, and his heart was filled with hate because God had accepted his brother's offering, the Genesis account says, "His face fell." Then God said to Cain, "Sin is crouching at the door; but you must master it." That is, "Sin is like a lion, waiting to devour you. And either it will devour you - it will destroy you, it will control you--or you will gain mastery over it. And if you do gain mastery over it, there will be," as the text says, "a 'lifting up'."

Paul spells out this principle in Romans 6. Man was made to be mastered. And we are slaves, "either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness," he tells us. We gain mastery over sin by obeying Another. And we will either be mastered by sin, or we will master sin--there is no middle ground. We think we can temporize with sin somewhat. There are certain sins we like--they are agreeable, they are enjoyable. And we think we can become involved to some limited extent in these sins. But we do not realize that when we do, then we fall under their control, and they begin to master us.

In New Guinea they catch monkeys by cutting a tiny hole in a hollow gourd, putting some seeds in it, and then waiting for some little monkey to reach inside for the seeds. Naturally, when he grasps the seeds, then he cannot get his fist out. Of course, all he has to do to gain his freedom is to let go of the seeds; but he will not do that. He insists upon clutching the seeds. This is what the Lord is saying here to the nation, and to us. When we grasp sin and hold it in our life, then we become slaves to sin. We think that we can get away with a little bit of moodiness and grumpiness. "After all, God made me ugly; it's his fault. So I'm going to be grumpy this morning!" But you know what happens. It begins to overcome us and spills over onto everyone around us, destroying our relationships with others. Or we think we can get by with a little bit of jealousy, or a little bit of envy, or with reading a little bit of pornography. But soon we are absorbed right into it, and we are controlled by it, mastered by it. It becomes the lord of our life.

This is what God is trying to say to us in this account. You cannot temporize with sin. You cannot play with it. You cannot go just so far and then cut it off, because it will destroy you. Romans 6 ends, "For the wages of sin is death..."--not physical death, but the sort of death-like state which sets in when we allow sin to control us. The boredom, the misery, the guilt, the fear, the anxiety, the control of sin in other areas of our life--these are the result of the sin that we cling to. I wonder how many times I have looked at some area of my life that I do not like at all--because it embarrasses me, makes me look bad in front of others--and so have prayed that God would take that out of my life. But God says, "No, the problem is not really that; it is this sin over here." But, you see, I like the sin over here. So God says, "Until this one is dealt with, that one will control you." We cannot have it both ways. We cannot allow Achan to live.

The Lord is so good to put his finger precisely on the issue. These vague feelings of guilt that we sometimes have do not come from God; they come from Satan. The kind of free-floating fear and anxiety that assails us from time to time does not come from God. When God sees an issue of rebellion or resistance in our life, he puts his finger precisely on it and says, "This is the issue." And this is what he does with the nation. They are to begin this process of elimination which will lead them to the culprit:

So Joshua arose early in the morning [Wherever you find that phrase occurring in Joshua it always indicates something significant. Joshua was a decisive man. He may have been untaught in some areas, because he had not

been this way before. But God never rebuked him for his ignorance. He had to learn through the experiences that arose. But when he did learn, he acted!] **and brought Israel near by tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. And he brought the families 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.** [First he selects the princes from each tribe, twelve men, and casts lots. It falls upon the tribe of Judah. He repeats the process through the various families, then the households.] **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** [some richly embroidered piece of material from Babylon] **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."**

Now Achan is found out. I really believe that had he repented earlier, he would have been forgiven. The Scriptures say that if we judge sin in our lives, then we will not have to be judged. But if we do not put to death sin in our life, then sooner or later God, in his mercy, will have to "find us out" in that area. Sin must be brought out into the light. God is committed to bringing us into the fullness of our inheritance in Christ. Anything which impedes that program must be dealt with. So if we do not judge it, he will have to judge it in some other way--not in any eternally condemning way, because that sort of condemnation was paid for when Christ died and rose for us. But he will have to find out the sin. It is interesting to me that throughout this entire process, even through the loss of life, Achan does not respond. This indicates something of the hardness of his heart. He was committed to rebellion. And now these few trinkets are brought out. They are certainly insignificant when compared with the loss of thirty-six of Israel's fine young men. I am certain that Achan now saw the paltriness of those articles.

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. 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.

This passage shows something of the extent of their retreat. They had gone all the way down to the Jordan; now they had to go to the south of Jericho, where the valley of Achor is located. They had been driven all the way back to their starting point. So they took all of these items that Achan had stolen and brought them out into the light, and then took his family and possessions up to the valley of Achor. And, in verse 25, Joshua says, "Why have you troubled us?" This is the word from which the name "Achor" is taken. God had told Israel, as we know from chapter 6, that if anyone broke the ban, he would trouble the nation.

"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.

Now, that is a harsh story. Personally, I do not believe that the children were stoned in this episode. If you have a New American Standard Bible, you will notice that a literal reading of the Hebrew is "they stoned him," and "they burned them", i.e., the various stolen items, and the things that belonged to Achan--his cattle, household goods, etc. But we have a statement in the law, in the book of Deuteronomy, that the children were not to be slain for the sins of their fathers. I cannot believe that God would command this in one instance, and then abrogate the command in another, unless the children somehow are implicated in the crime. We do not know for certain, but it appears that Achan himself was the only one who was stoned. Still, this is a very difficult thing to understand, unless we see God's attitude toward sin. The alternative was that Achan would live a life of defeat, and that God's people would be destroyed. This is why they had to act so decisively, so completely.

And this is the way God wants us to deal with sin in our life. What are the areas in your life and mine that trouble us, and trouble our families? We can apply this passage both individually and corporately. It is true in our own lives as individuals that if we harbor sin in any area, then we become the slave of sin in other areas of our life. It is also true within the Lord's body, the church. If there is one brother or sister who is out of phase and acting in rebellion, it hurts the entire body, as it did the nation of Israel.

What are the things in our lives that ought to be brought out into the light and stoned? We want somehow to preserve them, but God says, "Put them to death!" Because the alternative is to die, to fall into the misery of a life where you are a prey to every enemy that comes along. There is no alternative. Perhaps some of you men are resentful of your own sons, threatened by them--perhaps because of some success they have enjoyed in school or in athletics. You feel bitter toward them, and you have cut them off, and this is destroying your relationship and poisoning your home. Or perhaps some of you women are dominating your homes - not because you want to, but because your husband is not leading as he should, and so you feel that you have to take that responsibility. But your home is troubled. You have not yet learned that the Lord can make a man out of your husband. He can control that situation at home. Or perhaps some of you young people have been deceiving your parents for years in some area of your life that you have hidden. You know in your spirit that this has caused you to withdraw from your parents because of your guilt, and you react in irritation toward them and you resent them, but down deep inside you know it is because you have been deceiving them. Those are all things which need to be brought out into the light and put to death. Have no mercy on them!

And once they are put to death, accept one another back into the family with warmth and understanding. We are not to say, "Well, I thought that was the problem; I'm glad you finally admitted that you're wrong!" and heap further condemnation on them. Rather, as in the case of Rahab, we are to welcome them with warmth and love and understanding. This is the only way to deal with trouble in our own lives, and in our families, and in our relationships with one another as members of God's family.

There is an interesting passage in the book of the prophet Hosea about the valley of Achor. The book describes the troubled relationship between Hosea and Gomer, his wife, who was unfaithful to him. Hosea went after her not once, but twice, and perhaps frequently, to bring her back, to win her again, and to set right this troubled relationship. It appears that eventually he was forced to use strong measures, as God must use on his own people, to discipline her. But in verse 14 of chapter 2 we read,

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, Bring her into the wilderness [That is where the Lord's relationship with his people began. That is, he is going to begin at the very beginning again, and reestablish the kind of relationship they had formerly] **And speak kindly to her** [speak to her heart]. **Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope.**

That place became the proverbial expression for the good results of discipline in a life. The nation of Israel went on from the Valley of Achor to conquer Ai, and then, in seven short years, to complete the conquest of Canaan. But this grew out of the experience they had at Achor. So what appeared to be a great disaster was a learning experience for the whole nation. It became a door of hope, a door of expectation. They entered into an entirely new relationship with God. And we can experience the same, if we are willing to let God put his finger on those areas of our life where we are consciously resisting his will, and then to bring them out into the light and put them to death, receive forgiveness for them, and then go on in his power.

Father, what consolation and hope we derive from your Word! We ask that these words may strike us where it is needed, that we might take them to heart, that we would be willing to face the areas of our life where we have been resisting you, and put them away, and to do so in that final and ultimate sense you have described here, and to begin to walk in newness of life. We thank you that you have cleansed us from all unrighteousness, and that you empower us to be all you ask us to be. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Learning from Losing
By: David H. Roper
Series: What do these stones mean?
Scripture: Joshua 7
Message No: 3 of 4
Catalog No: 3443
Date: July 20, 1975
Updated September 7, 2000.

[PBC Home page](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [David H. Roper Library](#)

Copyright © 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.