

Be Sure Your Sins Will Find You Out

Joshua 7:16-26

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, February 26th 2023

I. Introduction - God knows how to expose sins

Some of you may remember the Ashley Madison scandal back in 2015. And for those of you who don't, Ashley Madison was a website that claimed to be an ultra secure dating website that would enable married people to cheat on their spouses with total anonymity. They claimed to have forty million users who had successfully had affairs with no secrets being exposed. Well, a hackers group called "The Impact Team" hacked their website, and showed that there is no such thing as secrets on the web. They put seven years worth of Ashley Madison's hacked records into the public, including names and addresses, credit card payments, and what the transactions were. And an enormous number of people had a lot of explaining to do. 1200 wealthy Saudi Arabians were suddenly subject to extortion since adultery is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia. Christians such as Josh Duggar were exposed. Some people committed suicide, while others joined a lawsuit. Many in government, all the way up to the White House employees, have been discovered as having used the site.

I think it illustrates well Numbers 32:23, which says, "be sure your sin will find you out." God knows our sins and He can release them to the world whenever He desires! A newspaper known for printing scandals came under criticism publishing the scandals of public officials. And the publisher responded by putting this in the header (and you can see a screenshot of it in the outline) - "If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

As we have been going through chapter 7 of Joshua, we have been discovering a lot of lessons from Achan's hidden sin. Well, in *this* section, Achan's sin gets exposed to all Israel. And his reactions to this exposure are instructive. They reveal the difference between true repentance and the half-hearted repentance that often happens when people get caught red-handed. You children know the difference between the times when you voluntarily confessed your sins before being caught and those times you confessed only after being caught and you did so in the hopes of escaping severe discipline.

II. Achan's reluctance to confess (vv. 18c-21)

Well, Achan's confession is the kind that doesn't count. He confesses to what is obvious and even then, minimizes what he has done. Before we look at verses 16-17, I am going to jump ahead to what's wrong with Achan's confession.

A. He thought he might be able to get away with it (vv. 14-18)

The first thing commentaries point out is that Achan must have thought he could get away with his sin. We saw last week that Achan hid his sin from the day Jericho was taken to the day of Israel's defeat before Ai. And then he *kept* hiding it overnight, and continued to hide the sin during this long deliberately drawn-out ordeal of weeding out each of the tribes of Israel, and once Judah was picked, going through each of the clans within Judah until the clan of Zarhi was picked, and then going through the ancestral houses of Zarhi until the ancestral house of Carmi was picked, and then going through the extended families within the ancestral house of Carmi until the extended family of Zabdi was picked, and then going through each of the nuclear families within the extended family of Zabdi until the nuclear family of Achan was picked. It was quite the long drawn-out process. The New King James doesn't render the words for tribes, clans, ancestral houses, extended families, and nuclear families correctly in verses 17-18, but at least the *idea* is clear. A good part of a day was taken in isolating who did this deed. And some commentators (and I would agree with them) believe that God deliberately revealed it in this slow drawn-out way in order to extend his grace and give Achan the opportunity to confess without being caught. But people tend to hide their sins as long as they can. And that was certainly the case with Achan.

B. He had to be “caught” (לכד = to be trapped v. 18c) and exposed

He didn't confess voluntarily. He had to be caught. Verse 18 says, “Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.” Literally, the word “taken” means to be “caught” or “to be trapped.” I think of the way monkeys were trapped out in Ethiopia, where I grew up. They would get a gourd with some food inside and place a hole in the gourd just big enough for a monkey to fit its hand inside. The monkey would look, smell it and want it. And it would finally get up the courage to stick its hand inside to grab the food. At that instant the man would rush out at the monkey, and because the monkey was frightened, it would frantically try to pull and pull in order to get its hand out, but it could not. Reason? It's hand was still holding the food and was now bunched up too big to fit the fist through the hole. If you do not let go of sin, sin will never let go of you until you are under its bondage - and in this case, under God's judgment.

C. Joshua had to beg him to confess (v. 19)

The third evidence that Achan's confession was an extracted confession, not a true repentance, was that Joshua had to beg him to confess. The NKJV has “I beg you,” NASB has “I implore you,” two versions have “I beseech you.” This confession was not quickly forthcoming. But Joshua is hoping that Achan will at least get his *conscience* clean before he is executed.

Now Joshua said to Achan, “My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

If God had been revealing everything to Joshua all the way along, God could easily reveal exactly where the loot was hidden too. So why does Joshua beg him to confess? It's not because they can't find the loot without his confession. Joshua is a prophet. I believe it is because Joshua is giving him the opportunity to come clean before the Lord even at this late stage.

And it's always good for parents to try to get their children to confess to their sins before the evidence of the sin is shown to them to test where their hearts are at. Sometimes parents have to go through this process of trying to extract a confession many times before kids get it and realize it pays to confess before you are caught. Lying should be punished even more severely than the sin itself. In this case, there wasn't any more severe penalty that Achan could receive since the penalty was death, but the principle is the same. God was giving Achan the opportunity to get his conscience completely clean. But sadly, his confession is deficient at even *this* point.

D. Even his confession was deficient (vv. 20-21). He admits to the obvious (v. 20), but he fails to look at the sin as God does (v. 21)

In verse 20, he does admit to the obvious. He says, "Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel..." Wow! That looks promising. Maybe he *will* come completely clean. And perhaps on first reading you might think that he *has* come completely clean. If you think so, you are likely fooled by less than stellar confessions from *your* children too. No, God wants our confessions to describe our sins as *God* describes our sins. There can be no excuses, minimizations, blameshifting, or making the sin look not quite as bad as God thinks it is. Achan goes on, "And this is what I have done." Let's compare *his* description of the sin to the description God has already given, and I think you will immediately see the deficiencies.

1. Rather than calling it "herem" or devoted to destruction (חרם - 6:17,18,21; 7:1,11,12,13,15) he falsely calls it spoils (v. 21a - שָׁלַל), which is the exact opposite

Eight times in the previous verses God had described all of the items in Jericho as *herem* or devoted to destruction and anyone who would might take those things as *also* being *herem* or devoted to destruction. But when making his confession, Achan doesn't use that word. In verse 21 he describes it as *shallal* (שָׁלַל), which is translated as spoils. *Shallal* is the exact opposite of *herem*. Spoils was a gift of God; it was a good thing. In Ai God would allow the Israelites to take spoils (chapter 8:2), the exact same word Achan uses here, but He absolutely prohibited any *shallal* from Jericho eight times in the previous verses. Spoils is a positive term, *herem* is a negative term for what he had taken. It may not seem like a big deal, but when you consistently use softer terms to describe your sin, you are engaged in the same false confession that Adam and Eve engaged in.

2. Rather than calling it a "disgraceful thing" (v. 15 - נִבְלָה) he calls it a "beautiful" thing (v. 21b)

Likewise, though God called it a disgraceful thing in verse 15 (nevalah - נִבְלָה), Achan called it a good thing or a "beautiful" thing in verse 21 (tovah - טוֹבָה). God sees it as ugly, while

Achan saw it as beautiful. Psychologically we tend to excuse our sins but not seeing them as ugly as God does. People might understand sparing something very beautiful and good, right? He doesn't want to admit to having deliberately embraced something ugly. It softens the confession of sin.

3. Rather than identifying the “accursed” garment with Canaan, a land devoted to judgment (Josh 3:10; 5:1; 6:18; 7:1; etc.), he called the garment a “Babylonian garment” (v. 21c)

Next, rather than identifying the accursed garment with *Canaan*, a land that was totally under God's judgment, he called the garment “a *Babylonian* garment” in verse 21. Perhaps it was a subtle way of rationalizing why a garment from a country *not* under God's judgment (and Babylon is clearly not under God's judgment at this point) should be rescued from a household that *is* under judgment. This is not a Canaanite garment. I didn't take a Canaanite garment. Now, you may question whether this was a softening of what he had done, but I think it was.

4. Rather than calling it a “breaking of the covenant” (v. 11), he calls it a sin (v. 20).

And it is true that Achan called what he did a sin against God in verse 20, but God describes the sin in much stronger language saying in verse 11 that this act had “transgressed My covenant which I commanded them,” and verse 15 says, “because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD.” Breaking or transgressing the covenant is much stronger language. As we saw last week, there are various degrees of sin, and a violation of the covenant is a super-serious sin. You don't break covenant with God and get away with it. But again, the language used reveals a lot about Achan. It's technically correct language, but it is language that is not as clear.

5. He uses a term for “covet” (חמד - v. 21) that can mean the more positive “to find pleasure in.”

He does admit that he coveted in verse 21, but he uses a term that can also have a more positive meaning of “to find pleasure in.” But sadly he was finding pleasure in something that God had pronounced the death penalty on. He is not treating it as a sin worthy of the death penalty.

6. Rather than calling it stealing (see God's view in verse 11 - גנב), He calls it taking (v. 21d - לקח)

In verse 11 God called what Achan had done theft or stealing - stealing from *God Himself*. It was stealing because at least the gold and silver could be melted and devoted to God and needed to go into the temple. Achan uses a weaker term translated as “took them.” The language is *technically* correct, but it is not describing the sin as seriously as God already had.

7. Rather than using God’s term for deception or feigned obedience (v. 11 - כחש), he speaks of it as being “hidden” (v. 21e - טמן)

Rather than using God’s term for deception or feigned obedience (kichashu - כִּחַשׁוּ), Achan simply speaks of it as “hidden” in his tent (taman - טָמַן).

8. Rather than bringing the items to the Lord before being caught, he admits to what will soon become obvious (v. 21f)

Rather than bringing the items to the Lord *before* being caught, he admits to what will soon become obvious.

Now, I wouldn’t make a huge deal about this if it was not for the fact that description after description of his sin (eight in all) lowers the seriousness of the sin from a God-centered perspective to a man-centered perspective. When we instructed our children in confession of sin, we instructed them to be accurate and Scriptural in their confession. And we modeled that ourselves when we confessed our sins to our children. We didn’t want them describing their sin more seriously than the Bible did or less seriously. Don’t be over-spiritual and describe your sin as worse than it is. Describe it as God does. When you have a willingness to describe sin as God does, you begin to hate it as God does. And you are more likely to flee from it as God calls us to flee from our sins. J. Hampton Keathley, III said,

God gave divine direction and Achan was discovered by supernatural means. He did not come forth voluntarily to confess or repent and throw himself on the mercy of God. His failure to do so stands in contrast with the attitude of the prodigal son and the publican in the New Testament.¹

Keathley thinks that if he had confessed as the prodigal son did, he might have been spared the death penalty. I doubt it, but it still shows why Joshua’s description of Achan is not positive at all after his confession.

When construction workers were laying a foundation for a building outside the city of Pompeii, they found a skeleton of a woman who must have been fleeing from an eruption of the nearby volcano, but was caught in the rain of hot ashes. They found in the skeletal hands a bunch of jewels that were preserved in excellent condition. She had her jewels, but she lost her life. Taking those extra moments kept her from reaching the sea. May we flee from our sins long before God has to bring a metaphoric volcanic eruption into our lives.

III. Israel’s eagerness to be holy (v. 16-18)

In stark contrast to Achan’s reluctance to embrace God’s will, the rest of Israel showed an eagerness to be holy and to please the Lord. These descriptions stand in such stark contrast to Achan. I think they are deliberately juxtaposed in this way.

¹ Unpublished sermon.

A. Joshua & all Israel rose early (v. 16a)

The first words in verse 16 are, “So Joshua rose *early* in the morning and brought Israel...” Joshua was no procrastinator. No matter how difficult the task, he immediately sought to do God’s will. Contrast that with Achan waiting, waiting, waiting, hoping his sin will not be exposed. Four times we are told that Joshua rose up early in the morning to do God’s will. We too should challenge ourselves to get the worst tasks out of the way. That removes the burden from our shoulders much earlier than if we procrastinate. When you procrastinate, the things you dread still weigh you down, and they de-energize you. It’s much better to get those things done early.

But those words show that Israel was quite willing to do the same. They *too* rose early. They *too* showed an eagerness to deal with anything that brought offense to God. They are a model of how we should deal with sin.

B. Joshua & Israel went to great inconvenience to deal with sin (vv. 16b-18)

And the next words in verses 16-17 show that they were willing to seek God’s favor despite the inconvenience involved. It says,

... and brought Israel by their tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. 17 He brought the clan of Judah, and he took the family of the Zarhites; and he brought the family of the Zarhites man by man, and Zabdi was taken. 18 Then he brought his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

As has already been said, there was a systematic ruling out of tribes, clans, ancestral houses, extended families, nuclear families, and individuals via a process of elimination. Commentaries differ on whether this guidance was the use of lots, the use of Urim and Thumim, or simply God’s direct revelation to Joshua a bit at a time as he approached various leaders. In one sense we don’t need to know. Whatever method God used, it was a method of guidance that was deliberately slow enough to give Achan plenty of time to confess. But he did not. But here’s the point I am making now - Israel embraced that slowness because that’s what God required. They were OK with it. And they started first thing in the morning.

C. They were diligent in following through on the execution (vv. 24-26)

Next, they were diligent in following through on the execution. That would have been tough. Who wants to do an execution? Not me. But they wanted God’s favor above everything else, and that made them willing to follow through on even something as distasteful as participating in this execution.

1. They were diligent in following proper jurisprudence (vv. 22-3)

And each *part* of the execution shows their diligence in following proper jurisprudence. Verses 22-23.

Josh. 7:22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver under it. 23 And they took them from the midst of the tent, brought them to Joshua and to all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD.

The diligence can be seen in the fact that they didn't walk to the tent - they ran. They found the articles, and they brought them out where all could see them, and did it all before the Lord. This was not a secret execution. All executions in the Bible were public. This prevented tyrants from using executions to get even with political opponents, or to misuse it on others privately.

You might wonder why they even needed to get evidence since Achan had already confessed anyway. Right? Just execute him. But since this was a public execution, they wanted it to be done according to the normal procedures of the law - which meant that they had to *verify* the evidence. You can think of some reasons why this might be a good thing. Some people have tried to use false confessions to receive the death penalty because they were too afraid to commit suicide. It was suicide by execution. They wanted the state to kill them. But if the state follows proper principles of justice, that can't happen. Sometimes people admit to things they didn't do out of fear. I've seen children do this with parents. They admit to it out of intimidation because the parents are accusing them. And the parents need to verify. Or, some people admit to things they didn't do out of false humility, or out of undue blind submission to authority, or to protect someone else that they didn't want to put a finger on. And there could be other reasons to want to verify the truth of a confession. But in any case, they were diligent in following through. They needed the first-hand evidence. It's a basic principle of justice. Witnesses need more than confessions or verbal testimony. They need to look at the evidence itself.

2. In a *lex talionis* fashion, the one who had identified with Jericho, was put under the same ban as Jericho, including women, children, animals, etc. (v. 24)

Next, verse 24 says,

24 Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and they brought them to the Valley of Achor.

Note that *all* Israel was involved. Since everything in Jericho had been put under the ban, and since Achan's family had willingly come under Jericho's curse, and since that curse was a *herem* curse of everything being destroyed, he and all his family and animals were destroyed - just like the Jerechoites were. This is a simple application of the *lex talionis* principle - that Achan should receive exactly what Jericho was supposed to have received. By taking those things he identified with Jericho. And this the punishment was just.

3. The offense was re-stated (v. 25a)

Next, the offense was re-stated. Verse 25:

And Joshua said, “Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.”

It appears that he was not satisfied with Achan’s confession. But at a minimum, the text is clear that his sin had brought great trouble to Israel. By embracing an accursed thing (which is super-serious) he brought covenant guilt and consequences on all Israel. Last week we saw that not all sins do that. And we should not overapply this death penalty to all sins.

4. The corporate nature of the stoning (v. 25b)

And notice that all were involved in the stoning. Verse 25 goes on to say,

So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.

Why did the community have to be involved in capital punishment? Why not let a civil magistrate do it cleanly and in private? Isn’t that gross? Well, there are many reasons that could be given as to why this is an important and mandated policy, but let me list a few:

First, it allows the condemned man to face his witnesses and executioners. People are less likely to falsely testify if they have to be the ones to throw the first stones, which is what the law required. (And also, if they could receive the same penalty for bringing false witness.) But the accused has the right to bring witnesses and he has the right to defend himself against the witnesses of the opposition. It’s a basic principle of justice.

Second, it instills fear of doing the same crime into the hearts of everyone who witnesses the execution and participated in it. It is a deterrent to crime. I witnessed public hangings in Ethiopia, and believe me, it made me think twice about doing what those people did. But stoning was even more of a deterrent. People nowadays doubt that this form of the death penalty would be a deterrent, but God’s inspired word says it is. Deuteronomy 13:11 says, “So all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you.” Deuteronomy 17:13 says, “And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously.” Deuteronomy 19:20 says, “And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.” Deuteronomy 21:21 says, “Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.” God keeps repeating himself because He knows people will not like this method of execution, but it is a *mandated* method for some crimes because it restrains evil. God guarantees that it *will* be a deterrent.

Third, by eliminating professional executioners, it inhibits tyranny and decentralizes civics. Each male adult member of the community was a part of civics. This too tends to prevent tyranny. The Bible as a whole is very opposed to big government, and this decentralization of even the executions is one of dozens of evidences of that fact. You wouldn’t get very many unjust executions if both the civil magistrate and the people had to be involved like this.

Fourth, it promotes a commitment to God’s law in a tangible, visceral way. Gary North says,

In stoning, each member of the community hurls a rock representing himself and his affirmation of God's judgment. The principle of stoning, then, affirms that the judgment is God's; the application of stoning affirms the community's assent and participation in that judgment.²

And lastly, it affirms the corporate nature of capital crimes - in other words, sins that have God's curse resting on them. We saw last week that not all sin has that corporate effect, but sins with God's curse upon them certainly do. Daniel Overdorf says,

This communal execution of justice demonstrated corporate responsibility for sin, and corporate desire for purity.³

D. They were diligent in using this as a memorial for future generations (v. 26)

Yet another evidence of their diligence is that they used this place as a memorial for future generations. Verse 26 says,

Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So 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.

The huge number of stones shows the involvement of lots of people. The naming of the place the Valley of Achor or the Valley of hope shows that they wanted future generations to remember this event.

E. Above all else, they desired that God's wrath be removed (v. 26b)

But above all else, they desired God's wrath to be removed from their nation. I think the most fearful aspect of this whole story is God's *desertion* of His people. Verse 12 says in the second sentence: "Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you." Neither will I be with you anymore. This is what Reformed people used to speak of as a Spiritual Desertion. It's not an eternal desertion (which will never happen because of God's preservation of the saints), but rather, a historical desertion designed to bring repentance. It's where God allows you to be defeated to wake you up to your need of Him. I read from Thomas Brooks last week. Let me read *part* of that quote from him again. He explains why God leaves people alone for a while so that they will run back to Him. He said,

By God's withdrawing from his people, he prevents his people's withdrawing from him; and so by an affliction he prevents a sin. For God to withdraw from me is but my affliction [in other words it is for my good - it's a spanking], but for me

² Gary North, *Victims Rights* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Biblical Economics, 1990), 142.

³ Daniel Overdorf, *What the Bible Says about the Church: Rediscovering Community* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2012), 80-81.

to withdraw from God, that is my sin [it is not for my good], (Heb. 10:38-39); and therefore it were better for me that God should withdraw a thousand times from me, than that I should once withdraw from God. God therefore forsakes us, that we may not forsake God.

God does not want us to be comfortable in our sin, and He will allow us to fall and to suffer losses if it will mean that we will once again repent and cling to Him and love Him with all of our heart. So Spiritual Desertions or defeats are one of God's means of recovering a backslidden Christian; and recovering a backslidden church. You could see it in Samson's life, and that is what is happening here.

So God deserted them to keep them from deserting Him any farther. When you fail to deal with the accursed thing in your midst you will find it more and more difficult to overcome the attacks of Satan. You will find yourself backsliding further and further until finally you fall into sins that you would never have dreamed of falling into. One year before his affair with Bathsheba, David would have been aghast at the thought of adultery with his best friend's wife, making his best friend drunk, lying to him, and finally murdering him. All of that would have been disgusting. But having opened a small hole in the dike, he found it impossible to close that stream of water, and what was once an unthinkable sin became an attractive alternative that was embraced *and* justified. Take seriously the fact that if you are not mortifying your flesh, if you are not putting sinful desire to death, then you are feeding it. And that cute little sin that you are feeding will eventually grow up into a terrible tiger.

IV. Conclusion - Achor means that their hope had been restored (v. 26c; 8:1)

But let me conclude with the name of that valley - Achor. When the prophets mention this valley in later history, it is mentioned as a symbol of how God uses even our defeats to turn us closer to Him and to renew His blessing in our lives. For example, in Hosea 2:15 it says,

I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.

God comforts us in the Valley of Achor because His forgiveness and His mercies are new every morning. Hours before, Israel had been doomed to destruction. Now Israel is favored. Where there is genuine repentance, God embraces you in His arms and gives you renewed strength to battle against sin. I would like to think that Achan was embraced in paradise because God knew he had a heart to turn from and repent of sin. I hope that is true. Certainly repentant *Israel* was embraced in history for precisely that reason. No matter how terrible your sin may be, God will receive you if you will only repent. No matter how deep your valley may be, your valley of Achor can be a valley of hope.

But the second aspect of this hope is that chapter 7:26 is not the end of the story. Chapter 8:1 says,

Then the LORD said to Joshua: "Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; take all the people of war with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land.

When you have God's favor, what once defeated you, can now be conquered. Greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world. If the church of America would come to repentance and turn from its wickedness, it would begin to see victory after victory. And it is my hope that in the upcoming sermons in Joshua you would be encouraged that despite our past failures, our God can give us victory after victory. May it be so. Amen.