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Joshua #9

Sermon Summary #9

Lessons from the Horror of Hidden Sin

Joshua 7:1-8:29; Psalm 139:1-6; Hebrews 4:13

“And no creature is hidden from . . . [God’s] sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). Do you believe that? Do you *really and sincerely* believe that? Or do you operate on the assumption that no one knows what you think or what you say or where you go or what you do? Is your attitude toward the moral choices you make one that says, “No one is hurt by my decisions except me. Therefore, it can’t be sin. Or if it is, it can’t be a very bad one.”

There once was a man named Achan, about whom we’ve just read in Joshua 7, who reasoned like that. His story is all about what happens when *human self-will* asserts itself against *inviolable divine commands*, and then tries to cover its tracks. Achan’s story is all about self-deception, the illusion of hidden sin, and the horribly destructive lie that we know better than God does what is best for our souls. If there is one overriding reality in this story, it is that Achan refused to embrace the simple truth that “no creature is hidden from God’s sight.” He failed to reckon with the consequences of the simple truth that “all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must [all] give account.”

Here’s what I propose to do. I want to unpack this story for you. I want to retell it so that you are familiar with the facts, after which we will look closely at several critically important spiritual lessons.

Achan’s Evil

To understand what is happening in chapter 7, we have to go back to chapter 6, verses 17-19. Following the destruction of Jericho, God gave explicit instructions: everything in the city is to be devoted to destruction; if you keep anything that is devoted to destruction, you yourselves will be devoted to destruction; the silver and gold and vessels of bronze and iron are to be placed in the treasury of the Lord.

Now, as far as Joshua was concerned, everyone in Israel had followed this command. It’s important for you to understand that what you and I are reading in 7:1 is information to which Joshua had no access.

But why was a “ban” placed on these objects? Why was it so important that Israel keep nothing from among the objects and treasures found in Jericho? The explanation is found in the fact that Jericho, as a Canaanite stronghold, was steeped in pagan idolatry. They were immersed in the worship of demonic spirits that they believed were gods.

The treasures or implements of gold and silver and bronze were all utilized in their rituals and worship, and were, in a manner of speaking, “imbued” with the evil of these demonic powers. Look closely at these biblical texts that unpack this sordid truth:

“The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction” (Deuteronomy 7:25-26).

“They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded” (Deuteronomy 32:16-17).

“They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds” (Psalm 106:34-39).

“What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” (1 Corinthians 10:19-20a).

The Canaanite garment that Achan kept for himself was not simply a piece of clothing. This had nothing to do with fashion or style. This garment was a concrete expression of the spirit of a culture that was steeped in Satanic activity and ritual. The gold, silver, and bronze were not merely pieces of metal or a means of monetary exchange. All such precious metals were either used to construct idols for worship or were imbued with evil and accursed because of their association with such pagan practices.

God did not take lightly this high-handed, willful defiance of his command. We are told in 7:1 that he viewed this sin of Achan as the sin of *all* Israel. “And the anger of the Lord burned against *the people of Israel*. ”

When it says in 7:1 that the people of Israel “broke faith” with God, we see how serious this matter truly was. The term used here describes “a highly serious, treacherous breach of trust between Yahweh and Israel” (Hubbard/221). If that weren’t enough, in 7:11 God himself describes this as “sinning”, “transgressing the covenant”, “stealing” and “lying”. Thus, Achan was guilty of breaking the First Commandment in that he set his affection upon and put his trust in what possessions could do for him rather than in God alone. Money became his god in the place of the one true God. He was also guilty of breaking the Eighth Commandment that prohibited stealing and the Ninth Commandment that prohibited coveting. On top of all this, he lied about it.

But remember: Joshua knew nothing of what Achan had done.

According to vv. 2-5 and following, Joshua did what he had earlier done with regard to Jericho. He sent spies to Ai to determine the strength of the enemy. They returned and, in effect, said: "It's no problem, Joshua. A couple of thousand soldiers can take this city with ease." As it turned out, the men of Ai routed the Israeli army and killed 36 of them.

This stunning reversal of fortune was a devastating blow to Joshua and the people. They had just witnessed God fight on their behalf and bring down the walls of mighty Jericho. How in the world can it now be that Israel suffers this sort of humiliating defeat?

Joshua was more than a little shocked by this outcome. He tore his clothes, threw dust on his head, and fell to the ground in confusion and despair. I don't believe Joshua sinned in doing this. He complained *to* God, but not *about* God. He simply couldn't figure out why God appeared to have abandoned Israel in this battle and to have placed his own reputation at stake. At the close of v. 9, Joshua cries out to the Lord: "And what will you do for your great name?" It's as if he says, "Lord, if you stand aloof and do nothing to help us win, your name will become a laughingstock among the Canaanites!"

The Lord's response in vv. 10-15 is straight and to the point. Although technically speaking it was only Achan who had sinned, God says that "**Israel**" has violated his commandment and has kept for themselves some of the devoted objects. If you want my presence in your midst, says the Lord, if you want me to fight on your behalf, you first have to get rid of these objects and you have to punish the man who is responsible for this sacrilege.

Let's pause briefly and ask the painful question: Could it be that the absence of power and blessing in so many churches today is the direct result of hidden sin among their people? If we often wonder why God seems at times to be so distant, if not absent, from our midst, could the answer be that we have tolerated sin in our lives? Could it be the lack of repentance? Could it be that we have forgotten that "no creature is hidden from his [God's] sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account"?

Unrepentant sin stifles and shuts off the flow of God's blessings. It strangles and paralyzes and immobilizes the body of Christ. It is even, at times, the explanation for why people aren't healed. James 5:16 is to the point – "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

The method God employed to identify the guilty party was itself remarkable and must have served to heighten the tension among the people. According to 7:14, it was by "lot" that the determination was made. Although there were different ways in which this was done, in all likelihood, this would have involved two stones, one black and one white, both of which would have been placed in a pouch or a fold in the garment of the priest. As each tribe of Israel was brought before Joshua, a stone was removed. If it was black, the answer to the question: "Is it this tribe, this clan, this family, this individual?" would be No. They were exonerated. If it was white, the answer would be Yes. They were guilty. Needless to say, God in his providence governed the casting of the lot.

If you are wondering why God employed this method for identifying the guilty party, there appear to be at least two reasons. *First*, this forced Israel to think long and hard about the seriousness of sin. As one commentator put it, "Short memories often need dramatic experiences." As the process continued, ever so slowly yet ever so deliberately, to exonerate the innocent, the reality of one man's guilt increased with a deafening crescendo.

Second, perhaps this method was chosen to give Achan an opportunity to repent. As he stood and watched and listened, should he not have felt the weight of his transgression increase? As the circle of possible suspects gradually narrowed, one would think Achan might have come to his senses. If he had, and suddenly cried out: “Stop! Enough! I’m the man!” would God have relented?

Tribe by tribe, clan by clan, household by household, man by man, everyone was subjected to the drawing of lots. First, it was the tribe of Judah that drew the stone that pointed to guilt. Then, from within Judah, it was the clan of the Zerahites. Then, from within the Zerahites, it was the household of Zabdi, and from within the household of Zabdi, Achan, the son of Carmi, was left standing alone.

The fact that this long and emotionally intense procedure went all the way to its consummation indicates that Achan held out to the very end in his baseless hope that his sin would remain secret and undetected. His confession, as found in vv. 20-21, was not voluntary. He did not willingly come forward because he was broken and convicted by his sin. He was not repentant. He simply got caught.

His execution was swift and decisive.

I will not take the time to read all of chapter 8, but the fact is that Ai still had to be destroyed. This time, however, God would act on Israel’s behalf. The guilty party had been eliminated. Thus we read:

“And the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Do not fear and do not be dismayed. Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land’” (v. 1).

Beginning with v. 3, the battle plan is unpacked. Some 30,000 soldiers, or as they are described in v. 3, “mighty men of valor,” are sent by night to hide just west of the city of Ai. The second group would appear on the north side of the city and serve as a diversionary force to draw the armies of Ai out of the city, leaving it vulnerable to attack. A third contingent of 5,000 men were positioned between Ai and Bethel to cut off reinforcements from the latter.

The plan worked. Joshua and his forces pretended to retreat in fear and cowardice. The armies of Ai, remembering how easily they had defeated Israel before, took the bait. They left the city unguarded. The Israeli soldiers who were hiding west of the city entered it and destroyed everything in their path.

Life Lessons

The lessons for us that come from this story are many. I will limit myself to four.

(1) First, we are confronted here with ***the substantial difference between the eastern worldview of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and that of contemporary 21st century western America.*** We promote and take

pride in our rugged individualism. It's every man for himself. What I do is my business and what you do is yours. Thus, I suffer for my misdeeds and you suffer for yours, but neither of us is held accountable for the other.

In the OT it was a different matter. People were less viewed as isolated individuals and more as members of a corporate body. They experienced a social and spiritual solidarity that we hardly even recognize. This was especially true in Israel. That is why Achan's sin was thought of as the sin of all Israel. This is why all Israel was made to suffer for his transgression and all Israel was active in his punishment.

Perhaps reading **Romans 5:17** and **19** will help . . . Adam was but one man but he was the representative and corporate head of the entire human race. Thus when he fell, we all fell. Jesus is the representative or corporate head of a new race, namely, those who identify with him by faith. Thus, as Paul says, just "as by the one man's disobedience (a reference to Adam) the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience (a reference to Jesus) the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19).

This is the biblical foundation that undergirds our approach to covenant membership in the local church. We are all members one of another. The life and deeds of one, whether righteous or unrighteous, affect us all. We are not so many marbles bouncing off one another as we occasionally meet and pass pleasantries. We are members of one body of which Christ is the head. The actions of one can often affect us all.

(2) We should also reflect on *the deceptive power of sin*, in particular the sin of covetousness. Notice in Joshua 7:21 where Achan confesses his sin, there are three elements: (1) "I saw", (2) "I coveted", and (3) "I took". These are precisely the three elements in sin that we read about in Genesis 3:6 – "So when the woman (Eve) **saw** that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be **desired** to make one wise, she **took** of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate."

Be careful what you set your eyes upon. Although sin is the result of what is inside us, it is provoked by what is outside us. The "seeing" stimulates or stirs up the covetous desire to possess or to taste or to experience. This desire is so powerful it will incite temporary spiritual amnesia: we forget God's prohibition and promise. We forget that he forbids the taking. We forget that his promise for obedience is more satisfying than anything sin can do for us. All of which in turn leads to the taking or the acting.

In Achan's case, much as in that of Adam and Eve, he thinks he knows better than God. It's as if he says to himself, "I know better than God does what is best for my soul. This is a happiness and a joy that I simply can't pass up, and if God were any kind of God to begin with, he'd be happy for me to experience the delight that will come from my possessing these objects."

He simply doesn't believe God is good. He doesn't believe that the prohibition was in his best interests. It's not unlike what Satan said to Eve: "God is holding out on you. He's forbidding this because he wants it all for himself." It comes down to this simple question: ***"Do you or do you not believe that in every commandment that God gives us he has our best interests in view? Do you or do you not believe that in every prohibition he is seeking our ultimate joy and our most delightful satisfaction?"*** If you don't, you'll rationalize your sin in precisely the way Achan did. If you do, you'll make the right choice, as painful in the present as it may be, trusting the goodness of God that in the long run he is truly seeking our greatest spiritual welfare.

(3) Let's think deeply and carefully about *the impossibility and thus the absurdity of hidden sin*. Do you actually think that God doesn't know what you think? Do you not realize that he is thinking about the fact that you stupidly think your thinking is hidden from him? Listen to David's declaration concerning the knowledge of God and its affect on his behavior:

"O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down

and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is high; I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:1-6).

Not everyone likes the idea of being utterly, exhaustively, and intimately known. They prefer to keep the secrets of their soul hidden from view. That God might know them in such pervasive detail is unnerving, to say the least. David, on the other hand, revels in this truth. Instead of feeling resentful or angry or responding as if God is an intruder in his life, David takes great comfort in knowing that God knows him exhaustively, past, present, and future. Such knowledge, he declares, "is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (v. 6).

Let's look more closely at the extent of God's knowledge of David (and of Achan and of us) and the joy it ought to evoke within us.

In the opening statement, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me" (v. 1), "searching" is obviously an anthropomorphic image, for "God knows all things naturally and as a matter of course, and not by any effort on his part. Searching ordinarily implies a measure of ignorance which is removed by observation; of course this is not the case with the Lord; but the meaning of the Psalmist is, that the Lord knows us thoroughly as if he had examined us minutely, and had pried into the most secret corners of our being."¹

In order to demonstrate that God also has exhaustive knowledge of every position and movement, David employs a figure of speech called *merism*, in which polar opposites are used to indicate the totality of all generically related acts, events, localities, and so on. Thus: "You know when I sit down and when I rise up" (v. 2a). His choice of words is designed to encompass the totality of his life's activities. God's knowledge extends to every conceivable physical state, gesture, exercise, posture and pursuit. "When I am active and when I am passive and everything in

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, III:B:258.

between . . . You know it all!” David leaves nothing to guesswork: “My most common and casual acts, my most necessary and trivial movements, are all under your gaze. Nothing escapes your eye!”

Indeed, God knows every mental impulse that governs and regulates such outward behavior. We read in v. 2b that God “discerns” our “thoughts from afar.” Every emotion, feeling, idea, thought, conception, resolve, aim, doubt, motive, perplexity, and anxious moment is exposed before God like an open book.

And all this “from afar” (v. 2b). Some take this as a reference to God’s transcendence, the point being that the distance between heaven and earth by which men vainly imagine God’s knowledge to be circumscribed (limited, bounded) offers no obstacle. Though God be infinitely high and we be so very, very low, he knows us thoroughly.

What follows serves only to confirm this truth: “you search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways” (v. 3), that is to say, every step, every movement, every journey is beneath your gaze.

Should there be any lingering doubts, verse 4 utterly dispels them: “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.” Two things are important to note. First, God has knowledge of our words “*before*” they are spoken. Second, God has *exhaustive* and comprehensive knowledge of our words. He knows them “altogether” or “completely.” Spurgeon was surely right when he said:

“Though my thought be invisible to the sight, though as yet I be not myself cognizant of the shape it is assuming, yet thou hast it under thy consideration, and thou perceivest its nature, its source, its drift, its result. Never dost thou misjudge or wrongly interpret me; my inmost thought is perfectly understood by thine impartial mind. Though thou shouldst give but a glance at my heart, and see me as one sees a passing meteor moving afar, yet thou wouldst by that glimpse sum up all the meanings of my soul, so transparent is everything to thy piercing glance.”²

How often have you blurted out, perhaps at an especially ill-advised moment, some word that you had no idea was forthcoming? Of this I can assure you: God wasn’t in the least surprised or caught off guard. You and I may not always know what we will say, but God does.

Quite simply, God surrounds us. His knowledge has us hemmed in (v. 5). We are enveloped by his loving care. “We cannot turn back and so escape him, for he is behind; we cannot go forward and outmarch him, for he is before. He not only beholds us, but he besets us.”³

How does all this affect you? Does it elicit fear in your soul? Anxiety? Anger? Evidently it didn’t affect Achan at all. Evidently he believed himself to be an exception to this rule. Evidently he thought he could sneak one by God without being noticed.

2 Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, III:B:259.

3 Ibid.

For David, God's exhaustive and all-encompassing knowledge of him is simply "too wonderful" (v. 6a). He lacks the necessary faculties of mind, spirit and affection to fully grasp what is at stake. It is too deep, too high, too wide, too expansive and broad for his finite mind to entertain. Such knowledge not only surpasses his comprehension but his imagination as well. "It is high; I cannot attain it" (v. 6b).

(4) Finally, this gloriously transcendent truth ought to elicit within us ***both fear and comfort, both awe and joy, both trembling and delight.***

Fear, awe, and trembling, because we are reminded that an infinitely holy God knows our unholy thoughts, hears our unrighteous words, and sees our immoral and selfish deeds. But it also awakens in us comfort, joy, and delight, for with this holy God there is also forgiveness. In his arms there is safety. And in the knowledge that he has of us there is delight in being reassured that nothing catches him by surprise, and that nothing comes our way that does not first pass through his sovereign hands and is thus designed ultimately for our greater good.