

# Learning From Losing

by David Roper

---

*David Roper's sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing sin to avoid defeat and learn from our failures.*

**Duration:** 32:54

**Scripture:** Genesis 4:6-7, Joshua 7:12, Joshua 7:21, Hosea 2:14, Hosea 6:7

**Topics:** "Sin And Consequences", "Obedience To God"

---

## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the tendency of people to look back and find direction from the way things have been done in the past. He mentions the theme song of the church being 'as it was in the beginning, henceforth and ever shall be world without end.' The sermon then delves into the story of Achan, who violated God's command to destroy everything that belonged to the Canaanites. Achan's disobedience resulted in sin controlling his life and causing death-like consequences. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not compromising with sin and allowing it to master us.

---

## Transcript

Ai was about 12 to 13 miles to the west of Jericho, up on the top of the central highlands, a very important strategic city from the standpoint of the conquest of the land. Ai, along with its sister city Bethel, straddled the north-south caravan route through Canaan, and this was the only way that armies could travel north and south in Canaan at the time, and so it was very important that they take this particular location. This was also the site of Abraham's second campsite when he came into the land from Haran, and so this particular location was not only strategic from a military standpoint, it also held rich historical associations.

And so they were eager, anticipating the victory as they marched up to Canaan from Jericho. The city of Ai is a very interesting little city, and also there's some confusion surrounding the city. From the 1930s on, they've been doing extensive excavation in Ai, and they've not been able to find any evidence of an Israelite invasion.

There's no destruction lair at the time when you would expect the Israelites to have arrived in the land. They find a lair much earlier, about 2200 B.C., about the time of Abraham, or actually a little before Abraham, but there's no indication that the Israelites ever conquered the city. There doesn't seem to be any walled city there at that time, and this has caused quite a bit of confusion.

The liberals say, see, we told you so. The book of Joshua is a book of fables. And conservatives say, no, you're just digging on the wrong hill.

But I'd like to suggest another theory that I think gives the story a bit more impact. The name Ai is not really the name of a city or a geographical location, it's a description. It means the ruin.

And all the way through the Old Testament, wherever that name occurs, it's always used that way, the ruin. It always has an article in front of it, in front of the noun, and always seems to refer not to a city, but rather to a pile of stones or a ruin. When Abraham came into the land of Canaan and he camped, it says he camped between Bethel and the ruin.

And I believe at the time Abraham lived there, it was one of these flat top tells that you find all over the Near East, and there was no one living there. It was a ruin at that time, no city there. But at the time of the conquest, when Joshua and the Israelite army invaded Canaan, there were a group of nomads, shepherds, and others that were camping on top of this tell.

There was no walled city there, no city of any size at all. Temporary structures, huts, shacks, tents, and the sort of things that semi-nomads would live in, but no city of any size. Which helps us to understand something of the attitude of the Israelites as they go on to say later in the account, it's small, it's insignificant, there's nothing to conquering this site.

After all, if they had taken a city like Jericho with its great walls, how much more easily they could take an undefended, unwall city. And this perhaps was what was behind their overconfidence. The Jews are master storytellers.

One device that storytellers use to stir up interest is to get the hearers on the inside of the story, so that they know something that no one else knows. If you've ever watched Columbo, you know that that's one of the first things they always do. They show you the murder scene or whatever the crime is, and so you know who the culprit is, but Columbo doesn't know and he sort of blunders his way through, and doesn't appear to know what he's doing, but you know, you see.

And that's one of the things that makes that series so interesting. This is what the storytellers did in Joshua 7. They begin by letting you in on something that Joshua didn't know, and most of the Israelites didn't know, who the culprit is. And he's named in verse 1. Let's begin reading with chapter 7, 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'll read later, he hid them in his tent without anyone's knowledge. And in direct contradiction to what God had told the people, over in chapter 6, verse 18, they were told to keep themselves 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 to it. If they took any of the articles, furniture, apparel, or the precious metals that belonged to the Canaanites, instead of devoting them 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 they were to destroy everything that belonged to them. And so we see

here at the outset, Achan defied that command.

Israel was told that they would be troubled if this occurred, and Achan, in defiance of even that consequence, took the things that were under the ban and hid them in his tent. It's bothered people for years, I'm sure, that the kind of Lord that we know would take that kind of action against people, that he would tell his people to utterly destroy an entire civilization. And yet there's no question that that indeed was the command.

There are some things I think that we need to know. The first is that there were Canaanites that worshipped the Lord, that came over into Israel and were assimilated right into the nation because they believed. They believed that the Lord was God.

Their names occur throughout the history of Israel. One we saw last week, Rahab. Others occur.

One of David's best friends, Uriah, was a Hittite. He was a Canaanite. And there must have been many more.

And we know that's the heart of God. Wherever there's an open and sensitive, responsive heart, he always responds. And 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 own people would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years until the iniquity of the Amorites was complete, until they filled up the full measure of their sins. And he left behind the truth that the patriarchs believed and taught.

And he left behind men like Melchizedek and others who were sources of light and truth to the Canaanites. They had many opportunities to respond to the truth. For 600 years, from the time God told Abraham until the conquest, they had opportunities to respond to the truth.

But despite this, the whole civilization, by the time the Israelites entered the land, was decadent. And they either had to be exterminated or they would exterminate the nation of Israel. There was no other option.

They would either be mastered or they would become the masters. And so they were told to devote them to destruction. That is, to offer them up as it were a great burnt offering to God.

Cities were to be destroyed. Everything that belonged to the Canaanites was to be destroyed. But in violation of the ban, Achan took some of the things and hid them in his tent.

Now we're on the inside and the story begins to unfold in verse 2. Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Bethoven, 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 go up to Ai. Do not make all the people toil up there, for they are few." Small group, insignificant, nothing to be greatly bothered about. 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 that 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 that they had followed when they conquered Jericho. And it seemed like a reasonable thing to do. Now we're not specifically told here that Joshua did not consult the angel of Jehovah, but there's no mention of any instruction given by the commander-in-chief, the angel of the Lord, who was responsible for the crusade.

It doesn't appear that he talked to him. He acted on his own because it seemed a reasonable thing to do. After all, this is the way they had operated in the past.

Now had he consulted the commander-in-chief, he would have been given entirely different instructions as we'll see later. But I think that because Joshua himself was uninstructed, he acted according to the most reasonable pattern that he had available to him, what he had done in the past. But as we know, God seldom does things the same way He's done them in the past.

The one thing predictable about the Lord is that He's totally unpredictable. You never know what He's going to do. Isaiah says, Don't ponder the things of the past, I'm going to do something new.

I often think of that passage in the light of the modern trend toward nostalgia, which I think is on the way out. I saw a piece of graffiti the other day that said, Nostalgia ain't what it used to be. But we do tend to look back and we get our direction from the way things have been done in the past.

I had a professor in seminary who used to tell me, 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've 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 new and the innovative, the creative thing that 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 the report.

And they went up to take Ai and they were disastrously defeated. It appears from the account that they even lost the ground that they had gained earlier. They were chased all the way back to the Jordan, all the way to the descent where the rock quarries were, where the gorges went down into the Jordan.

All the way back to the river. And they could have stopped at that point and said, Well, we've won one and lost one and we'll try someplace else. But they couldn't.

They had to face the city of Ai because they knew that they either had to master that enemy or they would be mastered by the enemy. And the people gave way to despair. They felt that they were defeated.

In verse 6, 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.

O 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? Doesn't that sound like us? Joshua begins by blaming the Lord. It's your fault.

You're the one who brought us over the Jordan. It's all your fault. And then he gives way to self-pity.

Oh, if we'd only stayed on the other side of the Jordan. Of course, their memory was short because things were grim on the other side of Jordan. But they had forgotten.

I've seen in my own life and in the lives of so many young believers the same experience. We come out of the world and initially there's such confidence in the Lord and there are times of great victory and accomplishment. And then we discover that things aren't 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 and we forget the guilt and we forget the memories and we forget the death. But we think it was better back there.

You see, we have not yet learned how to fight in the land. And 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 abilities and we try to act on that basis.

And God leads us into failure. In order for us to understand that there is another way of operating, there is another way of living, a whole new basis for living in the land. And the only way we can learn that is through defeat.

Now this is Israel. And they sense that they are defeated. They are on the run.

And God responds. Because that's the sort of Lord we have. He's not going to leave them in defeat.

He's going to tell them what the next step is. And in verse 10, the Lord said to Joshua, Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? Israel has sinned and they have 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 anymore 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's 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. You're the one who transgressed. It's not God's fault.

It's your fault. Israel, you have sinned. Now you see, there is a principle here that's spelled out in great detail in the New Testament.

And the principle 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 offering.

It says his face fell. God said to Cain, Sin is crouching at the door, but you must master it. Sin is like a lion that's 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, if you do gain mastery over it, there will be a lifting up. Now the passage that was read earlier in Romans 6 spells out this principle.

Man was made to be mastered and we will either be mastered by sin or we will master sin. There's no middle ground. We think we can temporize with sin somewhat.

There are certain sins that we like. They're agreeable. They're enjoyable.

And we can become involved to some extent in these sins, but we don't realize that when we do, then we fall under the control of sin. And that sin begins to master us. They tell me in New Guinea that they catch monkeys by cutting a hole in a gourd.

They hollow out a gourd and they cut a little tiny hole in the gourd and they put seeds in there and the little monkey puts his hand in the gourd and he grasps the seeds in his hand and then he can't get his fist out. It's like a little stopper. And of course all he has to do to gain his freedom is let go of the seeds.

But he won't do that. He grasps the seeds. And that's what the Lord is saying to us and to the nation here.

That when we grasp sin and we hold it in our life, then we become a slave 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 it spills over onto everyone around us, destroys our relationship with others. Or we think we can get by with a little bit of jealousy or a little bit of envy or reading a little bit of pornography, but soon we're absorbed right into it and we're controlled by it, mastered by it, and it becomes the Lord of our life.

Now this is what God is trying to say to His people in this account and to us that you cannot temporize with sin. You can't play with it. You can't go just so far and cut it off because it will destroy you.

The wages of sin is death. That's the last statement that was read to us this morning. Not physical death, but the sort of death-like state that 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. That's the result of sin that we cling to. I wonder how many times in my life I've looked at some area of my life that I don't like at all because it embarrasses me and makes me look bad in front of others.

And so I pray that God will take that out of my life. And God says, no, really the problem is over here. It's this sin.

But you see, I like that one. And God says, until that one is dealt with, that one will control you. We can't have it both ways.

We can't allow Achan to live. And the Lord is so good to put His finger precisely on the issue. These vague feelings of guilt that we have don't come from God.

They come from Satan. The kind of free-floating fear and anxiety that assails us from time to time. That doesn't come from God.

When God sees an issue of rebellion or resistance in our life, He puts His finger precisely on it and He says, that 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.

In verse 16, 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 been this way before. God never rebukes him for his ignorance. He just has to learn through the experiences that arise.

But when he does learn, he acts. So he arises early in the morning and he acts. He brought Israel near by tribes and the tribe of Judah was taken.

He first selects the princes from each of the tribes. Twelve princes. He casts lots and it falls upon the tribe of Judah.

And then the subdivisions of Judah and the various families and clans. And finally in verse 18, he brought his household near man by man and Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah from the tribe of Judah was taken. And 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 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold, 50 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." And he found out. I really believe that had Achan repented earlier, he would have been forgiven. The Scriptures say that if we judge sin, then we will not have to be judged.

But if we don't put to death sin in our life, then sooner or later God, in His mercy, will have to find us out in that area. Because the sin has to be brought out into the light. You see, God is committed to bringing us into the fullness of our inheritance in Christ.

And anything that impedes that program has to be dealt with. So if we do not judge it, He will have to judge it in some way. Not in any final 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's interesting to me that throughout this entire process, even through the loss of life, Achan does not respond. It indicates something of the hardness of his heart.

He was committed to rebellion. And now these few trinkets are brought out, certainly insignificant when compared with the loss of life of 36 of Israel's fine young men. And I'm certain now that Achan saw the paltriness of those articles.

And then in verse 22, So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and behold, it was concealed in his tent with the silver underneath. And when he 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.

They had to go up to the south of Jericho. That's where the valley of Achor is located. Because they had been driven all the way back to their starting point.

And they took all of these items, the things that Achan had stolen, and they brought them out into the light and then up to the valley of Achor. And in verse 25, Joshua said, "'Why have you troubled us?' This is the word from which the term valley of Achor, trouble, is taken. "'Why have you troubled us?' Remember, God had told Israel, as we know from chapter 6, that if anyone breaks the ban, he will trouble the nation.

"'Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day.' And all Israel stoned him 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 wrath.

Therefore, the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day." Now, that's a hard story. I personally do not believe that the children were stoned in this act. If you have a New American Standard Bible, you'll notice that they changed the pronouns through here.

They stoned him. They burned them. That is, the various items that had been stolen and the things that belonged to Achan, his tent, his cattle, and so forth.

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. And I cannot believe that God would command something in one instance and then defy that very command in another instance, unless the children somehow were implicated in the act. We just don't know.

But it appears that Achan himself was the one who was stoned. Now, this is a very difficult thing to understand. Unless we see God's attitude towards sin, the alternative was a life of defeat, God's people would be destroyed.

And that's why they had to act so decisively, so completely. And that's the way God wants us to deal with sin. What are the areas in my life and in your life that trouble us and trouble our families? I think we can take this passage both individually and corporately.

It's true in our own lives as individuals. If we harbor sin in any area, then we become the slave of sin in other areas of our life. It's also true within the Lord's body here.

If there's one brother or sister who's out of phase and acting in rebellion, it hurts all the body as it did the nation of Israel. And it hurts our families. What are the things in our lives that ought to be brought out into the light and stoned? We want to somehow preserve them.

God says put them to death because the alternative is to die. To fall into the misery of a life where you're a prey to every enemy. There's no alternative.

Perhaps some of you men are resentful of your own sons, threatened by them perhaps because of some success that they've enjoyed in school or in athletics. And you're bitter toward them and you cut them off. And that's poisoning your home and destroying your relationship.

Or perhaps some of you women are dominating your homes not because you want to, but because your husband is not leading. So you feel that you have to take that responsibility and your home is trouble. And 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. Some area of your life that you've hidden.

And you know in your spirit that it's caused you to withdraw from your parents because of guilt and you react in irritation toward them and you resent them, but down deep inside you know it's because you've been deceiving them. Those are all the things that need to be brought out into the light. Exposed.

And then put to death. Have no mercy on them. And once they're put to death, to accept one another back in to the family with warmth and understanding.

Not to say, well, I thought that was the problem and heap further condemnation on them. Or I'm glad you finally admitted that you're wrong. But as in the case of Rahab, to accept them back with warmth and with love, with understanding.

That's the only way to deal with trouble in our lives, in our families, in our relationships with one another as members of God's family. There's an interesting passage later in the Prophets about the Valley of Achor. Turn to the book of Hosea, will you? It's the first of the Minor Prophets.

It comes right after the book of Daniel. Chapter 2. Here, the book of Hosea is also a book describing a troubled relationship here between Hosea the prophet and Gomer, his wife, who was unfaithful to him. And Hosea went after her, not once but twice, perhaps frequently, to bring her back and to win her again and to set right this troubled relationship.

And it appears that he's eventually forced to use rather strong measures as God has to use on His people to discipline her. But in verse 14 we read, Therefore, behold, I will allure her and bring her out into the wilderness. That's where it all began, the relationship with God's people and the Lord.

He's going to begin at the very beginning again and establish the kind of relationship that they formerly had. And I'll speak kindly to her. I'll 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 proverbial for the good results of discipline in a life because the nation of Israel from the Valley of Achor went on to conquer Ai and then in seven short years to complete the conquest of northern and southern Canaan. And it grew out of the experience that 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're willing to let God put His finger on those areas of our life where we are consciously resisting His will and bring them out into the light and put them to death, receive forgiveness for them, and then go on in His power. Let's stand together, shall we? Father, what consolation and hope we derive from the Word. We ask that these words might strike us where it's needed, that we might take them to heart, that we would be willing to face the areas of our life where we've been resisting You and put them away, and to do so in that final and ultimate sense that You've described here, and to begin to walk in newness of life.

We thank You that You cleanse us from all unrighteousness and empower us to be all that You've asked us to be. And we thank You in Jesus' name. Amen.

---

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/11/SID11453.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/david-roper/learning-from-losing/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**