**ACHAN’S AND ISRAEL’S SIN**

Joshua 7:1-26, Key Verse: 11

“Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions.”

In today’s passage we see Israel’s first defeat in their campaign to take over the promised land of Canaan. This defeat happened because of serious sin that had been infected the community of God’s people. But God helps Joshua and Israel to deal with it, painful though it is, so Israel can be united again and move forward. It’s not easy or fun to deal with real sin, but it has to be done. In the church, sin has to be dealt with squarely or else the church can end up divided and powerless. Let’s pray that today we may see what is a sin against devoted things, and what is necessary to be cleansed from it.

1. Sin leads to Israel’s defeat (7:1-5)

In Chapter 6 and M. Paul’s message two weeks ago, we saw how Israel won an overwhelming victory at Jericho, after obeying God’s commands to march around the city once for six days and then seven times on the seventh day. When they shouted and the priests blew their horns, the walls came tumblin’ down. We also learned that this act was not just for Israel’s sake to take a city for themselves, but God’s act of judgment against the Canaanite people. For this reason, God gave specific instructions for how to deal with the city and all its wealth. In Chapter 6:17-19 it said, *“The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. 18 But 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. 19 All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.”* None of the spoils from Jericho were to be taken by individual Israelites. Why? Since Jericho was the first city conquered in the promised land, it was to be given 100% to God. This is the principle of the firstfruits. There would be more than enough to provide for Israel later as they continued to conquer the promised land.

This was a very clear command, and at first it seemed that everyone had obeyed it. But sadly, someone had not. Look at Chapter 7 verse 1. *“But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.”* A man named Achan stole some of the devoted treasure for himself. During the battle of Jericho, he must have wound up in a place by himself and had the opportunity to stash some things away with nobody seeing. But God saw it; because what he stole was the devoted things, Achan was stealing not from people, but from God, and it says the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.

One servant of God told me about one small incident that happened when they were a young disciple. The church had given them some money to take and pay for daily bread devotional books, and they had to hold the money for a while. So in the interim, they kind of used some of the money to buy their own stuff until their next paycheck came. There was no intent to steal or anything like that; it was more like just casually mixing the money together. But when this disciple told their Bible teacher about it, the Bible teacher treated it very seriously and taught the disciple about the need to treat God’s money as holy and not even have a hint of using it for ourselves. I thought this was a good contemporary example of what devoted things are and how we should deal with them.

Notice that verse 1 says the Lord’s anger burned against Israel. Why was God angry at all Israel for what just one person had done? This shows us that sin never affects just one person. Sin is like an infectious disease. If this sin was not found out and dealt with, its influence would spread through the community like poison, and Israel could not be a holy people for God. Paul expressed this principle in first Corinthians when he wrote, *“Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough,”* where yeast refers to the influence of sin. In the church also, the sin of one member affects everyone, because the church is one body, the body of Christ (1Co 12:26).

Joshua and Israel did not know what Achan had done, so they went ahead with their plans to continue conquering the cities of Canaan. Verse 2 says, “*Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, ‘Go up and spy out the region.’ So the men went up and spied out Ai.”* The second city Israel planned to conquer was named Ai, and Joshua sent a spying expedition just like he had done with Jericho.

The spies came back with what seemed to be good news. When they returned to Joshua, they said, *“Not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.”* (3) Compared to Jericho with its strong walls, taking Ai looked like a piece of cake. The spies even suggested that Joshua should just send a smaller portion of the army, for the sake of efficiency.

I think what we are seeing here is actually a second sin in this passage, besides the one committed by Achan, and this was a sin that all Israel participated in. It is the sin of pride. Some people have said that for God’s people, success is actually a more dangerous source of temptation than failure. Israel was in high spirits because of their great victory at Jericho, but this made them forget God. They thought that they could easily take Ai because it looked smaller and weaker than Jericho. But they forgot one thing: who was it that made the walls of Jericho fall down? It was not themselves! How quickly they forgot that they had taken Jericho only by obeying God’s directions, not by their own power.

Notice that these plans to attack Ai were made without ever inquiring of God. Even Joshua himself took the spies’ advice without seeking God’s answer. What was the result? Look at verses 4 and 5. “*So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, 5who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.”*

This was Israel’s first defeat. Their army was beaten back in a shameful and humiliating fashion, with loss of life. It says that at this, “the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.” Does this expression sound familiar? Back in Chapter 2, Rahab had told the Israelite spies in Jericho: “all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.” What a turnaround! Now that Israel had sinned and broken faith with God, in their hearts they felt the same sentence of judgment that the Canaanite peoples had felt before. Israel’s illusion of invulnerability was shattered. They were now terrified for their own lives, because now they were in enemy territory in Canaan, and any display of weakness could lead to the Canaanite peoples attacking Israel to completely destroy them.

This disaster could absolutely have been prevented. I am sure that if Joshua and Israel had inquired of God before attempting this attack, God would have told them about the sin of Achan and they could have dealt with it without having to suffer this defeat. God’s desire is not to lay a trap and make us fall in it. But it’s our basic responsibility to live humbly before God and respect his holiness. Let’s pray to remember that all of our victories have come from relying on God, not ourselves.

1. Joshua and the elders seek God’s solution (6-15)

Look at verse 6. “*Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads.”* After their stinging defeat at Ai, Joshua came to God very sincerely, together with the elders of Israel. God had succeeded in getting their attention! To their credit, at least they now came to God humbly.

What did Joshua pray at this time? Look at verses 7-9. “*And Joshua said, “Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! 8Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? 9The 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?”*

When he says, “Why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan …to destroy us?” and “If only we had been content to stay on the other side,” it sounds like the unbelieving grumbling the Israelites had done under Moses after they escaped Egypt and were being pursued by Pharaoh. It shows how deeply Joshua’s faith has been shaken. He is full of fear that new Israel will be totally wiped out. He still has some growing to do.

But one thing he says right is in verse 8. “Pardon your servant, Lord.” Joshua knows that sin is what really defeats people in a holy God’s eyes, and if it’s his own sin that has led to this defeat, he asks for forgiveness. He also prays to God on the basis of God’s own name and glory. He knows God’s purpose is to use Israel to reveal the glory of his name, and so how can he let them be wiped out?

God graciously answered Joshua’s prayer. First, God wanted to make sure Joshua didn’t waste any more time feeling sorry for himself, so he said, *“Stand up! What are you doing down on your face?”* (10) Joshua, as a leader of God’s people, simply had to understand the problem and go through with God’s way of resolving it.

And indeed, the problem was sin. In verses 11 and 12 God says, “they have stolen”, using the plural, not the singular. He reveals that devoted things have been taken. God also says, “They have lied,” because whoever did this hid what they had done and pretended to have not done anything wrong. And most of all, God says, “they have violated my covenant.” This sin was not just a petty theft, but a violation of sacred terms made between God and his chosen people. God says that this sin is the reason Israel cannot stand against their enemies. I was reminded by this that even things that no other person knows about still have a very real effect on our lives. Sin’s consequences are always there. In this case, the visible consequences were Israel’s shameful defeat at Ai. But even if there are no earthly consequences of sin, there are spiritual consequences. God said that whoever had taken the devoted things had now, themselves, become devoted to destruction. The ultimate consequence of sin is for the soul of the person who commits it.

God gave Israel a very specific procedure to follow to be cleansed of this sin. First, he had all the people of Israel consecrate themselves (13). Then, in the morning, every tribe had to present itself before the Lord, and God would select the tribe and family and finally the individual to show who was guilty. Most likely this was done by casting lots, which God would control to point to Achan.

Why did God do it this way? That is, why did he get all Israel involved and make this long process to show who was guilty, instead of just telling Joshua in the first place who it was? It’s because, as we saw before, this sin was not just a one-person issue; it affected the whole community, so the whole community had to deal with it. As this selection process narrowed down who it was, each person would have an opportunity to examine their own hearts before God.

This teaches us that if there is a sin issue in the spiritual community, it has to start not with pointing the finger but with each person examining themselves. One person’s sin is never just that person’s, or at least not uniquely so. Any specific sin is really just one expression of the sinful nature that is in all our hearts. When we someone else caught in a sin, it’s always true to say, “Except for the grace of God, that’s me.” So even dealing with just one person’s sin in the church must also involve communal repentance and godly sorrow. Otherwise, we might be guilty of just trying to find a scapegoat, someone to pin blame on. Let’s pray for God’s wisdom for how to remove the sin from among us.

1. Achan faces the consequences of his sin (16-26)

Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and the tribe of Judah was chosen. Then the clan of the Zerahites was chosen, then the family of Zimri, and finally the lot fell to Achan himself. God had now proven that he had seen what Achan did. Joshua charged Achan to give glory to God by not hiding what he had done (19). In our Bible study Friday night, someone mentioned that if Achan was genuinely repentant, he could have come forward and confessed his sin at the very beginning, instead of waiting to see if he would be found out.

Anyway, at this time Achan confessed. What does his confession show? Look at verses 20 and 21. *“Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: 21When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”*

Achan stole a Babylonian robe, two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold. He said that when he saw these treasures, he coveted them. To “covet” means to feel a strong greedy desire for something. We know that “Do not steal” is one of the Ten Commandments, but the prelude to stealing, “Do not covet”, is also one of the ten. Greed is a very serious sin, though it is tolerated so much in our culture. It’s implied today that you can covet anything you want, as long as you’re willing to work hard for it. But the Bible shows us that covetousness is very bad because it is idolatry. How easy it is for us to idolize something that catches our attention, whether it be fancy clothes or a car or a laptop or just plain old dollars. Our sinful desire leads us astray into thinking that thing will make us happy, and so it basically becomes an object of our worship. Then our hearts are darkened and turned away from God.

Achan confessed his sin, but the penalty of it still had to be paid. Joshua sent men to Achan’s tent and they found all the things there. They brought them back to the Israelites, and not just what Achan had stolen but everything he owned, including his animals. They stoned him to death, and his sons and daughters as well, and burned everything.

This is one of the difficult things to read in the Bible, mainly in regard to why they also stoned Achan’s sons and daughters. We know the Bible teaches that children are not to be put to death for their parents’ sins. Someone suggested that maybe Achan’s sons and daughters were grown up and participated with him in his sin. All I can say is that I am personally very thankful that we live in the dispensation of Christ and not of Israel. This is definitely not how we are to deal with sin in the church of Jesus. The New Testament states that the earthly government is the one that holds the sword of physical punishment. There is to be discipline in the church, but it is spiritual, and the true judgment of sin is for God alone.

So, as Christians, what should this event teach us? For one thing, it teaches us that “the wages of sin is death.” Sin is a deadly poison. Achan’s example also teaches us how strictly we should deal with our own sin. The way that Achan and all his belongings had to be destroyed shows how completely we have to leave behind our sinful life. Our sinful life is the life that is doomed to destruction. So when we follow Jesus, we shouldn’t try to carry any piece of that with us. We can’t play tricks on God; we can’t hide anything from him.

Verse 26 says that after Achan was killed, “*the Lord turned from his fierce anger.*” You know, Achan’s sin is not worse than our sins. We deserve the same penalty he got. But the best news is that Jesus took that penalty in our place. Jesus didn’t deserve death, but on the cross he willingly took all the blame and guilt for our sins on himself. Romans 3:25 says, “*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished…”* On the cross, Jesus took away the wrath of God from us, just as Achan’s death turned away the anger of God from Israel. Then Jesus rose from the dead, showing that sin has been defeated once and for all. Hallelujah! When we come to God with a repentant heart, we can see that Jesus was singled out to take the punishment for all our sins. Jesus actually is our scapegoat, by the Biblical definition of the word from the book of Leviticus. Jesus is the one who carries away the sins of God’s people.

Today we saw the bitter fruit of Achan’s sin and Israel’s sin. It reminds us that God is holy, and that sin is not something he can just ignore. Let’s pray to keep devoted things holy in our hearts. Most of all, our own lives should be devoted fully to God. Let’s pray for building a community of forgiven sinners that can deal with sin in God’s way.