

Who was Achan in the Bible?

First Chronicles 2:7 refers to Achan as “the troubler of Israel, who broke faith in the matter of the devoted thing” (ESV). In the days of Joshua, when the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh built their own altar east of the Jordan River, the other tribes used the story of Achan as a warning: “Do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God. When Achan son of Zerah was unfaithful in regard to the devoted things, did not wrath come on the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin” (Joshua 22:19b-20). So who was this “troubler” named Achan, and what did he do?

The story of Achan is found in Joshua 7. God had delivered Jericho into the Israelites’ hands, as recorded in Joshua 6. The Israelites had been instructed to destroy everything in the city, with the exception of Rahab and her family, as well as the city’s gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The metals were to go into the tabernacle treasury; they were “sacred to the Lord” (Joshua 6:19) or “devoted” to Him. Jericho was to be totally destroyed, and the Israelites were to take no plunder for themselves.

Shortly after their success at Jericho, the Israelites moved on to attack the city of Ai. The spies Joshua sent to Ai thought the city would be easy to overtake—much easier than Jericho—and they suggested Joshua only send two or three thousand troops. Much to their shock, the Israelites were chased out of Ai, and thirty-six of them were killed. Joshua tore his clothes and bemoaned their attempts at conquering Canaan. He told God, “The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?” (Joshua 7:9). God responded by telling Joshua that some Israelites had sinned by taking devoted things. The people were to consecrate themselves, and then the

following morning the perpetrator would be identified by lot (see Proverbs 16:33).

When morning came, each tribe presented itself. The tribe of Judah was chosen by lot, then the clan of the Zerahites, then the family of Zimri, then Achan. “Then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me’” (Joshua 7:19). Achan confessed his sin, admitting that in Jericho he saw a robe, two hundred shekels of silver, and a fifty-shekel bar of gold that he “coveted,” took, and hid in a hole he had dug within his tent. Messengers from Joshua confirmed the plunder was found in Achan’s tent, and they brought it before the assembly. The Israelites then stoned Achan, his children, and his livestock and burned the bodies; they also burned Achan’s tent, the plunder he had taken, and “all that he had” in the Valley of Achor (i.e., the “Valley of Trouble”), Joshua 7:25-26. The pile of stones was left there as a reminder of Achan’s sin and the high cost of not obeying the Lord.

After Achan was judged, God told Joshua, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land” (Joshua 8:1). The Israelites laid an ambush and soundly defeated Ai, killing all of its inhabitants. This time, the Israelites were allowed to take the plunder for themselves. Only Jericho, the first city in Canaan, had been wholly devoted to the Lord (see Deuteronomy 18:4).

The story of Achan is a stark reminder of the penalty of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23a). We also see two truths illustrated plainly: first, that sin is never an isolated event—our sin always has a ripple effect that touches others. Achan’s sin led to the deaths of thirty-six of his fellow soldiers and defeat for the whole army. Second, we

can always be sure that our sins will find us out (Numbers 32:23). Hiding the evidence in our tents will not conceal it from God.

Achan's sin was grave. He took what was God's. The Israelites had been specifically warned about the consequences of not doing as God instructed. Joshua told them, "Keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it" (Joshua 6:18). Achan's sin was a clear and willful violation of a direct order, and he did bring trouble on the entire camp of Israel. Also, Achan was given time to repent on his own; he could have come forward at any time, yet chose to wait through the casting of lots. Rather than admit his guilt and perhaps call on the mercy of God or at least demonstrate reverence for Him, Achan attempted to hide. "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

The precious metals Achan took were meant to be given to the tabernacle; they were God's possession. So Achan not only disobeyed a direct order, but he stole from God Himself and then covered it up. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is a similar warning against lying to God. As to why Achan's entire family was destroyed along with him, that is a bit difficult to understand. Most likely, they were complicit in the sin—they would surely have known about the hole dug in their tent and what was hidden there. Or perhaps their execution was a demonstration of just how pure the Israelites were called to be.

In the story of Achan we see just how deceptive sin can be. In the midst of a miraculous victory, Achan was enticed by a robe, some silver, and some gold—certainly none of that compares with the power of God he had just witnessed. Yet we know our own hearts can be

just as easily swayed. James 1:14-15 says, “Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Another aspect of sin’s deception is that it promises a benefit that it just can’t deliver. The stolen items did Achan absolutely no good; he couldn’t spend the money, and he couldn’t wear the clothes. What seemed of great worth to him was actually worthless, buried in a hole in the ground while guilt festered in his heart.

In Joshua 7:21, as Achan finally confesses his sin, he relates the process that led to his destruction: “I saw . . . I coveted . . . and took.” This is the same process that leads to many sins today. Achan was deceived by sin’s lies, but we don’t have to be. “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:16-18). Real blessing comes from God, not through the pleasures of sin.

Throughout the Bible we find that mercy accompanies judgment, even in the story of Achan. God was merciful in limiting the destruction caused by Achan’s sin. He also quickly restored the nation of Israel after the sin was dealt with. In Joshua 8 we see Israel defeat Ai and renew their covenant with God. God forgives, and He desires to be in relationship with His people. Even when we do not understand His commands, we can trust His character. He is the unchanging One and the Giver of good things. Achan’s story is both one of warning and one of hope.