

Joshua: How Achan's Sin was Found Out

Joshua 7:1-15

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March 24, 2002

On September 17, 1791, Major General Arthur St. Clair headed north from what is now Cincinnati, Ohio, to establish a fort at the head of the Maumee River where he was to be soundly defeated by the Shawnee Indians. He had been brought almost out of retirement by President George Washington. He took one look at the opposition, whom he thought should be around 1000 people, Shawnee Indians. He thought to himself that 3000 men would be sufficient. By the time he reached the Maumee River, half of his men had disappeared. Somewhere in the region of 600 of his horses had been injured in fighting because of the error of laying food for them on the ground instead of in troughs. In less than three hours, those 1000 Shawnee Indians had killed 700 of his men, countless numbers of men were injured, and Major General Arthur St. Clair and the few men that he had left ran for their lives. It is one of the, proportionately that is, one of the most bitter defeats on the soil of America. George Washington said to General St. Clair before he went into battle, "Beware of surprises." After the battle, Washington wrote of St. Clair, "He's worse than a murderer."

Well, what we have here in Joshua chapter 7 is a story of a rout. It may not have been, but it may have been of the proportions that are recounted here in Joshua 7, in our translation, mainly around 3000 men, though there is a lot to be said. But it perhaps was a lot less than that. Certainly 36 of them were killed. They have just come from the experience of the mighty hand of God upon them in Jericho, where they had been more than conquerors. They had merely walked around the city and shouted, and the walls of the city had collapsed. They had gained what they had been seeking after, namely, a bridge head into the land of Canaan. The next location, moving westward to the center most point of the land of Israel, was this relatively small and insignificant town of Achan.

What this narrative is trying to do is set the stage, the reasons for the disaster. The reasons why Israel failed so miserably in taking the city of Achan . It's only at the end of the narrative, the end of the chapter, that what is said in verse 1 of the narrative is actually walked through to it's conclusion.

I. The spiritual failure of Israel.

What the narrator is trying to tell us, indeed with the very opening words, that the blame for this disaster can not solely be laid upon the shoulders of Achan, because as the narrator tells us in the very opening words, the sons of Israel acted unfaithful. There was something about Israel that allowed Achan to do what he did and to think that he could get away with it. That is, in the eyes of the narrator, is as serious a matter and as serious a sin as that which Achan himself did. I want us, then, to look at this passage, both tonight and next week. I've decided to slow down a little here in Joshua 7 because there is so much for us to learn. Much of it is painful. I want us to look at the particular sin of Achan next week. This evening I want us to look at the passage in it's over all context because it has three major things to teach us.

It teaches us something, first of all, in the tragedy in the defeat of Ai. In verses 2 through 5 we are given a description of the tragedy of this defeat. It was the next stage in their access into the land. What the story wants to underline is that there was among the people of God, a spirit that in their approaching the people of Ai. There seems to have been on their part something of a presumptuousness about their victory. Perhaps they reasoned that God would be with them no matter what. Perhaps they reasoned that because God had given them victory in the past they would certainly know victory in the future, no matter what they did, no matter what they thought. The spies come back from Ai and they are full of victory that has just occurred in Jericho and they say to Joshua and the men, "We have spied out Ai. There is nothing to it. It's just a small little town, it's a piece of cake. We can take this little town without so much of the slightest effort. There is no need for you to send all of them in. Just send a few. You will find that the men of Ai will come screaming out begging for mercy."

You notice as you read these verses 2 through 5, that there is absolutely no reference what so ever to the Lord. In making their plans, in assessing their enemies, in going into war against Ai, they do not so much as consult the Lord God Almighty. There seems to be, on the part of the people of God, a presumptuousness that the victory of Ai is absolutely certain. It is as though they had completely forgotten that Jericho was taken, not by their own wits, and not by their own might, and not by their own abilities, but by the mighty power and Spirit of God. How quickly they forgot that lesson. How quickly, how quickly after a spiritual victory they once again turned to themselves and their own coming in order to try and secure the victory. Everything about this says to us, that Israel was trusting in the arm of flesh.

The narrator, the one who is telling this story as he wedges verses 2 through 5 in-between the story of Achan, wants us to understand that whatever it is that Achan did, and we'll see that later, however much Achan is to blame - and he was to blame - there was something within Israel itself that allowed Achan to think that he could violate the commandments of God and get away with it. The

narrator wants us to appreciate and understand that partly that was due to the general spirit that existed within Israel itself. Achan could say to himself, "I can actually do this and I can actually get away with it because the people of Israel, my brothers and sisters won't care." Perhaps we may be able to alleviate Joshua from blame, though that is going to be pretty difficult to do. Perhaps they had begun to think that so long as Joshua was with them they were going to be fine. So long as they had a great leader, everything was going to be 'ok.' So long as the one in charge was blessed of God, and look at the final verse of chapter 6, "so the Lord was with Joshua and his fame was in all the land," so long as they have one in charge who is famous everything is going to be 'ok.'

So you see what this story is saying to us? That because, because of the spiritual lethargy of the people of God, there arises from within them an Achan. Now I don't know about you, but I feel that deeply certain. The possibilities that a particular sin in relation to one member can be generated by the ethos of the people of God. That a certain member of the body of Christ may commit some foul sin because he or she has drawn the conclusion that the people of God will not care. There is no way of looking at this passage other than drawing the conclusion that there is a collective responsibility on the part of Israel for what Achan did.

Now I want us to pause for now and listen to the searching question, "Is that perhaps the kind of spirit that exists within our own fellowship?" That we are so proud of our past achievements, and let's face it, let's be blunt, let's allow the word to meddle a little here. There are many, many things about which our fellowship can be proud of and that within that spirit can grow such a feeling of well being about ourselves and about our attainments and about our history that we have forgotten what it is to seek the face of God. To ask whether God approves and whether God directs and whether God is leading us this way or that way. That God is so much a part of this fellowship that nothing, nothing can hinder our progress. My friends, I feel that deeply. It may be possible for someone to be devoting themselves to something God curses while at the same time thinking no one much will really care.

Is that kind of fellowship that we belong to? Do we still have a passionate concern for the glory of God in everything that we do? That we will not so much as take one step forward without seeking the approval of our heavenly father?

II. Joshua's response.

There is a second feature of this story that I want us to look at. The distinctive response of Joshua. Joshua makes a very distinct response, whatever we may think about Joshua's responsibility in all of this. For my part I can't but imagine that he himself, felt himself to be partly to blame. For Joshua, the buck stops here. He tears his clothes and he falls down, verse 6, before the ark of the

covenant until evening. I wonder what you think of Joshua's response. There is so much to commend isn't there? It's all together serious, it's all together reverent, it's full of sorrow, it's full of dignity, it's full of an awareness of the sovereignty and majesty and holiness of God. God has been offended and Joshua is aware of this. He opens his soul to God, pours out his soul to God. He is undone by what has happened. He says in his prayer, "Why did You bring us here, just to be defeated by the Amorites and the Canaanites, just for them to mock us?"

Then, notice, Joshua brings the very name of God into his prayer, "Because what are the Canaanites going to say about Your name as they see Your people being defeated?" It's a very moving prayer isn't it? Full of pathos, it's full of sadness, it's full of urgency, it's a somewhat desperate prayer. There is an enormous contrast between this prayer and what is said at the end of chapter 6 about Joshua, "that the Lord was with him and his fame was in all the lands." Imagine trying to tell that to Joshua now, while he is on his face before the ark of the Lord.

It is very appropriate that Joshua should be on his knees at this time, for then something extraordinary happens, something quiet extraordinary happens. Joshua is on his knees and pouring out his soul before God, and there is voice that comes to Joshua and says to Joshua, "Get up, get up from your knees. What are you doing on your knees, be quiet, get up from your knees." It's extraordinary. God stops and prays. In the middle of this prayer meeting, the middle of Joshua pouring out his soul, God, comes to Joshua and says to him, "This is not a time to be praying, this is a time to be doing."

This is a time for action because prayer, my friends, can often be a substitute for action. When you know in your heart of hearts what you ought to be doing and you say to yourself, "Well, let's pray about this now." Have you done that? Some of you have been contemplating forming intimate relationships that are inappropriate and you say to yourself, "Well let me pray about this. Let me ask God and see what He thinks about this," when it is perfectly clear what it is that you should be doing.

What's going on here. God is saying to Joshua very, very clearly, that the defeat of Ai was deemed to one thing, a violation of the covenant that God had established in chapter 6. In going into the cities of Canaan, the gold and the silver and the bronze was to be taken and brought to the sanctuary and anything else was to be destroyed. It was under the ban and someone has violated that covenant. God is saying to Joshua, "The reason for your defeat is plain and simple. Someone has violated the ban and Joshua, it's time for you to go into action."

That goes very deep doesn't it? That goes extraordinarily deep, that it's possible to hide behind facts of piety, a deep seated refusal to deal with the sin which has exposed my true life to Almighty God. There are times, my friends, when it is so

inappropriate to say, "I will go away and pray about this" because that can be but a mere excuse for not doing what is our plain our very, very plain requirement of God. It's as though God is saying to Joshua, "I don't want to hear your prayers anymore. I want you to get up. I want you to go away. I you to repent. I want you to deal with this sin. I want you to confess it. I want you to plead for mercy. I want you to deal with this problem and don't come back until it is done."

I wonder if I can pause a little and make this irritate a little, like a new shoe. You know a shoe has to be worn in. When you get a new shoe it grates a little, it chaffs. Is there something you need, that you know needs doing? You know it needs doing. In your marriage, in your sexual life, in your relationships, in your business, and you are pretending at piety by asking God for guidance when it's perfectly clear what it is you need to do.

III. Achan's sin.

There is a third thing in this passage. That is the disclosure of the sin of Achan. We know from the very beginning, the reason for the defeat of the people of God. The narrator has decided not to hold us in suspense. I want us to look in detail at Achan's sin next week, and if you think this is uncomfortable, I promise you, I promise you next weeks will be more uncomfortable. I want us to look at those four verbs: I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid.

Tonight I want us to look merely at the broader picture. God orders Achan to be destroyed. I can not imagine the solemnity of the way that was done. How they were brought forth by tribes and clans and families until eventually there was only one standing, and it's Achan. They take all that he has, his donkey and cattle, even his tent, even his tent and it's destroyed. Achan and his family are stoned to death and burned. You say, "Well, that's the Old Testament for you." If only you turn to the Acts of the Apostles, in the very wake of the out pouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And you read of Ananias and Sapphira, who are struck down dead over a piece of real estate that the church, you might think, had no business knowing about anyway. That my friends, is how far we have moved from a biblical understanding of the holiness and righteousness of God.

You may think that we live in more enlightened times, but the real thing about this passage, the real thing about this passage is that God gave this man Achan an opportunity to repent, a whole day to repent. Tomorrow morning consecrate yourself because tomorrow God is going to name this man. He had all night , he had all night to fess up. You know, my friends, I've been asking myself this question all afternoon, "Could Achan have found mercy had he confessed?" I believe with all of my heart he would have found some mercy in the heart of God.

You know, the real, real solemn thing about this passage is not that Achan was given an opportunity to repent, it was that he couldn't repent. He couldn't repent,

because sin had so hardened his heart that when the opportunity for repentance presented itself, he couldn't do it.

Some of you think you can repent just like that. Then, why don't you do it? That sin that's been gnawing at your life for months and perhaps years, why don't you repent of it tonight, because the truth is, the truth is, you can't in and of yourself and apart from the mercy and grace of God, you can't.

You know, the beautiful thing is that Jesus takes His name from Joshua, and as Joshua pleads, and isn't that pleading so poignant? When He speaks to him, my son. C.H. Spurgeon and Dr. John Gill, Calvinistic Baptists of the nineteenth century, believed that Achan was a true believer. I'm not so sure about that.

But you know, even Joshua couldn't offer Achan what Jesus can offer us. Somewhere to hide from the wrath of God. "Oh, safe to the rock that is higher than I, my soul in it's conflicts and sorrows would fly, so sinful, so really Thine, Thine would I be, Thou blessed Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee." It's the only place in this entire universe that is a safe place to hide from the coming wrath of almighty God, because however, however repulsive, however repulsive you may find this chapter and what happens to Achan and his family, however much it turns your stomach to read it, it's nothing. It's nothing in comparison to the solemnity of the Day of Judgment. On that day, when our sins will be shouted from the rooftops, there is only one safe place to hide, and "Hiding in Thee, O blessed Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee." Let's pray together.

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