

We Must Deal With Sin In The Camp

"Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you." (Joshua 7:12)

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The bodies of the thirty-six dead soldiers lay crumpled on the hillside before the city gate. The leaders of God's army were sore afraid. The "...hearts of the people melted, and became as water" (Joshua 7:5). Joshua and all the elders of Israel fell to the earth before the ark of God, and put dust upon their heads.

Then it was that the voice of God spoke. "...Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them ... therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies... neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you" (Joshua 7:10-12).

In Joshua 6, God gave Joshua and Israel instructions on how to carry on the battle against Jericho. He said in no uncertain terms that Jericho and its possessions were accursed. "And the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the Lord, only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver and gold, and vessels of brass and iron are consecrated unto the Lord: they shall come into the treasury of the Lord" (Joshua 6:17-19). Jericho and everything in it is said to be accursed—with the exception of Rahab and her household. Now that word "accursed" is an interesting one. It means not only "accursed," but also "devoted." These two meanings are not separate and distinct so that sometimes the word means the first and sometimes the second. Both meanings belong together. That which is accursed is devoted. This is why Joshua 6:17 says that "...the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the Lord...". The margins in various translations even offer the word "devoted" as an alternate translation.

To the best of the knowledge of Joshua, the command had been carried out fully. Achan had heard these words. He knew exactly what was involved. Nevertheless, when Jericho fell and Israel entered the city to carry out the command of God, Achan transgressed. He took of the accursed thing, brought it back secretly, and buried it in the ground under his tent (Joshua 7:1, 21-23).

The trouble that Achan brought upon the nation was Israel's defeat at Ai. Even though Achan's sin was secret, he had brought the curse into the camp and all the nation was guilty for his sin. Years later, after the conquest of Canaan, we find a sermon in which the sin of Achan is recalled. "Did not Achan the son of Zerah commit a trespass in the accursed thing, and wrath fell on all the congregation of Israel? And that man did not perish alone in his iniquity" (Joshua 22:20).

Thirty-six men were killed, If we have any questions about the severity of Achan's punishment, let us ponder this a moment. Achan was responsible for the death of 36 soldiers. Assuming all these men were married, Achan was to blame that 36 widows now had to live without a husband. Also

Achan was to blame that the children in 36 families had to grow up without a father. Achan, in fact, though indirectly, killed those 36 men.

Joshua went to his knees in prayer! Then it was that God told him to get up and revealed that it was not a time for prayer, but for action. He demanded that the congregation put away the sin that was among them, and stated, "...thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you" (Joshua 7:13). The next day, Joshua determined that one of the members of the tribe of Judah, Achan by name, had stolen a Babylonish garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold. He had hidden the spoil under the floor of his tent.

Messengers were sent to bring the stolen booty. It was displayed in the presence of all Israel that there might be no question as to the guilt of Achan. Having established beyond question the sin and the sinner, the whole congregation took the guilty man and his family down into the valley of Achor and there stoned them to death.

A Lesson For The Church

Of the events which transpired in the life of ancient Israel, the apostle Paul declares, "Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted" (1 Corinthians 10: 6). We need to consider God's dealings with his people, for "...they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Again we read, "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning..." (Romans 15:4). The apostle again referring to an expression from the Old Testament says, "...For our sakes, no doubt, this is written..." (1 Corinthians 9:10). In view of all of these statements, we may well look for and learn lessons from the story of Achan.

1. Achan had remained silent during the entire process, probably like many people, believing that he would escape or that God certainly would not punish him. God is praised and glorified when we confess our sins. God is not being praised when we refuse to acknowledge or accept what His word says about our bad attitudes or behavior. By refusing to come forth earlier in the process, Achan revealed his hardened and defiant heart. In addition, sorrow at this point is really too late for it does nothing to bring back the 36 innocent men who had died because of Achan's transgression. It is possible for sin to exist in the congregation of God's people without the leadership being aware of it. Joshua did not know of the trespass of Achan. This fact does not justify toleration of sin, when it is known to the leaders.
2. Sin in the church often affects others than the sinner, and may even cause those who have not been guilty, to stumble and fall. There were thirty six men who died as a result of the sin mentioned in our text. That is one of the grievous results of sin. It has an influence over others. The last part of Joshua 6:5 reads, "...wherefore the hearts of the people melted and became as water." The defeat at Ai demoralized the people. This is perhaps even more significant than the defeat itself because it created misgivings and a lack of confidence in the Lord. Rather than examine their own lives as the source of their defeat, they began to doubt the Lord and wonder if He had changed His mind or if they had misread His directions.

3. When sin is known to be in the congregation, it is a time for action rather than for prayer. It is true that we are to pray always, and in all things, but it is never true that prayer is a substitute for another command. When God informs an alien sinner to be baptized for the remission of sins, he cannot obtain remission by praying to God. When God instructs the church to withdraw from those who are disorderly, we cannot pray them out, but we must take formal action.
4. The church can only stand against her enemies when she lives up to the profession she makes. Unless the lives of the members preach the same kind of sermon as the tongue of the speaker, the church will be in disrepute. The prophet Nathan asked David, "Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight...(2 Samuel 12:9) "...By this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme..." (2 Samuel 12:14). Paul condemns the Jews for their hypocritical pretense, and tells them that they preach a double standard; one for those who hear and another for themselves, and as a result declares, "For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you..." (Romans 2: 24). Of sinners in her midst, the church may say as did old Jacob to his murderous sons, "...Ye have troubled me to make me stink among the inhabitants of the land..." (Genesis 34: 30). Often we are forced to turn our backs unto the enemy when they fling cruel darts of accusation about the lives of the members. No power on earth can face the church and overthrow her when all of the members are following holiness, without which no man can see the Lord!
5. God's people should not postpone action essential to purifying and cleansing the church. Many times there are those in the number of disciples who are fearful and fainthearted. They do not want sin condemned publicly in positive terms. They do not want the church to take action about which the world will hear. They would prefer that the world know the church is tolerating sin than to have it learn that the church is made up of those who are living consecrated lives. The Lord said, "...Thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing..." (Joshua 7: 13). It is note worthy that "Joshua rose up early in the morning and brought Israel" (Joshua 7:16), and we too, should begin at once to cleanse the congregation,
6. The steps leading to sin are outlined in the confession of Achan, "I saw," "I coveted," "I took," "I hid" (Joshua 7:21). If we would not look upon sinful things we would always be free from sin. However, if we do see them, we should not covet them. "But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it bringeth forth sin, when it is finished, it bringeth forth death" (James 1:14,15). Sin produces a guilty conscience, a desire to hide! It is interesting that the first sin followed the very same steps mentioned by Achan. Satan has not changed the bait on his hook from that day to this.
7. The proof of guilt should always be well established before any public discipline is administered. Joshua was not content with the mere acknowledgment of the sin, but sent messengers to the tent, who found the stolen items and brought them to Joshua and all of the children of Israel and laid them out before the Lord. This would preclude the possibility of any member of Israel later affirming that an innocent man had been punished.

8. The punishment was administered by the entire congregation. It was not the work of Joshua and the elders alone. They guided the body of people in ascertaining the guilty person, the nature of the crime, and the correct penalty. But the discipline was the act of the entire group. "And all Israel stoned him with stones" (Joshua 7: 25). This was in exact conformity with the law. God had stated through Moses, "If there be found among you... man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God... you shall stone them with stones until they die... (Deuteronomy 17:2-5). "The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you" (Deuteronomy 17:7). Incidentally, in this passage is found another statement of the care that should be exercised in determining guilt before action is taken. God said, "And it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and enquired diligently and, behold, it be true, and the thing certain..." (Deuteronomy 2:4). No man can be scripturally disciplined upon mere hearsay, but when there is a question, diligent inquiry must be made into the facts of the case, until the truth and certainty of the accusation be established. It was a matter of God's law of justice that no person should be condemned upon the testimony of one man, but two or three witnesses were required to establish an accusation. That principle has been carried into the New Testament.

9. God's wrath is kindled against His people when they knowingly tolerate sin among them. The only way to set aside that wrath is by getting rid of the sin. The church cannot prosper as long as she places a low estimate upon sin. She must realize that God's people are to be a holy people. There is much in the little word "So" as used in the Bible. After describing in detail the method by which Achan and family received punishment, the record declares, "...So the Lord turned from the fierceness of his anger" (Joshua 7:26). This means simply that in the manner described was the Lord turned from anger. Let us not forget that the anger of the Lord was directed to the congregation which tolerated the sinner as well as to the guilty person. This is made plain in the first verse of the chapter under consideration. The question is sometimes asked, "Why did God demand the punishment of the family of Achan as well as the head of the house?" The law established the fact that one who had knowledge of a trespass and refused to make it known, would bear his iniquity (Leviticus 5:1). Those who uphold evildoers, even of their own kindred, are as guilty as the ones whom they defend, and should be subjected to the same punishment. In the case of Achan all of his physical properties and personal possessions were burned. One of the first principles we need to recognize is that "...a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6). As long as we cherish, or even tolerate sin in the sense of allowing it to be rewarded and unrebuked, God cannot grant us success in battle. As He said to Joshua, so He says to us, "...Neither will I be with you any more, **except** ye destroy the accursed from among you" (Joshua 7:12).