

HOW SHALL WE STUDY OUR OLD TESTAMENTS? - Part nine

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WHY CHRISTIAN STILL NEED TO THINK ABOUT SIN

Chapter seven presents an amazing contrast to chapter six. In **chapter 6** what seemed an **impossible** task is accomplished with **ease**. In **chapter 7** what seems at first to be an **easy** task becomes almost **impossible**.

Chapter 6 closes with the conquest of Jericho and such glowing words of hope - "**So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land**"(27). You're left with the feeling that everything would then be coming up roses for the new leader and his trusting people. How could they miss with this great God on their side? Joshua's military reputation was already the stuff of legend. The people were now established in their promised land. They had taken the strongest fortified city. They had the ark of the Lord.

Then the opening words of chapter seven sound with dark music in the background - "**But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel**"(7:1).

1) **THE SINFUL ACT IS COMMITTED BY ONE PERSON BUT THE EFFECTS OF THAT SIN SPREAD TO MANY**

Look carefully at that blunt first verse again - **“But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel.”**

Notice, ***“the people of Israel broke faith....”***, and ***“....for Achan....took some of the devoted things....”***, and ***“....the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel.”*** The *plurals* and the *singulars* get all tumbled in together. Then, when Joshua makes his assessment of Achan’s sin, he is careful to emphasize the very same thing: **“And Joshua said, ‘Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today.’ And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones”(25).**

The text quickly tells how the battle at Ai went - **Joshua 7:2-5** -
“**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." And the men went up and spied out Ai. [3] And they returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not have all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are few." [4] So about 3,000 men went up there from the people. And they fled before the men of Ai, [5] and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six of their men and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted and became as water.**”

Picture this whole situation. Imagine a young soldier marching up the hill to take the city of Ai. He marches in confidence because God has promised He would be with them. It takes the fear out of his young heart. He's seen what God could do in the leveling of the walls of Jericho.

Suddenly, the enemy mounts quite a defense. This soldier begins to see his buddies fall all around him. He's terrified and would turn to run but for the greater fear of being a coward. Then in one horrible moment, this young soldier, in all probability only about 16 years of age, feels the enemy's spear through his side. He numbly knows his life is slipping away.

What thoughts quickly scramble through his racing mind? Something has gone terribly wrong. He will never see his family again. But God had promised to be with them. What about the walls of Jericho? Why is this happening to them?

Of course, we have the behind the scene details of our text. **We** know the whole story of Achan and his sin. But remember, this young soldier probably doesn't even **know** Achan. He knows nothing whatsoever about Achan's sin. All he knows is his own life is slipping away fast in spite of God's promised help and blessing.

I've labored over painting this little scene in detail because it launches a powerful spiritual truth. Sin doesn't just effect the **sinner**. Soldiers die. They are young husbands and fathers. Children are left as orphans. And it's all because of Achan's personal sin. That point is not just **made up**. It's right there, embedded at the very core of this account. And we're meant to ponder it deeply.

Purity before God counts for more than merely **personal** reasons. We know **individuals** experience guilt and judgment for sin. We hear about this all the time. But these bleeding, dying soldiers **didn't** commit the sin. **Achan** committed it. Only **Achan** isn't killed in battle. **They** are. What is God doing here? What is the idea the Spirit of God is trying to bend our heads around?

Individual sin can destroy corporate blessing. Purity counts more than we think. Holiness is **everyone's** business because you can't damage a hand or a foot without the **body** feeling the pain.

Of course, Achan is **responsible** for his sin in a way those dying soldiers are not. Achan alone is **accountable** for what he did. In words many people aren't comfortable with God will command Achan be both stoned and burned. But we're not talking about **accountability** right now. We're talking about the **effects** of Achan's sin. And the effects of personal sin **spread** well beyond the one sinning.

Not surprisingly, our relativistic, tolerant world doesn't get this. The dominant moral background for particular moral decisions is always the same. As long as no one gets hurt - as long as no one has his or her rights trampled underfoot - what **I** do is **my** business. Don't force **your** values on **my** lifestyle.

And that would be a fine system but for one important fact. What if we are here neither by blind chance or our own initiative? What if we are the **result** of God's creative activity? What if we are **designed** and **made** by **Another**? And what about the **Creator's** rights? Surely He **has** rights if this world and all that is in it **belongs** to Him. What conceivable **right** could we have to deny our Creator His due? Where would such a treasonous right come from?

Now we come to an important fact. Please think this through. To help fallen people **see** their moral blindness and to make their dreamed up independence both **painful** and **observable**, God exerts a **severe mercy**. We see it unfolding in our text and we see it unfolding in today's world. God **magnifies the effects of sin** beyond the limited realm of the individual committing it. He **extends the ripple of our own actions beyond** ourselves to those we love and hold dear. This is His megaphone that all is not well and that life apart from His loving rule and reign will never work. This is the only way God can speak to individuals who have grown indifferent to their **own** self-destruction.

In other words, God has so constructed His universe (and this cannot be changed) that **all** sin has **social** effects. **All** the Israelites wandered and died in the wilderness because of the faithless report of the ten spies. **All** Israel had to eat the ground up gold calf mixed with water at the foot of Mount Sinai.

This is true of **all** sin, but is more obvious in a **few**. In our own day this is why **abortion**, **homosexuality**, and **pornography** are always **everybody's** business. James says even our **personal selfishness** spills over into **nations at war**. All sin takes a corporate toll on **my** earthly future and my **children's** future. Sin pulls us collectively under its deception, sting, and rot.

We need to rethink this in God's House. Sin doesn't just effect the individual sinner. Individual sin effects the church the way tint effects the whole gallon of paint. I don't mean we all share the **guilt** of the sin. And I don't mean we are all **accountable** for it, except in the sense of not **confronting** it and **exposing** it, and doing all we can to bring the sinner to **repentance**.

But we are all **effected** by it. Individual sin effects **corporate worship**. Individual sin effects **corporate prayer**. It stifles **corporate renewal**. Individual sin lowers corporate spiritual climate. In other words, **everyone has a stake in your walk with Jesus**. Everyone pays a horrible price for one person's dishonesty, shallowness, and hypocrisy.

However painful this lesson is, we will never see sin as it really is until we confront this first basic point. Let's move on to a second lesson from this great passage:

2) **SIN BECOMES PARTICULARLY FATAL WHEN BURIED**

Joshua 7:20-22 - "And Achan answered Joshua, "Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I did: [21] when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath." [22] So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath."

These are the words of Achan's confession. By his own admission, he took the forbidden material goods. He buried them underneath his tent. He was sure no one knew and, because there were no witnesses, how could he ever be found out? He went on with the rest of his life just as he normally would. He looked after his family. He went to work. He went to offer his sacrifices at the tabernacle. He performed all of his duties as any good man in the Lord's camp. He told stories with the men around the fire at night. He soothed his own heart as he talked about the Lord's goodness in the taking of Jericho. He was in the clear.

At times it is wonderful to have an infinite God and at times it's a pain. It means the things that escape the notice of the whole world are not concealed from God. His **omniscience** messes with my lifestyle. I become accountable for things no one else knows about.

The Bible says it is part of God's nature that He will bring everything done in the **dark** into the **light**. That doesn't refer to things done after the sun has gone down. It refers to things buried in **secrecy** - things done **under the radar** of any possible human reckoning. These will be **manifested** - made **visible** and **obvious**. It is part of God's nature that He can do that whenever He wishes. This exposing and reckoning only await His good pleasure.

The bigger issue in this passage is what happens when sin is covered up? What starts to leech into the sinner and his or her community? This passage turns dark for both Achan and Israel. Two things happen at the same time when people hide their sin:

- a) ***First, people prepare themselves for continued expressions of deeper sin in the future. John Calvin used to say there was less “potential for sin to stain when it was dealt with honestly, quickly, and repentantly.”***

This is because when we ***hide*** our sin a ***deception*** settles into our own souls. Though we know better in the wisest part of our being, covering sin creates the ***delusion*** that because we aren't facing the music for our sin ***right away*** we can continue normally through life with impunity for our moral misses.

What that means is this: ***when we cover our sins we are studying to make that one hidden sinful act the future direction of our habitual daily living. This is what the Apostle Paul calls “making provision for sinful lusts” - Romans 13:14 - “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”***

If Achan's punishment seems **severe** consider that it may be balanced by a certain **mercy** revealed in the **way his sin is exposed**. Consider the gradual **sifting** in the fingering of Achan's specific guilt. The text reveals quite a **gradual** unveiling of his guilt in **verses 14 to 18**. Why does God choose such a **drawn out process**? This would have taken days to accomplish. God gives Achan a lot of time to simply **come forward**. He can **see** he's **going** to be exposed long before he **is** exposed.

What's wrong with this guy? Can't he see there is no escape? Why doesn't he confess? I'll tell you what's happened. In covering up his sin he has **fixed** his heart in it. He can't find his way out. He can't come home anymore. He can't find it in himself to **repent**. That's the hidden curse of hiding sin. Hidden sin always **traps**.

- b) ***Second, because hidden sin is resilient to repentance it stores up God's sternest wrath. There is a particular repulsiveness in using the time God grants for **humble repentance** to **cherish and plot further sin**.***

This is such a horrific choice that the Bible specifically warns against it - **Romans 2:4-5** - **“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? [5] But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”**

The person who hides sin uses the precious gift of **time** merely to **compound God's wrath**. I know these are old words with a funny ring to modern ears, but listen to **Jonathan Edwards** comment on Paul's warning from Romans chapter four on storing up God's wrath:

"There is something peculiarly heinous in sinning against the mercy of God more than sinning against any of His other attributes. There is such base and horrid ingratitude, in being the worse to God because he is a being of infinite goodness and grace, that God's grace, above all things renders wickedness vile and detestable. This ought to WIN us, and ENGAGE us to serve God better; but instead of that, to sin against him the more, has something inexpressibly bad in it, and does in a peculiar manner enhance guilt, and incense God's wrath."

3) **THERE ARE A FEW TIMES WHEN PRAYER IS ANNOYING TO GOD**

Joshua 7:10-13 - "The Lord said to Joshua, "Get up! Why have you fallen on your face? [11] Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. [12] Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you."

[13] "Get up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the Lord, God of Israel, "There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you."

Joshua's prayer is recorded in **verses 6-9**. Then God speaks and says, "Joshua, what in the world are you doing on your knees? This isn't the time for prayer. We're past that point. This isn't the time for begging at the altar. This is the time to clean up the mess. This is the time to get rid of the sin in the camp!"

Then begins one of the greatest shakedowns in history. From **tribe**, to **clan**, to **family**, to the **man (14-18)**, Achan is found out. Then he confesses (**19-21**). But it's a confession that comes too late. Joshua says the confession serves only to demonstrate the glory and justice of God in the **punishment** that is about to fall. Much like the confession that all will give before the great white throne of God.

I don't know what to do with those strange, stern verses. I can't explain them away. I don't like telling you what I think they say. You can hold on to sin too long. You can hang your soul with the freedom God allows. It's clear we must deal with ourselves honestly while there is mercy and time available. That much is certain.

4) **WE'RE MEANT TO STUDY THE HARSHNESS OF GOD'S
JUDGMENT OF ACHAN**

Joshua 7:22-26 - "So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. [23] And they took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the people of Israel. And they laid them down before the Lord. [24] And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters and his oxen and donkeys and sheep and his tent and all that he had. And they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. [25] And Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones. [26] And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor."

Something is unfolding here that shakes us up a bit. God gets all our attention. It troubles us that God seems so severe just for some petty theft. And even more troubling is the **way** in which God executes His judgment. We are not surprised that God might judge **Achan**. All through the Old Testament God strikes people with disease, death, insanity, even having the earth swallow them up whole. It's all there for the reading.

But here **God** doesn't **touch** Achan. And **Joshua** doesn't take care of it either. The shocking truth is in verse 25 - "**And Joshua said, 'Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you today.'**" **And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones.**"

"And all Israel stoned him with stones...." How would **you** feel, throwing those rocks at that whole family? What would go through your mind? Why doesn't **God** just judge him with some sickness or plague. He did that **other** times in the Bible. Why does He make these innocent people hurl rocks at this whole family?

Is He trying to teach them that sinning against God is **worse** than the pain they're feeling as they stone these people? Is he trying to show them that when people sin against God they need to feel the **pain** in God's heart **as much** as the physical pain that's caused by these rocks? Is he trying to make them search their own hearts about why they suddenly care so much about the violence against these **people** when they can commit sins against a holy **God** with little more than passing indifference?

Achan is content enough that he can hide his sin from the **people**, and he doesn't even care that he can't hide it from **God**. I don't even like asking myself the kind of questions this passage raises. Can I, as a Pastor, live much of my life caring more about what **people** think about me than what **God** thinks of me? This is at the very core of how spiritually fruitful my life will be.

All we know for sure is God wanted a permanent pile of stones right on that spot. He wanted generations to remember the horror of that afternoon when one man's hidden sin cost his family their lives, and **"troubled"** a whole nation.