

The Spoils of Patience: What Achan Missed at Ai

Olaf Standley
Oak Hill Baptist Church
4/21/2026

The account of Achan in Joshua 7–8 offers a sobering and instructive picture of disobedience, patience, and the consequences of acting apart from the Lord's command. After the miraculous victory at Jericho, God had clearly instructed Israel that all the devoted things in that city were to be set apart for Him (Joshua 6:17–19, ESV). This was not merely a restriction; it was an act of worship. Jericho, as the firstfruits of conquest, belonged wholly to the Lord. Yet Achan saw valuable items—a beautiful cloak, silver, and gold—and took them for himself, hiding them in his tent (Joshua 7:21). In doing so, he chose immediate gratification over faithful obedience.

What makes Achan's sin especially tragic is what unfolds in Joshua 8. After Israel deals with the sin in the camp, the Lord gives them victory over Ai. This time, however, God explicitly allows the people to take the spoil for themselves: "Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves" (Joshua 8:2, ESV). The contrast is striking. What was forbidden in Jericho is permitted in Ai. The very kind of wealth Achan grasped for prematurely would soon have been available to him legitimately, had he simply trusted and waited on the Lord.

This contrast highlights a central biblical principle: God's timing is as important as God's commands. Achan's failure was not only that he took what God had forbidden, but that he refused to trust that God would provide in His time. The temptation he faced is familiar to all believers—the desire to secure now what God has not yet given. Instead of trusting the Lord's provision, Achan acted as though God might withhold something good from him, echoing the same distrust seen in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1–6).

Furthermore, Achan's sin reminds us that disobedience rarely affects only the individual. Israel's defeat at Ai in Joshua 7 was a direct result of hidden sin within the camp. Thirty-six men died, and the hearts of the people melted in fear (Joshua 7:5). What Achan likely considered a private act had devastating public consequences. Had he waited on the Lord, not only would he have avoided judgment, but he would have spared his community from loss and discouragement.

The narrative also underscores the difference between taking and receiving. Achan took what he wanted, when he wanted it, in defiance of God's word. In contrast, in Joshua 8, the Israelites receive the spoils of Ai as a gift from God, in accordance with His command. This distinction is crucial. What is taken in disobedience leads to loss, while what is received in obedience leads to blessing. The same object—wealth—can either be a curse or a blessing depending on how and when it is obtained.

In a broader theological sense, Achan's story points to the importance of trusting God's character. Scripture repeatedly affirms that God does not withhold good from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11). Achan's actions reveal a heart that doubted this truth. If he had believed that God's commands were for his good and that God would provide, he could have resisted the

temptation. Waiting on the Lord is not passive resignation; it is active trust in God's wisdom, provision, and timing.

The gospel provides the ultimate answer to the failure we see in Achan. Where Achan took what was forbidden and brought judgment upon himself and others, Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the Father in every way. Though He had every right to glory, He "emptied himself" and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7–8, ESV). On the cross, Christ bore the judgment that sin deserves—not only for open rebellion but also for the hidden sins of the heart. Through His death and resurrection, those who trust in Him are forgiven and given a new heart that can learn to trust God's timing. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to grasping and taking; we are freed to wait, knowing that God has already secured for us an eternal inheritance far greater than any temporary spoil (1 Peter 1:4).

Finally, this account calls believers to examine their own lives. How often do we grasp for something God has not yet given—whether success, recognition, security, or material gain—rather than waiting on Him? The story of Achan reminds us that impatience can lead to unnecessary loss, while obedience positions us to receive God's blessings in the right way and at the right time. If Achan had waited, the spoils of Ai could have been his without guilt, without judgment, and without regret. His story stands as both a warning and an invitation: trust the Lord, obey His word, and wait for His provision.