



HOW TO LOSE A WAR

What was the worst thing you ever did at school? Did you ever get found out? Did you ever have a reputation for being a 'troublemaker'? Or did you cover your tracks?

We all make mistakes, and there's a difference between things done accidentally and things done intentionally. But today we're going to think about the intentional stuff; about the impact of sin on our walk and our witness; and, crucially, how to find a way back from a place of defeat.

Joshua 7

It's been a case of 'so far, so good' in the story of Joshua.

However, in ch7 we get one of those 'scratch the vinyl' moments. With the actions of one man, things start to go wrong. But it's not all negatives, even if it might read like it. Like a medical treatment, there's a sequence here, a healing process.

There's a cause, which produces a symptom, which demands a diagnosis, which offers a cure ...

1) Cause. If you'd seen Akhan walking towards you and said, "Oh-oh, here comes trouble", you would have been right, on 2 counts at least, because 1) that's what his name means, and 2) that's what he causes (so perhaps it was a nickname rather than a birthname or 'prophetic' name – though stranger things have happened ...).

What did Akhan do that was so bad? God had given an order, through Joshua, to *machrim* or devote all the spoils of Jericho to Him, as the firstfruits of the Land of Canaan. But Akhan disobeys and nabs a Babylonian garment, a bag of silver shekels, and a wedge of gold. And the disobedience is a 3-fold process, according to vs21:

- "I saw" (not a momentary catch of the eye, but a gaze. It's when we linger that the problems start!).
- "I coveted" (he desired what wasn't his, which is where most sin comes from – from Eden onwards).
- "I took" (he put it into effect, and the desire of his heart became an action, an actuality in his life).

That's how sin works, no matter what form it takes, no matter what the temptation is. We might have a sinful nature, but sin is still a choice.

And one we all make (Romans 3:23).

2) Symptom. None-the-wiser, Joshua plans to attack another city, Ai – but with a smaller force. The logic being: "Ai is smaller than Jericho. That's all it'll take." But Joshua has forgotten something. Whose battle is it? God's. So, who should he be consulting? God. But there's no indication that he does. And in that, he makes a common mistake: yes, he behaves like a general, but he forgets who's really in charge. Something we all do, right?

But the real problem here is Akhan. As a result of his greed and outright disobedience the Israelites are defeated and 36 are killed. Which may not seem a lot, but in a war that Israel is supposed to win easily, that's 36 too many.

Can churches ever lose a battle like this? Yes. In fact, I would go as far as to say that churches have died and shut up shop because there were issues that needed dealing with, and no-one did. Does that mean that whenever a congregation faces a challenge to its mission or ministry something is amiss? Of course not – but it's worth asking the question, even so.

Which is, of course, what Joshua does next. He seeks a ...

3) Diagnosis. Joshua here does what most people in the Bible do when things go wrong: he falls on his face, throws dust on his head, and has a good moan. And who does he blame? God! And I can relate to that (well, maybe not the dust on the head bit, but the rest): "What are you doing, God? You're supposed to be in charge! Why are you allowing this to happen to us / me?"

Joshua and the leaders carry on like this 'til the giving of the evening sacrifice, and then God speaks. And He does something intriguing: He tells them to stop praying. Why? Because there's a time to pray and a time to prayerfully get on with it (and it's important to know when to do what).

But what's the diagnosis? Israel has sinned. Not "Israel has some kind of psychological disorder, or made a slight error in judgement, or had a difficult upbringing." No, Israel has? Sinned. There are 2 words used, both in vs11:

chata, 'to miss the mark'; and *avar*, 'to cross the line.' I.e. to deal with the wrong in our hearts and the problems caused, we've got to call it what it is.

So, God gives the diagnosis. But He also offers a ...

4) Cure. Joshua warns Israel, and the next day they cast lots to uncover the culprit. The focus narrows, from:

- Tribe (Judah), to
- Clan (Zerah), to
- Family (Zimri), to
- Individual (Akhan).

Akhan spills the beans; the Israelites search his tent; they find the stolen items; they spread them out before God. And then they put him to death – with his family. Which might sound harsh, but the *Torah* prohibits the punishing of individuals for the sins of relatives (Deuteronomy 24:16), the inference being: they were all involved.

But even so, where's the cure here? An ex-pastor one said to me, after hearing me preach on this, "David's sins were worse. Why was David restored, and Akhan not?" The answer is he could have been – if he'd put an end to Akhan before Israel had to. By which I do not mean suicide; I mean crying out to God, as David did (e.g. Psalm 32:5). There are 2 ways of dealing with sin: either God deals with *it*, or God deals with *us*. But if we want it, there is a cure on offer.

Today, we know Him as? Jesus.

A Door Of Hope

So, how many of us feel like we've let the side down? Either overtly, or secretly? No, I'm not asking for a show of hands. But how many of us feel like an Akhan?

The good news – the *great* news – is that God Himself, in Jesus, has paid the price for us, taken our punishment for us, on the cross of Calvary. Which is what an obscure verse in Hosea 2 is referring to. In vs15 God promises that He will turn the 'Valley of Akhor' (a variant of *Akhan* or 'trouble') into a 'Door of Hope.' And in Jesus, that door has not only opened: it's opened to all of us.

We may feel like we've scored an 'own goal' (or several, more likely!), but Jesus has taken it all and offers us a new life, a fresh start, a second chance. But just like David and unlike Akhan ... we have to take it.

Have *you*?