

Joshua 7:1-26
The Consequences of Sin

Review and Introduction

In the small hamlet of Enfield, Connecticut, on a Sunday morning in July, 1741, the great theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards delivered a sermon that has been remembered as much for its fiery eloquence as its vivid illustrations. He said,

"So thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would soon lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God."

Entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, this sermon epitomized the Puritan fascination with sin and damnation. While the passion of those Puritans is, to our own loss in my opinion, less appreciated today than during that First Great Awakening in colonial America, and while there are those who might argue that the Puritans emphasis on the wrath of God perhaps should have been better balanced by equal fervor in sermons about His grace, there is no doubt that Edwards was right about at least two things. We are all sinners, and sin angers God.

As the psalmist put it,

"You, You indeed are to be feared,

And who may stand in Your presence, once You are angry? (Psalm 76:7).

As we resume our study of the book of Joshua, we can recall that we were celebrating the miraculous victory at Jericho. Joshua had led the Israelites to their first victory in the conquest. It was a victory achieved not by brilliant military strategy, or by clever battlefield tactics, but by the power of God Who used a ceremonial march and a loud shout to bring down the walls of that formidable city.

It must have seemed too good to be true. Jericho had fallen without the loss of a single Israelite. The joy in the camp that evening must have been celebratory in the extreme. All God's promises, it seemed, were about to be fulfilled. The years of wandering were over. The land of promise was theirs for the taking. With the Lord God fighting for them, the Israelites were unstoppable. All the Israelites had to do was to remember to be strong and courageous in obeying the Lord.

But that, as it turned out, would be much more difficult than it seemed on that festive night.

The sin

Our account begins, "But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully regarding the things designated for destruction, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the designated things; therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel" (v. 1).

One theme that we will see this morning is the relationship between the actions of one man, Achan, and the nation of Israel. While Achan acted alone, it is all of Israel who are held accountable for the sin. They are considered to have acted unfaithfully, even though they had no understanding of what had occurred. Keep this in mind as we continue to work through the passage.

Also, let us be clear about the nature of this sin. The phrase "acted unfaithfully" is the same word used to describe a wife's adultery in the Mosaic Law (Numbers 5:12-13). The term implies the breaking of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel in much the same way as adultery breaks the relationship between a husband and a wife. Achan's actions were so much more than a simple theft.

We can pause here to reflect that Scripture teaches us that sin, all sin, is serious. It ought never to be minimized as a "bad decision" or an "error of judgment" or any other euphemism. When we sin, no matter in what way we sin, no matter whether we sin by doing something we shouldn't or by not doing something we should, we break our relationship with the sovereign Creator God Who is the Author of our salvation.

And God will not be pleased. Indeed, in the case before us, Scripture is clear that "the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel" (v. 1). The Lord burned, that is, He was incensed, He was enraged. It was not that the Lord was somewhat upset or miffed by this slight offense. He all but exploded with anger, and His wrath would find an outlet.

The Consequence for Israel

Scripture then continues with an account of an event the Israelites did not expect. ²Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, 'Go up and spy out the land.' So the men went up and spied out Ai. ³Then they returned to Joshua and said to him, 'Do not have all the people go up; have only about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai; do not trouble all the people there, for they are few.' ⁴So about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. ⁵And the men of Ai struck and killed about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them on the mountainside; and the hearts of the people melted and became like water" (v. 2-5).



Most scholars believe that Ai was a city located in the hill country just east of Bethel and about 12.5 miles from Jericho. As with the plan of attack on Jericho, Joshua again sent out spies to assess the situation. However, from the report the spies gave to Joshua upon their return to the Israelite camp, it seems that this time the group of spies was not sent to evaluate the morale of the inhabitants and to see if there were any who might be loyal to the Lord, but rather to spy out the strength of the opposition that the Israelites might face in their attack.

The spies returned with an optimistic account of the situation. there was no need to rally the entire Israelite army. A few thousand men could take care of Ai, they assured Joshua. We know from Joshua 8:25 that the total population of Ai was 12,000 men and women. Assuming normal population demographics, that would mean about 6,000 men, and therefore, there were likely about 4,000 men of fighting age defending the city. For the spies to suggest that only 2,000-3,000 men need to go into battle against this force suggests a certain level of overconfidence, perhaps due to the seemingly easy victory at Jericho.

And it was not that the Israelites lacked manpower. From Joshua 4:13 we know that there were about 40,000 fighting men just from the two and one-half Transjordan tribes. And Numbers 26:51 gives us 601,730 as the count of Israelite men over twenty years of age. So, to send only a few thousand men into battle was certainly a sign of confidence, perhaps overconfidence. Notice, also, that there is no mention of Joshua's leadership. Joshua did not lead the men into battle, he sent them into battle.

Without question, the battle was a disaster. The Israelites army was routed. It retreated hastily, men were killed, and morale was destroyed. And while it might seem that the thirty-six men killed was rather a good outcome for such a defeat, remember that no one had been killed, or wounded, in the attack on the much larger and more strongly fortified city of Jericho.

As for the moral of the Israelite people, Scripture is clear. Using language reminiscent of those in Jericho at the time when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, "the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (v. 5). The Israelites were as forlorn now as the people of Canaan had been when they heard the Israelites were on their doorstep. Hope was lost, despair set in, and confusion reigned.

With our understanding of how the battle ensued, it is easy to point the finger at Joshua and the fact that the assessment of the situation and plan of attack was entirely human. There was no going before God to determine if, and how, the Israelites should attack. Instead, there was a sense of hubris in only needing to send a fraction of their army into battle. And, to be sure, this is all true. But that was not the cause of their defeat.

Scripture is clear that the Israelites were defeated at Ai not because they were overconfident or because they did not seek the counsel of the Lord beforehand, but because God was angry with them over the sin of Achan. In other words, the Israelites had been given over to the consequences of their corporate sin. Yes, there was overconfidence and a lack of seeking the Lord, but this was because God was angry with the Israelites and allowed them to be overconfident and self-assured.

But before we move on, let us also acknowledge that the fact that only 3,000 men went up to Ai was actually a matter of God's grace. Angry as He was, He sovereignly ordained that the punishment should not be too severe. Yes, there must be consequences of the sin of Achan, but God's mercy could be clearly seen in the punishment.

The Plea

Confused and distraught, Joshua cried out to the Lord. ⁶Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the ground 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. ⁷And Joshua said, "Oh, Lord GOD! Why did You ever bring this people across the Jordan, only to hand us over to the Amorites, to eliminate us? If only we had been willing to live beyond the Jordan! ⁸O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies? ⁹For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear about it, and

they will surround us and eliminate our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?" (v. 6-9).

The behavior Joshua exhibited is clearly associated with grieving. The tearing of the clothes and the putting of dust on the head was a typical response of an Israelite who had heard that a loved one had died. We can also see that Joshua took his grief to the Lord. He "fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the LORD" (v. 6).

And he did not do this for only a few minutes, but he stayed there until night. Nor did he do this alone, the leaders of Israel were at his side. These elders of Israel were perhaps the same as the officers of the people, or they may have been others involved in policy-making and leadership among the various tribes. But all of them, with their clothes torn and dust on their heads, they bowed before the presence of God and sought answers.

Joshua's prayer is recorded for us, and it gives some insight into how his mind was working at this time. Joshua cried out to the Lord first with a complaint, "Why did You ever bring this people across the Jordan, only to hand us over to the Amorites, to eliminate us?" (v. 7). And, as is usual with such complaints, there was selective memory. "If only we had been willing to live beyond the Jordan!" (v. 7), Joshua claimed, somehow forgetting in his grief that the wilderness sojourn had not been without its challenges.

It reminds us of the time in the Wilderness, when the Israelites had become tired of the God-given miracle of manna.

"⁴ Now the rabble who were among them had greedy cravings; and the sons of Israel also wept again and said, 'Who will give us meat to eat?' ⁵ We remember the fish which we used to eat for free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶ but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna!" (Numbers 11:4-6).

Also the time when the spies sent by Moses into Canaan came back with their report of the inhabitants of the land.

"¹ Then all the congregation raised their voices and cried out, and the people wept that night. ² And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the entire congregation said to them, 'If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or even if we had died in this wilderness! ³ So why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder! Would it not be better for us to return to

Egypt?' ⁴ So they said to one another, 'Let's appoint a leader and return to Egypt!'"
(Numbers 14:1-4).

In both cases, the Israelites had apparently forgotten about the slavery and genocide that marked their time in Egypt.

We must keep in mind that Joshua did not know what we know about the cause of God's anger. To his knowledge, the Israelites had not willfully disobeyed. Joshua, indeed all of Israel with the exception of Achan, were unaware of the sin in their midst. That was why Joshua was confused. He had no idea that the Lord had withdrawn His mighty arm from the Israelite army.

Therefore, Joshua's concern was for the future. He knew how vulnerable the Israelites were without the assistance of their God. Now that "Israel has turned their back before their enemies" (v. 8), their destruction seemed imminent. Certainly, news would spread, the word would get around that the people of Israel, despite the apparent power of their God, were not invincible after all. It was only a matter of time before "the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear about it, and they will surround us and eliminate our name from the earth" (v. 9).

Yet, we must recognize that Joshua was not merely complaining. He had a twofold concern, First, and quite naturally, he is concerned for the survival of the people of Israel. This was a sign of his understanding of his responsibility as leader. They were in his charge. They were his responsibility from an earthly perspective, and he could not imagine their destruction.

Second, and this distinguishes Joshua's complaint here from that of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness mentioned above, Joshua was concerned for the reputation of God. This is what gives this prayer its potency. Joshua was not merely concerned for his own sake, or even that of the people he leads, but for God. He grieved not only for the dead in battle, not only for the despair of the people, but for the reputation of the Lord.

The Answer

God did not keep Joshua waiting long for His response. ¹⁰ So the LORD said to Joshua, 'Stand up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned, and they have also violated My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things designated for destruction, and have both stolen and kept it a secret. Furthermore, they have also put them among their own things. ¹² Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become designated for destruction. I will not be with

you anymore unless you eliminate from your midst the things designated for destruction. ¹³ Stand up! Consecrate the people and say, "Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, because the LORD, the God of Israel, has said this: 'There are things designated for destruction in your midst, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you have removed the designated things from your midst.'

¹⁴ So in the morning you shall come forward by your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the LORD selects by lot shall come forward by families, and the family which the LORD selects shall come forward by households, and the household which the LORD selects shall come forward man by man.

¹⁵ And it shall be that the one who is selected with the things designated for destruction shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has violated the covenant of the LORD, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel"" (v. 10-15).

There is much to learn from God's response. But the most salient point is that something must be done about sin. Sin cannot be ignored. Sin cannot be tolerated in the lives of those whom God has called into a relationship. And God does not have a double standard. The Canaanites were punished for their sin, and the Israelites were punished for theirs. Simply because God has called us to faith does not mean we get a free pass when it comes to sin. Quite the reverse.

At first, God seemed indignant. He commanded Joshua to get off his face and get up. There was work to do. The sin must be eradicated. And God described this sin in many ways. First the word sin is used. Then transgressed, then stolen, then deceived. In all six different verbs are used to describe Achan's sin.

God was clear that "Israel has sinned" (v. 11). They had done these things. This shows an emphasis on the corporate solidarity of Israel. What Achan has done, all Israel has done. This might seem unreasonable, but it is a reality that we can easily recognize in our own culture today. Think of the effects on a local body when a pastor commits adultery. Though one man has done something, many will suffer.

God declared that because of the sin, "the sons of Israel cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become designated for destruction" (v. 12). As the things stolen were to have been devoted to the Lord, the (*ḥērem*), and everything else destroyed, so now Israel had been designated for destruction unless the plague of sin is removed entirely.

The final statement, "I will be with you no more" (v. 12), was a terrifying threat. God had always been with His people. It was a promise from the very beginning with Abram, that God would be with him. Each of the patriarchs had heard this promise. Moses had heard this promise. And now God was telling Joshua that unless this sin was removed, the presence of the Lord would be removed.

We cannot imagine the terror on the face of Joshua, but he must have been relieved when God, in His sovereign grace, provided the solution. To begin, the people were to consecrate themselves. The consecration recalls that made before crossing the Jordan river, and while no details are given as to what this consecration involved, clearly the Lord was calling Israel to return to being a holy people.

Joshua obeyed immediately. He relayed God's words to the people, giving them one day to prepare themselves for judgment. The process was made clear, first tribes, then families, then households should present themselves to the Lord and He would declare the guilty party. These societal divisions are reflective of other ancient Near-Eastern societies at this time. There is no detail given as to how God revealed who was guilty, but clearly there was no disputing the decision. God was in control of the process. Scripture contains no mention of human judgment. The sin has been against God, and He would both identify the perpetrator, and exact justice, according to His divine will.

The Confrontation

The tension rises in our narrative as the climax is approached. ¹⁶So Joshua got up early in the morning and brought Israel forward by tribes, and the tribe of Judah was selected. ¹⁷So he brought the family of Judah forward, and he selected the family of the Zerahites; then he brought the family of the Zerahites forward man by man, and Zabdi was selected. ¹⁸And he brought his household forward man by man; and Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, was selected. ¹⁹Then 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.' ²⁰So Achan answered Joshua and said, 'Truly, I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: ²¹when I saw among the spoils a beautiful robe from Shinar, two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I wanted them and took them; and behold, they are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath'" (v. 16-21).

Joshua rose early in the morning. He had a great deal to do and, no doubt, a great deal on his mind. He followed the Lord's instructions to the letter. First the tribes moved forward, and Judah was selected. Then the families of Judah drew near, and the Zerahites were chosen. As that family came forward (one can only wonder in amazement at what Achan was thinking during this process), the family of Zabdi was singled out.

Finally, Achan was determined to be the culprit, and he was immediately confronted by Joshua. He was challenged to "give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him" (v. 19). This is an interesting way to describe confessing sin, but it is true. While our sin often brings reproach to the name of the Lord, our confession can help bring Him glory. Achan was implored to tell all to Joshua, to hold nothing back, to be completely honest. And to his credit, Achan did just that. He acknowledged that what he had done was sin. And then he described, in detail, what he had taken, "a beautiful robe from Shinar, two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight" (v. 21). Those items, the robe, 200 shekels of silver (about 6 pounds), and a fifty shekel bar of gold (1 ¼ pounds) could easily have been hidden and transported back to camp during the sack of the city.

His motive for the act reminds us of Eve in the Garden. He saw something beautiful that was forbidden, and did not resist the temptation to take it anyway. Achan had not obeyed the explicit command of God. Yes, he had confessed his sins, but now he must bear the consequences.

The Consequence for Achan

²²So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath it. ²³So they took them from inside the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the sons of Israel; and they laid them out before the LORD. ²⁴Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, 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. ²⁵And Joshua said, 'Why have you brought disaster on us? The LORD will bring disaster on you this day.' And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. ²⁶Then they erected over him a large heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day" (v. 22-26).

Joshua first verified that Achan was, in fact, telling the truth. He sent a few men to search for the forbidden goods, and when they were found and brought to him, Joshua laid them out before the

Lord. Interestingly, that word is the same as that for pouring out an offering. These items had belonged to the Lord, and now they were being restored to Him.

The sentence was carried out with immediate effect. Achan, his family, his possessions, his animals, everything associated with the man was taken to the Valley of Achor. The valley of Achor has not been identified with certainty, but the best guess is that it lies about eight miles east of Jericho, thus in the opposite direction from where the Israelites will be traveling. The point was to remove the sin as far as possible from the people.

Joshua mocked him, saying that Achan had brought trouble on Israel, so the Lord would bring trouble on him. And such trouble. The entire group was stoned to death, then burned, and then a heap of stones was erected over the remains. We learned about a monument to God's miraculous grace in Joshua 4:1-10 and here we see a monument to God's wrath. Both remained until the writing of the book of Joshua.

Takeaways

There is much to reflect on in this passage. First, and perhaps foremost, is that God's commands are intended to be taken seriously. Sin will be found out, if it does not become known to others, there is no hiding our sin from an omniscient God. And, to be right with God, sin must be dealt with. We cannot ignore the sin in our midst.

Second, we can see that God is glorified by our repentance. God welcomes the repentant sinner. He is eager to forgive, though there are still consequences for sin. And those consequences may affect others. As parents, grandparents, leaders in our church, representatives of Christ to the world, let us never lose sight of that fact. When we sin, the reputation of Christ is damaged.

Finally, let us appreciate that the consequences are so serious because sin is so serious. Scripture has many accounts of how serious sin is taken in the local body of believers. Think of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Consider the words of Paul to the Corinthians,

¹It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, namely, that someone has his father's wife. ²You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. ³For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵I have decided to turn such a person over to Satan

for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord"
(1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

And to the Thessalonians,

"⁶Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother or sister who leads a disorderly life and not one in accordance with the tradition which you received from us. . . ¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person so as not to associate with him, so that he will be put to shame" (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).

There are times for church discipline. It is difficult, but not to do so when required by the circumstances is fear of man. Let us each resolve to be on our guard against sin. Not simply because we fear the wrath of God, or the shame of public notice, but because sin is so abhorrent to God that He sent His Son to die for it on our behalf. Such a thing as sin ought to be a part of our lives and when we find it there, we must repent of it immediately.