

Joshua

Lesson 8

Chapter 8:1-29

Some things in life, human projects go tragically wrong. Hopes are dashed. People are hurt. Families are destroyed. The dreams of a lifetime are buried forever. The brightest futures become dark holes filled with dirt. What makes all this so sad is that the whole incident can usually be traced back to the decision of one man. The sin of one person, out of the will of the LORD, can affect all the lives around him or her. It does not matter where that person resided in the chain of influence; all people matter to the LORD; therefore, the one who breaks the law of the LORD can stop His blessings to all. You might say, “the LORD would allow a whole group of people to be harmed because of the sin of one person.” That is true in most cases. But when the LORD has given a law and repeatedly stated the consequence of anyone in that group breaking the LORD’s law upon the whole body of that group, then the LORD will allow the harm to come. The nation of Israel has such warnings placed on them. All from their time with Moses in the wilderness. They are warnings concerning thoughts and deeds yet to be born. But when they are born, the penalty will be brought to bear on the nation. The Church has such warnings too. How can the group recover? Only by rooting out the sin and making amends as the LORD requires. Such was the case of the sin of Achan in the last passages. Once he was handled according to the will of the LORD, the group was back in the graces of the LORD. Then, and only then, can the projects move on with success.

3. The Third Campaign in the Promised Land

a) The Conquest of Ai

(1) Joshua’s Plan from the LORD

The tragic campaign on Ai was inflicted on the nation because of Achan’s sin at Jericho. What Joshua failed to notice was that he had not sought the counsel of the LORD in planning and executing the battle at Ai. Joshua had not noticed that the LORD was not involved with the battle because of the sin. Once the tragic battle was over, Joshua sought the LORD and was informed of the sin and how to make amends. Once done, Joshua could place his sights back on Ai for the third campaign in the Promised Land known as the conquest of Ai. Consider now Joshua’s plan from the LORD. Chapter 8, verse 1. *“Now the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not fear or 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. ²You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it.” (8:1-2)*

In the LORD’s words, we hear the promise of victory because the LORD has declared it to be so. Notice also we hear the LORD’s interjection as how to assure the victory. It is not a suggestion; it is a command. *“Set an ambush for the city behind it.”* An ambush was a new strategy for armies that day. An ambush meant that troops would be concealed to surprise the enemy at some predetermined point in the battle. In that day, troops would march in clear sight in battle array and attack the city. It was still part of the plan, but the ambush was set behind the city too. Ai saw the troops coming to the front of the city, but they did not see the troops behind the city.

b) Joshua's Plan for the Battle (8:3-7)

(1) The Division of the Troops (8:3-5a)

(a) The Ones to Go by Night (8:3-4)

Joshua's plan for the battle of Ai included the division of the troops. The ones to go by night would hide behind the city ready for the ambush. Verse 3. *"So Joshua rose with all the people of war to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose 30,000 men, valiant warriors, and sent them out at night. ⁴ He commanded them, saying, "See, you are going to ambush the city from behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready."* (8:3-4)

(b) The Ones to Go by Day (8:5a)

The ones to go by day would be the ones who marched straight to the front gate of the city as customary for battles in that day. Verse 5a. *"Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city."* (8:5a)

(2) The Plan of the Troops (8:5b-7)

(a) The Day Troops Will Retreat (8:5b-6)

With the initial plan set, Joshua explained the plan of the troops. The men with Joshua will be the day troops. Then Joshua explains the plan for the ambush. The night troops will advance. Verse 7. *"And you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand."* (8:7)

c) Joshua's Plan for the City (8:8)

While Joshua and the day troops turn away from the city of Ai in retreat, the night troops will take the city from behind. It is Joshua's plan from the LORD for taking the city. Verse 8. *"Then it will be when you have seized the city, that you shall set the city on fire. You shall do it according to the word of the LORD. See, I have commanded you."* (8:8)

(1) The Night Troops Depart (8:9)

Joshua gives the order and the night troops depart. Verse 9. *"So Joshua sent them away, and they went to the place of ambush and remained between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai; but Joshua spent that night among the people."* (8:9)

It is fifteen miles from Gilgal to Ai across the mountains. It is about thirty-five miles by the roads. It would have been difficult in either case for the night troops to depart and set up in the night behind Ai. It is for that reason that we must realize that the writer has suspended with all indications of time between battles and where we are in the first year after crossing the Jordan River. This thought can be born out in the fact that the next time the writer tells us where we are in the timeline is when all the battles led by Joshua are over at the end of about five years of campaigning.

In this passage, we are not told where Joshua gives these instructions. Surely, the men of war were together near Ai at the time in some obscure location.

The night troops were to set in ambush behind Ai, in between Bethel and Ai. The city of Ai was directly east of Bethel. Therefore, the night troops were positioned on the west side of Ai. The day troops were with Joshua in the obscure camp where Joshua revealed the plan.

(2) The Day Troops Depart (8:10-11a)

On the following day, Joshua and the day troops departed. A clear indication that they were camped in the vicinity of Ai when Joshua gave the plan. Verse 10. *"Now Joshua rose early in the morning and mustered the people, and he went up with the elders of Israel before the people to Ai. ¹¹ Then all the people of war who were with him went up and drew near and arrived in front of the city, and camped on the north side of Ai."* (8:10-11a)

The front gate of the city of Ai was on the east side. If the night troops camped behind the city on the west side, the front of the city was on the east side. However, after showing his troops at the east front gate of Ai, Joshua had his men camp on the northside of the city walls.

(3) The Division of the Troops (8:11b-13a)

The writer gives a little more detail of the plan with the division of the troops. Verse 11b. *“Now there was a valley between him and Ai.”*¹² *And he took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city.*¹³ *So they stationed the people, all the army that was on the north side of the city, and its rear guard on the west side of the city....”* (8:11b-13a)

The night troops were the rear guard stationed on the west side of Ai. The number of night troops was about five thousand men. The remaining twenty-five thousand men were on the north side of the city. But Joshua stationed himself in the valley between the two troops, as we will see next.

d) Joshua’s Plan to Wait Over Night (8:13b-17)

(1) Where Joshua Waited (8:13b)

It was Joshua’s plan to wait overnight. In this next verse, we find where Joshua waited. Verse 13b. *“... and Joshua spent that night in the midst of the valley.”* (8:13b)

Joshua did not spend the night with the night troop of the ambush or the day troops in plain sight. Joshua spent the night in the valley between the two.

(2) Why Joshua Waited (8:14)

Now we come to why Joshua waited in the valley. Verse 14. *“It came about when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the city hurried and rose up early and went out to meet Israel in battle, he and all his people at the appointed place before the desert plain. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city.”* (8:14)

It was the perfect place for Joshua to give the signals to both troops to start the battle with the day troops and to signal the night troops. Now to what Joshua did.

(3) What Joshua Did (8:15-17)

Verse 15 tells us what Joshua did. *“Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness.”*¹⁶ *And all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were drawn away from the city.*¹⁷ *So not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who had not gone out after Israel, and they left the city unguarded and pursued Israel.”* (8:15-17)

The plan had worked. The LORD’s instruction to use an ambush was perfect. The town’s men emptied from the city and left it unprotected.

e) Joshua’s Plan to Engage (8:18-17)

(1) The Sign of the Outstretched Hand (8:18-19)

With the town of Ai unprotected, it was time for Joshua’s plan to engage. The ambush would begin with the sign of the outstretched hand. Verse 18. *“Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.” So Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.*¹⁹ *The men in ambush rose quickly from their place, and when he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it, and they quickly set the city on fire.”* (8:18-19)

Joshua was carrying a javelin. Think of it as a spear. It was a dart attached to a throwing stick. The javelin stretched toward Ai was the sign. The ambush worked.

(2) The Sign of the Smoke-Filled City (8:20-27)

With the ambush by Israel of Ai, the sign of the smoke-filled city left the hearts of the inhabitants hopeless. Verse 20. *“When the men of Ai turned back and looked, behold, the smoke of the city ascended to the sky, and they had no place to flee this way or that, for the people who had been fleeing to the wilderness turned against the pursuers.”* (8:20)

(a) Caught Men (8:21-22)

The writer continues to speak of the fate of the caught men. Verse 21. *“When Joshua and all Israel saw that the men in ambush had captured the city and that the smoke of the city ascended, they turned back and slew the men of Ai.”* ²² *The others came out from the city to encounter them, so that they were trapped in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on that side; and they slew them until no one was left of those who survived or escaped.”* (8:21-22)

As directed by the LORD, all the men of Ai were slain.

(b) Caught King (8:22-23)

Back in the city, the writer speaks of the caught king. Verse 22. *“But they took alive the king of Ai and brought him to Joshua.”* (8:22-23)

It was normal for the king of a city or nation to be captured alive and brought to the ruler of the opposing side in a battle. Joshua was the ruler, and the king of Ai was delivered to him.

(c) Caught People (8:24-25)

But the destruction of the humanity of Ai was not over. The fate of the caught people had to be handled. Verse 24. *“Now when Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the field in the wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them were fallen by the edge of the sword until they were destroyed, then all Israel returned to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword.”* ²⁵ *All who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000—all the people of Ai.”* ²⁶ *For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.”* (8:24-26)

Just as Moses held his hands up until the battle against Amalek was won, so, too, Joshua held up his hand with his javelin until the battle with Ai was won.

(d) Caught Animals (8:27)

All the caught people were killed. What was done with the caught animals? Verse 27. *“Israel took only the cattle and the spoil of that city as plunder for themselves, according to the word of the LORD which He had commanded Joshua.”* (8:27)

The writer does not mention it here, but the order of the LORD was the same for all the battles. The animals would be divided among the families of Israel. The gold, silver, copper, and bronze would be put in Israel’s treasury. The idols of Ai were crushed and burned.

f) Joshua’s Plan for Future (8:28-29)

(1) The City’s Eternal Desolation (8:28)

The writer speaks of Joshua’s plan for the future. He begins with the city’s eternal desolation. Verse 28. *“So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation until this day.”* (8:28)

When the writer says, *“until this day,”* he means *until the day the manuscript of Joshua’s book was completed.* It means the same every time we see that phrase in this book.

The city of Ai would be *“a heap forever, a desolation.”* The Hebrew word for *“heap”* means *tomb.* Much later, in the book of Ezra, Ai is mentioned again as three-hundred and twenty men in exile return to Israel from Bethel and Ai. The exile will occur in 722 BC, seven hundred and two years after Joshua destroyed Ai. Therefore, Ai must have been rebuilt at some time, even if it was not on the same sight, in order for the exiles to be taken from that city.

(2) The King’s Eternal Desolation (8:29)

We must not forget the king of Ai, who had been delivered to Joshua. He made sure of the king’s eternal desolation. Verse 29. *“He hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua gave command, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the city gate, and raised over it a great heap of stones that stands to this day.”* (8:29)

The writer does not tell us that the king was killed before his body was hung on the tree, but that was surely the case. In Joshua 8:2, the LORD said, *“You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king....”* However, we have not been told how the king of Jericho died. But with another king

who will be killed in Joshua 10:28, the writer tells us, “*Now Joshua captured Makkedah on that day, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword; he utterly destroyed it and every person who was in it. He left no survivor. Thus he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho.*” Therefore, the king was killed with a sword before he was hung on a tree for exhibition in Ai, just as the king of Jericho was killed.