



Text: Joshua 7:1-26 (with selected verses from chapter 6 & 8)¹

Series: Facing Life with Courage

Title: Part 6 – Getting Into Trouble ... And Getting Out of It!

Date: June 14, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

The passage we're looking at this week is dense with challenge and after a week of studying and meditating on the text I found myself going in different directions with the message. On Friday afternoon, however, I read the excellent insights of a great Bible scholar and preacher, James Montgomery Boice, and much of what I say this morning is drawn from his excellent work on this text.²

What a short step there is between a great victory and a great defeat. One moment we are riding high on the cloud of some great spiritual success. The next moment we are plunged into the dark valley of some grim spiritual failure. The mountain top to valley trail is a well travelled path and I know this morning that I'm speaking to many fellow travelers of that road. You and I can draw encouragement this morning from some company on the road, as well, because that's where we find Joshua and the people of Israel in our text today.

What people think of Joshua, most think of the victory of the armies of Israel at Jericho and it is right that they do. The victory at Jericho was a great miraculous victory, carried out in strict obedience to God's battle plan. We learned some important lessons about spiritual warfare when he studied that amazing event two weeks ago. But that was "yesterday" and the defeat at Ai is "today."

Ai was so much smaller that archaeologists have trouble actually locating the site of the ancient city. The spies that Joshua sent out came back telling the people that this battle could all be over before lunch! They told Joshua to just send a small force against Ai because "they are few." (v.3) But those "few" inhabitants inflicted the only defeat the army of Israel would ever experience in their conquest of the land. The thirty six Israelites killed by the troops of Ai were the only Israelites ever killed in battle in their conquest of the land.

What caused the change? How could a humiliating defeat such as this follow so closely on the heels of such a great victory?

Bible scholars have offered a variety of explanations. Some have suggested that Israel had become **too self-confident** in the aftermath of the victory at Jericho. Over confidence is evident in the minimizing of the number of troops needed to

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.

² James Montgomery Boice, Joshua: An Expository Commentary, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1989, pp. 57-63.



defeat the city because numbers had nothing to do with the victory at Jericho. God won the victory at Jericho, not the skill or numbers of Israelite troops.

Some have thought that the defeat at Ai was due to a **lack of prayer**, particularly on the part of Joshua who didn't consult the Lord about how Ai should be taken. There is no reference to prayer, just the sending out of scouts.

While these factors might have been present, the writer of the account draws our attention in a totally different direction. God actually tells us what the essential reason for the defeat was: **there was sin among God's people**. Joshua and the other leaders of Israel threw themselves on the ground before the Lord, crying out to him in anguish over the defeat. It had shattered them and melted their hearts and weakened their spirits.

“Alas, O Lord GOD, why...?” Joshua 7:7

God wasn't very gentle in his answer to Joshua...

“Get up! Why have you fallen on your face? Israel has sinned....” Joshua 7:10

One of the central lessons of this story is that **God takes sin with deadly seriousness**. Sin is something of which God takes great notice. He doesn't excuse it. He doesn't tolerate it. He is gracious and patient but he will always deal with it. I want us to notice the ways in which God describes the sin that underlay the defeat at Ai. God wants us to notice the sin because I think he wants us to take sin in our lives very seriously.

He said to Joshua...

“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. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies.” Joshua 7:10-12

The word translated as **“sinned”** has the root idea of “missing the mark.” Sin is failing to stay on track with God's will and God's heart.

The word translated as **“transgressed”** has the root idea of “over stepping the line.” Sin is moving outside of God's revealed will and purpose. God had told Israel how he wanted them to deal with the destruction of Jericho and someone had violated God's boundaries.

The particular sin at issue involved **theft and deception**. In fact, it involved stealing directly from God himself. According to God's command, the “devoted



things” belonged to him. God had been very specific and clear with Israel about how they were to treat the spoil of the city of Jericho. He had said to them...

“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it. But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.” Joshua 6:17-19

When we started our study of Joshua I dealt with the issue of why God “devoted to destruction” the Canaanite people and their cities.³ Essentially, it was God’s judgment upon them for centuries of sin and rebellion against him. The conquest of the Land of Promise is not a story of genocide; it’s a cautionary tale of God’s judgment. It tells us that God takes sin seriously and will one day bring his judgment against all sin everywhere.

By this point in the story of the defeat at Ai we already know something that Joshua didn’t know. We know that the trouble that has come down on the heads of all Israel has come because of the sin of just one man. We know that one of his soldiers, a man by the name of Achan, had taken some of the things from the destruction of Jericho and had claimed them for himself. The book opens with this description of Achan’s sin...

“But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan ... took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.” Joshua 7:1

Notice that phrase, “broke faith.” Later in the Book of Joshua it’s used to describe a suspected case of apostasy by a group of Israelites from the worship of the true God. They were suspected of abandoning the worship of the Lord and of engaging in idol worship. As the story unfolds later in Joshua the suspicion proves to be false, but the phrase, “to break faith,” clearly carries the meaning of worshipping other gods. By doing what he did, Achan in essence became **a denier of God** and **a worshipper of idols**.

Finally, God describes Achan’s actions with one more very descriptive term. He said of Achan...

“he has done an outrageous thing in Israel.” Joshua 7:15

³ See “Part 2 – Rahab, A Woman of Faith & Courage,” May 10, 2009



The word translated as “outrageous” has the root meaning of **foolish**. “Achan, how could you be so stupid! What were you thinking? How did you think you could steal from God and not get caught?”

Sin is missing the mark of God’s standard of righteousness, it is a overstepping the boundaries that have been set for us by his law, but sin is also our own worst nightmare! Even from the perspective of our own self-interest, sin is like putting a gun to our own heads. Do we think we can hide from God? Do we think we won’t be caught? Do we think we’ll never have to pay the price? The Psalmist wrote...

“In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’... Why does the wicked renounce God and say in his heart, ‘You will not call to account?’” Psalm 10:4, 13

One Bible scholar⁴ noted that in doing what he had done, Achan had violated...

- **The eighth commandment against stealing (Exodus 20:15)**
- **The ninth commandment against coveting (Exodus 20:17)**
- **The covenant law God had established about dealing with “the devoted things.” (Deuteronomy 20:10-20; Joshua 6:17-19)**
- **The commandment against lying (Leviticus 19:11)**
- **And the first commandment forbidding “other gods” (Exodus 20:3)**

How did Achan get himself, and Israel, into so much trouble? How could he have been so “stupid”? The shocking answer is that he did exactly what you and I do every time we disobey God. His sin was really quite “garden variety” in how it came about. On the surface it wasn’t any more or less heinous than hundreds of things that we do throughout our lives.

After his identity had been exposed by God’s discerning Spirit, this is how Achan explained how he got himself into this mess...

“Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: 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.” Joshua 7:20-21

Notice three things about the process of Achan’s sin. He said: **I saw; I coveted; I took**. The reason I called his sin “garden variety” is that that is exactly the process that was followed by our ancestors in the Garden of Eden. The Bible describes Eve’s fall into disobedience this way...

⁴ David M. Howard, Jr, vol. 5, *Joshua*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1998), 197.



“So when the woman 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....” Genesis 3:6

In Hebrew, the verbs in Joshua & Genesis are exactly the same. Achan “saw,” “coveted,” and “took” just as Eve had done. That’s “garden variety” sin.

I think there were some roots that led Achan to follow this sad path to disobedience. **First** of all,

His “seeing” was twisted into a temptation to sin by an underlying dissatisfaction with life

There were hundreds of others who had passed these items, and perhaps ones that were even more splendid, but Achan stopped and took these things. Why?

Achan was dissatisfied with the way God had ordered the affairs of his life. God was leading the people into a land in which he promised each family their own land, their own home and their own vineyards and fruit trees. He promised them a land of “milk and honey”! But Achan’s mind wasn’t on the blessings that lay ahead; he was stuck in the past. He was probably reasoning like this:

“God has not treated us well in these last years of wandering. True, he’s given us manna to eat and kept our clothes from wearing out – but who wants the same old thing to eat every day and the same old thing to wear day in day out! I’ve had enough of this! Following God may satisfy others but not me. The first chance I get, I’m going to improve my situation, with or without God’s help!”

That’s “garden variety” thinking. Dissatisfaction with God’s provision and doubt about God’s Word was the way in which Satan twisted Eve’s “seeing” into a temptation to sin. He said to her...

“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” [He hadn’t said that – Satan was twisting God’s Word] **And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**
Genesis 3:1-5

He played on her mind by calling into question God’s goodness and he sowed seeds of dissatisfaction that very quickly sprang up into rebellion against God.



Isn't this what often happens to us? I'm in my early 50s. Because of my choice to pursue education for ministry Ruth and I deferred significant amounts of income in the early years of our marriage. I went to school; my peers went to work. As we all know, it's those early earning years that are most important in the long run and now at 50 plus, I'm thinking about the long run more and more. There's a temptation to become resentful and to complain about what I don't have. But that's Achan's road. Ultimately, that's Satan's road. And I don't want to go down it.

This week I read Psalm 92. It closes with these words...

“The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.” Psalm 92:12-15

What struck me about growing old and being fruitful, flexible and spiritually alive is the absence of dissatisfaction. To declare that “the LORD is upright” is to say that he's never done me wrong, that His ways for me have always been right and good. It's to say with the Apostle Paul...

“In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Philippians 4:12

Second, what sped Achan's downfall was that ...

He coveted 'things' that weren't his because he viewed 'things' from a worldly perspective

Under the rules of war in Joshua's day, a conqueror could seize the possessions of the one he defeated. Perhaps Achan was thinking along these lines. It was the “way of the world.” You win; you take. You conqueror; you possess. But the problem with this line of thinking was that Achan hadn't won. He hadn't conquered. God had.

God gave the city of Jericho into the hands of the Israelites. He broke down the walls and filled the hearts of the inhabitants with dread. Notice that Achan referred to the things he took as **“the spoil” (v.21)** not as **“the devoted things.”(v.1)** Everything belonged to God. They weren't just “things” to be possessed by anyone. It wasn't “finder's keepers.” It was all God's.

Francis Schaeffer had an insight on the nature of the things that Achan took. He noted that Achan coveted two kinds of things: he coveted gold and silver and he desired a robe from “Shinar.”



The **gold and silver** speak to the common, garden variety of temptation we face toward **materialism**. Materialism is expressed either positively or negatively. Either we're filling our lives with all kinds of "stuff." I'd call that "positive materialism." Or we're resentful that we can't have as much stuff as somebody else. I'd call that "negative materialism." Positively or negatively, it's a still materialism.

Schaeffer suggested that the **cloak** spoke to the temptation toward **worldliness**. "Shinar" was another term for the area of Babylon. Babylon was a highly regarded city in Joshua's day. It was the Paris, Rome, or New York of its day. Many centuries later, it actually overpowered Israel and took the people captive. When Achan saw the robe displayed with its intricate work in the style of Babylon, he was a chance to be like the world in its outward, visible success and fashion, and so he took it.⁵

Nothing will so quickly destroy our spiritual lives as dissatisfaction with God's arrangement of our lives which leads to lust for what God has not given or has given to someone else.

Finally...

Having seen and coveted, he logically "took" what was not his to take

Achan's dissatisfaction and his covetousness which are internal, invisible sins, led to sinful actions. Achan stole; he became sneaky (he hid the items under his tent) and he lied.

That's always the way it is with sin. We may sin in our minds and then by the grace of God be led to confess and repudiate our sin before we reap its consequences. But if we do not repent of hidden sin, it will inevitably break out into the open. The Apostle James wrote...

"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." James 1:13-15

The Bible tells us that one day the secret sins of life are going to be brought to light at the final judgment. But it didn't take that long for Achan. The Holy Spirit led the process by which his sin was brought to light. The lots were cast and Achan was exposed.

⁵ As quoted in Boice, Joshua, p. 60.



Achan and his family, who were obviously accessories to his sin given that the items were hidden under their tent, were taken and put to death. Could Achan have been forgiven if he had asked for mercy?

This is what the Word of God says about that...

“No one devoted, who is to be devoted for destruction from mankind, shall be ransomed; he shall surely be put to death.” Leviticus 27:29

That’s why God had warned the people to...

“keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it.” Joshua 6:18

By taking those things into his home, Achan had condemned himself and his family to death. He had sinned in what the Old Testament called a “high handed” way and there was no sacrifice that could redeem his life. That’s why God called his action “outrageous;” it was foolish, it was unbelievably brainless!

Achan and his family were taken outside the camp of Israel and put to death in a valley called “trouble.”

**“And they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. 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 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.”
Joshua 7:24-26**

**In Hebrew, *Achor* means “trouble”
The Valley of Achor is “Trouble Valley”**

With the death of Achan and his family, God’s anger was turned away from Israel. Chapter 8 begins with these encouraging words...

“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.’” Joshua 8:1

And never again in the Book of Joshua do we read of Israel being defeated in battle.

If the story of Achan and the defeat of Israel’s armies at Ai means anything to us, it must mean that sin cannot be tolerated in the lives of God’s people. God plays



no favorites when it comes to sin. But although this story is a story of judgment, it is also a proclamation of hope for the blessing that will come again when sin is repudiated.

For years I'm sure that any mention of the Valley of Achor brought cold chills to anyone who had witnessed these awful events. Those who threw the stones that killed Achan and his family that day must have done so with heavy hearts. The thought, "there but for the grace of God go I," must have played across their minds. Achan's sin, after all, had been a "garden variety" sin. There was no victory, there was no joy, there was no exultation in the Valley of Achor.

But that would change.

We're brought to this awful place once again in the work of the prophet **Hosea**. Hosea is also **a story of God's judgment on the sin of his people**. God orders Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman by the name of Gomer. Her unfaithfulness to Hosea was to serve as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

In the grimmest part of Hosea's prophecy, God speaks three judgments against Gomer, each one preface with the word, "therefore."

First, God says...

"Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths." Hosea 2:6

In other words, God is going to make her life frustrating and unfulfilling.

Second, God says...

"Therefore I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season, and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness." Hosea 2:9

God is going to deprive her of the necessities of life, her food and clothing.

The **third** time God speaks the word "therefore" we've reached the peak of his dealings with Gomer and God links his "therefore" with the Valley of Achor, "Trouble Valley." It's the place where unfaithful Achan was put to death and considering what the Lord has been doing with Gomer, we should be fearing for her life. God has promised her frustration and deprivation. What is left but the ultimate judgment, the death of the one who has been sinning?

But this is what God says...



“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.” Hosea 2:14-15

Who can turn “the Valley of Achor” into “a door of hope”? God can. When Achan died, God’s anger was turned aside from Israel. But in an even greater sense, that’s exactly what happened for us when Jesus Christ died on the cross. The Apostle Paul wrote...

“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Romans 3:22-23

Just like Achan, we’ve all fallen short of the mark of God’s righteousness. But the hope is found in God’s offer of mercy. We’re all in trouble. We’ve all sinned but in Christ we...

“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Romans 3:24-25

The word **“propitiation”** refers to the satisfaction of God’s anger against sin. Because of Jesus death for us, God’s wrath is no longer burning against us, if we receive his offer of mercy by faith in Christ. **God’s wrath against our sin has been removed by the satisfaction of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf.**

Roy Comrie is a missionary with SIM and familiar to many of you. He spoke here a few years ago. About 18 months ago, Roy’s sister Sheila was murdered by a thief who broke into her home. A few weeks ago, Roy was granted permission to speak with the many accused of his sister’s murder. Aside from my decision to withhold the name of the accused, this is Roy’s account of that meeting...

After first being told [it was impossible for Roy to meet with the accused] ... Roy was able to speak with to [the accused] for 20 minutes about the wonder of God’s forgiveness, using the story of the massacre in 1979 in Zimbabwe of 9 missionaries and their four children, and the subsequent salvation of most of the gang who murdered them, who then became part of God’s family. Roy assured [the accused] that he too could become his brother through repentance and faith in Jesus, and he then gave [the accused] a Zulu Bible. Amazingly he turned to Roy and said, “I am so sorry.” The whole legal council [sic] had been listening and one of the detectives had tears streaming down his face. The judge then arrived and the court case continued. Roy was able to speak later to [the accused] about the fact that he will face two judges, this one and another on before whom all men will stand, and for whom he would need the defence [sic] of Jesus who had died a violent death to procure pardon for him, and faith in Him would mean he could be acquitted. The case has been remanded but we have found a chaplain and Bible correspondence course that can reach [the accused]



in prison. Please keep him in your prayers. We believe that God has begun a good work in him. He will likely spend the rest of his days in prison but as an evangelist he could have a tremendous ministry.⁶

Does sin bring judgment? Of course it does. This is the teaching of Scripture from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. This is why we must never take sin lightly. But judgment is not the whole story. Sin does bring judgment, but God often graciously uses the judgment to bring about change in us that enables him to turn what otherwise would be the greatest of all judgments into blessed hope.

Who can turn the Valley of Trouble into a door of hope? We can't. But there is One who does: Jesus Christ. He has done it by taking our trouble upon himself. He was troubled for us. He went down into that dark valley of judgment, dying in our place, satisfying God's righteous anger against our sin (Rom 3:25), in order that he might raise us up in hope by his resurrection.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** O Great God
- **Benediction:**

⁶ Personal letter from Roy Comrie, April 2009