

## **Joshua: The Morphology of Sin and Repentance**

**Joshua 7:16-27**

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Michael has been married for 25 years. He has three children; one is away from home and working. Two are in college. Michael is a successful businessman, in the eyes of the world. His business requires him to take frequent trips away from home for several days at a time. During one of these trips he finds himself lured to a bar where he meets a young woman. Actually, she's not that young, but the soft lighting hides a multitude of sins. And they start to talk. To his great surprise, Michael starts talking about his marriage: how the spark has gone, how lonely he now feels, and for the first time in years, he finds someone who is sympathetic and seemingly understanding. Now, if this were a novel, we could go on. But Michael ends up having an affair. He shocks himself as to how easy it was. He feels terrible in the morning. He had never done anything like this before. He'd thought about it, but he had never done it. Michael finds solace in that for some inexplicable reason, he gave this woman a false name! Imagine! It may help keep his identity safe. He convinces himself that this was a one-time thing. It will never happen again. He believes that he may have gotten away with it. He comes home the next day and never says a word. His wife suspects something, but dares not think the worst. Guilt racks him all the time, but he dare not say anything. He dare not let it show. And after a while he becomes good at it, hiding the sense of shame. Denial will be best course of action. And every now and then he contemplates returning there, especially when things aren't going so well in his marriage, and finds himself plotting and planning, that maybe he can do it again.

We are considering the story of Achan in Joshua 7, and last week we began to look at this story in its overall perspective. We looked at three things. We looked at the defeat in the attempted conquest of Ai. How the 36 Jewish men were killed. It appears there was some type of rout, and they failed to take the city. And we looked at Joshua's response, the deeply moving, poignant prayer of Joshua. And we looked, briefly, at the disclosure of Achan's sin. We looked at it in its broad perspective in connection with the story of redemption at this point. But this evening we need to return and look at this sin of Achan from a more detailed perspective, asking different questions now. Asking more personal questions. Not so much about what Achan's sin meant for the progress of the

kingdom of God or the conquest of the land of Canaan so much, but asking about more personal issues dealing with sin and temptation.

It's like a warning buoy that's flashing a light and saying to each and everyone of us here, and to some perhaps in particular, "You need to take careful heed to what is written here."

"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:11-13).

Our theme comes from something the seventeenth century puritan, John Owen writes: "Let not that Christian think that he makes any progress in true holiness who is not prepared to walk over the bellies of his lusts."

## **1. There is the struggle of sin**

There is a warfare taking place here, in which Satan is doing his utmost to undo all evidence of God's work in the lives of his people. His aim is both corporate and individual. Corporately, what Achan did affected the entire body. But it was also something that affected Achan, too. Both C H Spurgeon and Dr John Gill, nineteenth century Calvinistic Baptists, both believed that Achan was a believer. That's altogether possible. He was certainly a professing believer. He was a member of the covenant people of God. He had not doubt walked around the city of Jericho, and it's far too easy and convenient for us to push Achan away by saying, "Well, he wasn't a believer, and whilst the story is a terrifying one, that's, well, what unbelievers do. But I'm a child of God and God loves me and I love him and there's nothing in this story to scare me."

That would an entirely false perspective to take on this passage. Achan was member of the professing community of God's covenant people. He had evidently walked around the city of Jericho with all the other men. I doubt very much that he had planned this thing: everything about the way he relates the story to us seems to say that it happened spontaneously. But perhaps he did unconsciously. You know, we can sometimes find ourselves in situations of temptation because of our subconscious sublimily has moved us in that direction all along. He saw these things lying there. And something triggered in his mind. A desire, a thought. "These could be mine." He finds himself looking round. Why? To see if anyone is looking at him. And apparently, no one is. An opportunity has presented itself. And a struggle ensues.

Where is there any evidence of a struggle in the text? Well, look at the confession he makes. Its full: "I have sinned against the LORD the God of Israel," he says (v.20). You might suspect that this has been forced out of him. And that is true. But he could still deny it even then.

Some forty years ago, I was caught with my hand in the cookie jar! It was Christmas time and I knew where my mother hid the presents. It was always in the wardrobe in her bedroom. And one evening I went up there while my mother was out milking cows. You don't know anything about that. And I was caught. It was safe, because the door was such that whenever she entered I would hear it. I have my hand in the bag of presents and oblivious to the fact that my mother is watching me through the window. Its dark outside and I have the light on. I couldn't see her but she could see me and all of my glory. And she's saying, "Derek, what are you doing?" "Nothing!" I replied. "Nothing at all." And the worst of it, I found myself protesting, "I wasn't doing anything" hours later when she had seen the amusing side of it, and I was still protesting my innocence and the sense of unease at having been caught. And the truth be known, forty years later there still a little voice in my head that wants to say, "I wasn't doing anything."

Yes, Achan has most certainly been caught. I venture the opinion that Achan may well have had one of those out-of-body experiences as he found himself struggling with this opportunity. Have you ever had one? You know, when you're shouting at the children. You're shouting at someone you love and you see yourself floating in mid air and looking down at this possessed banshee who's yelling at the top of his voice, and you can't stop. A trigger has gone off, and it's going to find its conclusion. And you're saying, "Who in the world is this?" And it's you. The good that you would, you do not do. The evil that you would not, you find yourself doing.

But perhaps, after all, there had been little evidence of a struggle. I want to think that there was, but it's all too possible that Achan had long since let go of the watchfulness that ought to mark the believer to the extent that the only thing that had prevented him from doing this in the past was *opportunity*. And I wonder tonight if that's you. If the only thing that prevents you from committing that accursed sin, whatever it is, the only thing that's preventing you is the opportunity.

For some reason or another, spiritual affections have not been nourished and the only thing that prevents you from falling is the lack of an opportunity. The truth is, your guard is long since down, and the only thing that has kept you is the providence of God. Before you self-righteously condemn Achan, reckon with the fact that the only reason, the *only* reason you have not taken that sin in your mind to its full conclusion *is the lack of opportunity*. And do you see that, my friend? *That* opportunity has almost nothing to do with you at all. It is the merciful providence of God that has kept you from doing what your sinful heart would do (despite what you say in protest). The only reason why haven't sinned is because God hasn't opened the way for it to happen. When you have been at your weakest in terms of resolve, he has kept you! His providence has overshadowed you.

That's a terrifying thought, isn't it: that the only thing that keeps me and you from sin and apostasy is the lack of opportunity.

That leads me to consider another aspect:

## 2. There is a progress and complexity to sin

Sometimes, God gives that opportunity. I cannot explain that fully. John Newton speaks of that in his poem about crosses.

I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly His face.  
I thought that in some favoured hour  
At once He'd answer my request;  
And, by His love's constraining power,  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.  
Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart,  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

*He made feel the hidden evils of my heart!* That is what happens here. There is a progress to the sin. It begins with a sight. It's all about verbs: I *saw*, I *coveted*, I *took* and I *hid* (it is hidden) (v. 21). He saw. It begins there. It begins with the "eye gate" as Bunyan calls it. He saw, and in seeing, lost sight of God. Perhaps when Achan saw the objects, at that point Achan had not yet sinned. Perhaps. But sometimes we go looking for occasions to sin and afterwards try and explain them away by saying that we were caught off-guard and unprepared. Who knows but the subliminally, Achan had long since sowed the seeds that led him to this tent.

But the next verb says everything. He *coveted*. He desired to have something that wasn't his. In the words of that pitiful creature Gollum (Smeagol) in *the Lord of the Rings*, "Its mine. My precious. And I wants it!"

He SAW... and in seeing he LOST SIGHT of God.

The language is reminiscent of Genesis 3, isn't it. When Eve says, "I saw, it was beautiful and I took" (Gen. 3:6). And that is how temptation operates, and you need to know that. It begins with the eye and covetousness drives us to reach out and take. It was because Eve said: "it is desirable..." And you know how temptation works particularly in some areas of our lives: we see it, as we see a million things, but the image becomes in our minds an obsession, and we cannot

be rested until we reach out with our hands and take that which our souls crave for. That's why we teach our children:

*Be careful little eyes what you see There's a Father up above Who is looking down in love Watch your eyes, watch your eyes what you see.*

"I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1).

The battle is won or lost at the point of what the Puritans called motivating desire. Desire, you see, is the index of your heart. It's what comes out of a man, from deep within, that is what defiles a man, Jesus said to the Pharisees who were more concerned about external appearance than anything else. They were like white-washed sepulchers: all clean and sparkling on the outside, but inside full of dead men's bones and rotting flesh (Matt. 23:27).

Do you remember the story of Joseph in Genesis 39? He has been sold into slavery in the household of Potiphar, an Egyptian official. Moses describes Joseph as "well built and handsome" (39:6), setting us up for what comes next. His master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" (39:7). The next move is decisive. Joseph says to her immediately, "How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (39:9). And when, on another day, Potiphar's wife takes hold of Joseph by his cloak, Joseph runs, leaving the cloak behind! He had made a covenant with his God. His motivating desire was set on the glory of God, you see, and the battle against sin is lost whenever we allow a thought to linger and to take hold and to set down roots. That's why you need to "Strangle sin at birth" Owen says. That means keeping a close reign on imagination and thought.

There's a momentum to sin. It's like a ball rolling down a snowy hill getting bigger and bigger as it goes down. You could probably stop your car from rolling down a moderately inclined hill by leaning against it, but once it's started to move, it's going to be impossible. It's called momentum, it's gained a force all it's own. Once a sin has gained a certain momentum, it is virtually impossible for you stop it reaching its fully grown state.

"...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:14-15).

There is a progress and power to sin, but there is a deception to sin.

### **3. There is the deception of sin**

Achan becomes like a man seized by an octopus; all of its tentacles wrap round him. By the end of this chapter, he has broken more than one commandment.

There is dishonor done to God. There is covetousness. There is theft. And then there follows falsehood and deception.

What is that strikes you about this story? For me, it is the determination of God to uncover the web of deceit. This dramatic description of how the tribes, clans and families were separated out in a ritual that would have made you very nervous indeed. And as we saw last week, Achan was given a day to repent, but he didn't. Because he *couldn't* repent. Sin had woven its ugly tentacles around him to such an extent that he finds himself unable to repent. It had taken hold of him.

Do you remember, in 2 Samuel 10, how David, when he had sinned with Bathsheba, tried to cover up his sin? How, upon discovering that Bathsheba is pregnant, he tries to get her husband Uriah to sleep with his wife, even though he is presently engaged on the field of battle. Uriah refuses to do so. He sleeps at the door of the king, infuriating David. So the next day He makes Uriah drunk, thinking wine will give the occasion, and yet he still lies down at the door of the king's palace. And it is not until Nathan comes to him, with that little story about a rich man and poor man, and the rich man takes the only lamb that the poor man has in order to feed some guests, that David becomes indignant. The sin has hardened his heart so much that he cannot see himself in this story. He is so far down the road of denial that he cannot see himself until Nathan says, "You are the man!"

Achan has bought into the lie that somehow, somehow, he can deceive almighty God. That God doesn't see. It is possible to deceive the fellowship of God. To deceive the very elect. It's possible for you to be an Achan tonight, to be guilty of some horrible, horrible sin, and nobody will know about it. The seeds of apostasy might be in your heart, as they were in Judas' heart. You couldn't have picked out Judas from the 12, and said, "Well, you know, he's the one." When Judas was being spoken of by Jesus in the Upper Room as the betrayer, no one pointed the finger at him saying, "Well, I never trusted him from the start." No one. They said, "Is He talking about me?" We cannot read the Gospels without the writers giving the story away from the very beginning, "This is Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus for thirty shekels of silver." But the truth is that even if the disciples suspected something about him, they never said so. Can you imagine what goes on in Judas' mind during those hours of Thursday evening and early on Friday morning? As soon as it becomes obvious that Jesus is to be crucified, Judas is "seized with remorse" but not repentance. Remorse is the fear of having been found out. Repentance is fleeing to God for mercy and pardon. And filled with remorse, Judas goes out and hangs himself (Matt. 27:3).

You may deceive those you love. You may deceive yourself. But you cannot deceive God.

"The eyes of the Lord are in every place keeping watch on the evil and the good"

(Prov. 15:3).

“For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecc. 12:14).

Do you know the little expression, “A Little bird told me?” It comes from the Bible, and goes like this:

“Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,  
or curse the rich in your bedroom,  
because a bird of the air may carry your words,  
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.” (Ecc. 10:20)

Why do we think, when we are sinning, that God doesn't see what we do? Or is it, rather, that we know that He sees, and we don't really care? There's a fourth thing:

#### **4. There are consequences to sin?**

Because it implicates Achan's family. Many of you are troubled by verse 24. You should be. There would be something extraordinarily callous about you if you weren't troubled by the fact that his family, presumably his wife (though the text doesn't say so), but especially his sons and daughters (the text does specify them) were taken out and stoned with stones and their bodies burned with fire. You might think that this is unfair. That the principle of solidarity, that the whole family is held accountable for the sin of the father, God visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children, maybe you think that's unfair. All I can say is, “Walk around this text with fear and trembling and pay respect to this text.” I cannot explain to the sensitivities of Western, Twenty-First Century ideas of jurisprudence. I can't do it. But walk around this text with fear and trembling, because of this I am certain: that it's saying to us, loud and clear, that our sins, our individual personal sins, have consequences for others; that our sins have consequences, especially for those whom we love, for those who are dearest to us.

When a husband and father commits adultery, it has consequences for the family. When a teenager buys into the lie of sexual preference and engages in homosexuality, it has consequences for the family. When a young man in business engages in a shady deal, that should shame him to the core, it has consequences for the family. When you engage in internet pornography, it has consequences for the family. You think no one knows. You are extremely naive about your computer if you think that! What if someone were to look at the history trails and cookies on your computer, would they reveal something hidden in your tent?

Sin can so harden even a professing believer's heart, that he can fail to see and appreciate those consequences.

Do you see what this passage is saying to us tonight? That the sin of one man brought Israel to its knees. The unconfessed, the unrepented of sin of one man brought the whole of Israel to its knees. That the reason, could it be, that there is a lack of blessing, is because of unconfessed sin on the part of one individual. Could that be? Can I make the application? I fear to make it. You have no idea how much I fear to make the application. I'm not suggesting that we engage in some kind of conspiratorial witch-hunt, a spiritual McCarthyism, that would be unpleasant indeed. There may be, in this passage, an application for church discipline, but I'm not exploring that at this point. What I do want to say, we need to watch and pray that we enter not into temptation. That we need never find ourselves in the position that Achan finds himself in. You say, "That could never happen to me. I've been a member of First Presbyterian Church for 50 years, it could never, ever happen to me." Wake up, where are you living? Not a week goes by, and you hear some sorry sordid story of someone who has fallen. Someone you know, an elder, a minister, a preacher, and how the world loves it and relishes it. That's all it would take to bring this church down. We need to pray hard. We need to pray with earnestness, that God would keep us on our toes, watching and praying, that we don't enter into temptation.

Let's pray together.

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