

ACHAN'S SIN

"And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it," Joshua 7:20-21.

The rich and licentious city of Jericho was doomed of God to swift overthrow and absolute extermination. God commanded Joshua to march his army around the walls of Jericho daily for six successive days, carrying with them the ark of the covenant, and having the priests to blow on the rams' horns. He also commanded Joshua to have his army to march around the city seven times on the seventh day. God told Joshua to have all the people give a great shout when the circle was completed the seventh time, assuring him that the immense walls of the city would then fall flat, burying in their collapse the temples, the shops, the bazaars and the homes of the people.

Through Joshua God ordered the legions of Israel to destroy utterly all the inhabitants of the accursed city, one family alone excepted, to prove that in the midst of wrath God will remember mercy to His faithful servants. Only Rahab, the one who had concealed the spies of Israel, and her household were to be permitted to survive the catastrophe. God told them to destroy everything, and to bring to the treasury of the Lord all the silver and the gold, and the vessels of brass and iron. One reason why God did this was because He knew that nothing demoralizes an army like sacking a fallen city. So far as we know, there was no thought on the part of anybody of disobeying God's command when it was issued. When God's order was executed the walls of Jericho fell to the earth with a mighty crash and a terrible scene of carnage followed.

I. The Fascination.

"I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight." When Achan saw these things -- the silver, the gold and the garment -- they were extremely fascinating to him. He was fascinated with their desirability, their variety and their abundance. When Achan's eyes lingered on that beautiful and splendid garment, which likely was a royal robe that had been worn by a prince or a king, he was greatly impressed and fascinated by it. Contemplating the fact that it might soon be committed to the flames, his first thought was along the line of what a pity that so valuable a thing should be destroyed and not be a benefit to somebody.

II. The Feeling.

Having gazed upon these things, Achan said, "Then I coveted them." He paused to gaze upon the beauty of that Babylonian garment. Had he turned his eyes away from that forbidden splendor, he would have avoided the temptation to desire to

possess it. According to the ideas of some today, Achan was right in his desire to possess it, even though God had forbidden him to have it, inasmuch as he did not wrong or injure anybody by taking and appropriating it since its owner was dead. They would content that he did not defraud God, since this garment was something that was to be burned instead of being dedicated to Him.

It is interesting to note the similarity between the sin of Eve and that of Achan. At the beginning Eve's trouble was in her eyes. She said, "When I saw the tree." When she saw the tree, Eve's fancy, aided by the suggestions and lies of Satan, clothed it with strange attractiveness and irresistible charms. In telling how she was carried away by it, Eve said it was invigorating -- "good for food"; attractive -- "pleasant to the eyes"; and instructive -- "to make one wise." As in the case of Eve and of Achan, in his first approaches Satan always comes under the guise of something fascinating, like pleasure or profit.

III. The Felony.

Achan tampered with that which was unlawful and remarked, "I saw." He deliberately entertained unlawful desires, and then confessed, "I coveted." When his desire arose to the point of influencing the will, Achan seized the articles which he had been forbidden to take. He described his satisfaction of his unlawful desires by saying, "I took." There were three steps in his felony: first, the look -- "I saw"; second, the lust -- "I coveted"; and third, the larceny -- "I took." It was an unlawful thing for him to continue looking; it was a greater evil for him to desire to take; then, mastered by the desire to possess, he committed a still greater sin when he stretched forth his hand and took that which he had been forbidden to take. His crime was that of theft for he took that which was not his own. He took something which he did not have any right to possess. His act was deliberate and inexcusable.

IV. The Fear.

Upon leaving the silent and ruined city of Jericho, Achan returned to the camp of Israel. Fearing that somebody might discover his crime, he entered his tent and hid the silver, the wedge of gold and the Babylonian garment which he had stolen, thinking that no eye had yet seen what he had done. In that thought Achan was sadly mistaken, for God had seen and known it all --- his glance, his greed and his gathering. Nothing that anybody does ever escapes the all-seeing eye of God.

V. The Fate.

Early the next morning three thousand picked soldiers, chosen from all the tribes, obeyed the voice of the trumpets, fell in line and marched out against the stronghold of Ai, which was the next fortress in the path of Israel. After the easy victory over mighty Jericho, the capture of Ai was a foregone conclusion.

In taking Jericho they had depended entirely on God and as a result they had enjoyed a tremendous victory. When they approached the lesser Ai they had come to have a lot of confidence in their own strength. Leaving God out of their calculations, and with Ai only a very small city in comparison with Jericho, they concluded that it would be quite unnecessary for the whole army to attack it. Since it was such an insignificant city, they decided to send only three thousand men to take Ai.

That decision was based on the assumption that they had captured and destroyed Jericho. Actually, all that they had done was to walk around the walls and shout. It was God Who had taken the city. The silence which reigned over the ruins of the city of Jericho was not a testimony to the strength of the people of God, but was due to the power of God Himself. There is no experience in Christian living so full of danger as that of victory. We so easily imagine that because we have achieved victory once that God has imparted to us some new strength which will see us through all of our earthly journey.

When Joshua heard of the humiliating defeat of the Israelites at Ai he "rent his clothes." At that time he knew nothing of the sin of Achan, for that crime had been concealed stealthily, but the tragedy of a defeated nation smote his heart. Joshua fell on his face before God, filled with dismay.

Joshua had counted on an unbroken series of victories in the land. He felt sure that they would not suffer another defeat. Now that they had been defeated at Ai, it seemed to Joshua that either God had deserted them or He was unable to cope with the powerful enemy in the land of Canaan.

To Joshua it appeared that Israel was in desperate peril. Since she had only established a bridgehead in the land, Joshua wondered if his people might not be flung right back into the Jordan River. Even worse, thought he, what discredit would attach to the name of the Lord if that should happen! Joshua cried, "O Lord, what wilt thou do unto thy great name?" His chief concern was not that Israel had been defeated, but that the name of Jehovah had been dishonored.

Actually, there were three reasons for the defeat of the Israelites at Ai. They were self-confidence, prayerlessness and disobedience. In consequence of these sins God had withdrawn His favor and help from His people. In the light of such a disaster, it is not surprising that they suffered a humiliating defeat.

God spoke to Joshua, saying, "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you."

One man had taken that which had been set apart for God, and that which God had ordered to be destroyed, and the whole army had been defeated. Achan's sin had brought death to thirty-six of his innocent countrymen, as well as the keenest distress and the greatest humiliation to Joshua and all of the Israelites. His sin brought both sorrow and disgrace to the people of his nation. Consequences flowed from his sin which he never anticipated when he committed it. This incident teaches us that no individual can sin without affecting others. No child of God can even grow cold in his spiritual life without lowering the temperature of everybody around him. Our relatives and our friends have to suffer for our misdeeds. There is a never-failing connection between sin and shame. If we do not feel it ourselves, others must feel it for us.

God shaped circumstances so as to reveal Achan's covetousness which brought disaster and shame on Israel's forces at Ai. He had no recourse except to see that the guilty one was punished. The sin and punishment of Achan embody principles of divine law and human accountability which are to be applied to all generations, and perhaps to none more than the present.

Joshua assembled the Israelites and told them that the reason for their defeat before the walls of Ai was that one of their number had sinned against God by taking that which he had been divinely forbidden to be appropriated for personal use. God had ordered that it should be destroyed or set apart for His own use.

Achan never dreamed that in all that vast army he was the only man who was guilty of taking and concealing any of the spoils of Jericho. It was truly wonderful that among all of the thousands in that vast army only one disobeyed God in this regard.

To discover who the culprit was, the lot was cast for each tribe and family and household. Even when his tribe and family were chosen, Achan remained silent. It was revealed that all were innocent except Achan. Alone in his shame, Achan stood in the presence of Joshua, while the multitudes in that great assembly fastened their eyes upon him. Think of how he must have suffered as he was stabbed through and through by the eyes of the angry people upon whom he had brought the displeasure of God and public disgrace at Ai. Achan had sinned against himself, his family, his tribe, his nation and against God.

It was only when Joshua spoke pointedly to Achan and said, "Make confession unto him," that he was willing to admit his wrong. Achan replied, "Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it." In brief his confession was, "I saw. I coveted. I took." Thus Achan made his confession, laying bare the steps in his sin, without attempts at palliation of his guilt or complaint about the severity of the punishment which would likely be meted out to him.

To verify Achan's confession Joshua sent messengers to search the tent, and there, as Achan had admitted, they found the silver and the gold and the garment. Bringing them out, they laid them on the ground before the people. In solemn procession Joshua then led Achan and his family, with his livestock and his stolen articles into the valley of Achor. There they stoned him to death, and then over his body they erected a terrible transgression and to the righteous severity of God's judgment that fell upon him. "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." Sin is a deadly foe; kill it, or it will kill you. If you are a lost person, repent of your sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ now in order that you may be saved.