

# Ash Wednesday 2009

## Joshua 7:1-26

During a routine examination, the doctor noticed something not quite right on her female patient, so she ordered some diagnostic tests. After the results came back, she called both the husband and wife into the office. She said, “There is a suspicious lump that appears to be cancerous. We need to do further tests.” The husband looked at his wife with teary eyes. They were both frightened at the prospect of cancer growing inside.

After a biopsy, again the doctor called the couple in her office and said, “The biopsy confirmed that you do have cancer and we will need to operate.” Again, the couple became frightened at even a new level of fear.

After the operation, the doctor met again with the couple and said, “I’m afraid the cancer has spread and even metastasized.”

“What does that mean?” asked the couple. “It means there is not much we can do at this point.” The woman died at the age of 35 and left her husband with 2 children. The husband then became a single parent and the children had to grow up without knowing the love of a mother. This seemingly insignificant lump ended up poisoning the entire body of a woman and taking her life. Not only did the cancer destroy the life of the woman whose life it took, it destroyed the life of her entire family.

Anyone who has heard the doctor say that they or a loved one had cancer, knows the fear it strikes deep in the heart and the anxiety it brings into the life of the person along with friends and family.

Then why is it that we don’t take seriously the devastation and death that sin brings into our lives? The ravages of sin are a thousand times more deadly than any cancer. Cancer kills the body, sin kills the soul. Let’s think about the malignancy of sin as we recount the events of tonight’s text.

The Hebrews had just entered the Promised Land and were about to take down their first really fortified and walled city. Just so the Israelites would know that God was indeed the power behind all their success, He had them walk around the city for seven days. On the seventh day, God miraculously brought down the walls and the Hebrews won a decisive battle. It was a time of rejoicing and praising God. That’s the part of the event that we sing about and teach about. But there is another sub-story going on at the same time.

Before they went into battle, God commanded this:

<sup>17</sup>*The city and everything in it must be completely destroyed as an offering to the LORD. ...*

<sup>18</sup>*Do not take any of the things set apart for destruction, or you yourselves will be completely*

*destroyed, and you will bring trouble on all Israel. <sup>19</sup>Everything made from silver, gold, bronze, or iron is sacred to the LORD and must be brought into his treasury” (Joshua 6:17-19 / NLT).*

And then the text records the description of the event:

*“<sup>20</sup>When the people heard the sound of the horns, they shouted as loud as they could. Suddenly, the walls of Jericho collapsed, and the Israelites charged straight into the city from every side and captured it. <sup>21</sup>They completely destroyed everything in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, donkeys—everything” (Joshua 6:20-21 / NLT).*

So they all thought. It seems that a man named Achan while ravaging the city came across a Babylonian Robe, some silver and gold. “What could it hurt if I just took these things?” he reasoned, “After all, it seems a shame to burn up this beautiful robe. It gets cold out here in the desert at night and it can keep me warm. It seems kind of stupid to just waste it by throwing it in the fire. And these silver and gold coins will help me get a good start for me and my family when we get settled. What can it hurt?”

Isn't that the way we modern day Christians think and reason? Oh, for the most part we stay away from those grotesque sins like killing and stealing and committing adultery. But we don't take too seriously things like gossip, pride, or what comes out of our mouths or how we spend our money. We have no idea how malignant sin is and how quickly it metastasizes. Achan also had no clue. Everything was just fine as Israel celebrated her decisive victory over Jericho and they all worshiped God.

As they prepared for their next battle, they figured the city of Ai would be a piece of cake. So they planned, prayed, and went to battle. However something went very, very wrong:

*“<sup>4</sup>So approximately three thousand warriors were sent, but they were soundly defeated. The men of Ai <sup>5</sup>chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the quarries, and they killed about thirty-six who were retreating down the slope. The Israelites were paralyzed with fear at this turn of events, and their courage melted away” (Joshua 7:4-5 / NLT).*

What happened? Well here is how the text explained it:

*“<sup>1</sup> ... A man named Achan had stolen some of these things, so the LORD was very angry with the Israelites ...” (Joshua 7:1 / NLT).*

*Joshua and the army had no idea what was going on. They wept and cried out to God. Nothing made sense. So God told Joshua to take care of the sin in the camp. First God called out tribes and selected Judah as the tribe responsible for the sin. Then He called out the clan of Zerah. At each step, can you imagine how Achan was feeling? Out of 12 tribes and millions of people, how could he possibly get caught? He decided to just ride it out. And then Camri's family was singled out, and then finally Achan was singled out. At this point, Joshua says very tenderly:*

*“<sup>19</sup> ... My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, by telling the truth. Make your confession and tell me what you have done. Don't hide it from me” (Joshua 7:19 / NLT).*

And then Achan came clean and confessed in front of all Israel. How humiliating would that be? Sin has just ruined Achan's life. Even though Joshua approached him tenderly and even though Achan publicly confessed his sin, he was still executed. Sin had metastasized in Achan and literally took his life.

Out of that whole city and after all the destruction, why did God make such a big deal about a crumby robe and a few dollars? Isn't that the way we think about sin? We don't think our sins are so bad. After all we are not having affairs, or stealing money, or killing people. In fact, we are pretty good people. We come to church, we serve in the church, and we give money to the church. Now that I mention it, we are pretty good people ... until we start to read our Bibles diligently and start to take God's Word seriously. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. And in case we are confused about that, the Bible doesn't make a distinction here about big sins or little sins. Gossip is murder. If we don't honor God with our finances we are stealing from God. When we live lust-filled lives that lack self-control, we are actually committing adultery in our relationship with God. We are worshiping idols. We have been studying through some of these so-called respectable sins in our series leading up to Lent. We are going to move into a reconciliation period during this Lenten season. However, if we don't have a clue as to the malignancy of sin, there can be no reconciliation with God or with one another. To think of ourselves as good in any way puts us in a position where we justify our sins. When we justify our sins, we put ourselves on the same course as Achan. James puts it this way:

*"<sup>13</sup>And remember, no one who wants to do wrong should ever say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else either. <sup>14</sup>Temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. <sup>15</sup>These evil desires lead to evil actions, and evil actions lead to death. <sup>16</sup>So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters" (James 1:13-16 / NLT).*

All sin leads to death and Achan found that out the hard way. We tend to think that our sin is our sin and it doesn't concern anyone else. That is a lie that society and Satan has come to make us believe. Listen to the end of this story:

*"<sup>24</sup>Then Joshua and all the Israelites took Achan, the silver, the robe, the bar of gold, his sons, daughters, cattle, donkeys, sheep, tent, and everything he had, and they brought them to the valley of Achor. <sup>25</sup>Then Joshua said to Achan, "Why have you brought trouble on us? The LORD will now bring trouble on you." And all the Israelites stoned Achan and his family and burned their bodies. <sup>26</sup>They piled a great heap of stones over Achan, which remains to this day. That is why the place has been called the Valley of Trouble ever since. So the LORD was no longer angry" (Joshua 7:24-26 / NLT).*

Let's see what just happened here. Because Achan took a robe and some cash, he was executed, his wife, his sons, his daughter, all his possessions and animals were publicly executed and burned. Achan's sin metastasized to his whole family and all died for this seemingly inconsequential sin. We have been talking about how ungodliness is defined by Jerry Bridges as:

*“Ungodliness may be defined as living one’s everyday life with little or no thought of God, or of God’s will, or of God’s glory, or of one’s dependence of God.”*

Whenever we live life apart from God we always run the risk of becoming idolaters by worshiping false gods. We worship the gods of self-satisfaction, wealth, power, and lust. Like Achan we start to worship ourselves by submitting to worldly reasoning and giving into our desires.

Let’s just listen how our sin can affect our spouse and children. God Himself said: <sup>3</sup>“Do not worship any other gods besides me.

*<sup>4</sup>“Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. <sup>5</sup>You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations” (Exodus 20:3-6 / NLT).*

We are often cavalier about our sins, but we must start to think beyond ourselves. The consequences of our sins affect our entire household. We may think God is pretty harsh in His response to sin. Why doesn’t He just lighten up a bit? After all, Achan was publicly humiliated and he gave a genuine “I’m sorry” to God and the people of Israel. Did God have to kill Achan, his wife, children, etc?

Oh, have we forgotten that because of Achan’s sin, 36 soldiers lost their lives? How could Joshua console their families? Achan’s sin left 36 women as widows, and countless children orphans. Who would take care of these women and children? Because of Achan’s little sin, 36 families were destroyed. Sin has now metastasized from Achan, to his wife and children, to the entire community.

How inconsequential is sin? God sent His One and Only beloved Son to come, to suffer, and to die a most horrible death to cover our sin. Every time we tell a little lie, we contribute to the suffering and death of Jesus. Every occasion of gossip, cheating, unhealthy talk, pride, or selfishness, we contribute to the suffering and death of Jesus. How serious is even a little sin? It cost Jesus His life. We have come to the point in church history where we no longer take sin seriously. Pastors don’t preach too much these days on sin and on hell. We don’t like to hear about our sin, the destructiveness of sin, and the eternal torment of hell. We like to come to church to feel good about ourselves.

Sin destroys individual, it destroys families, and it destroys churches. However, righteousness has an even more powerful effect on individuals, families, and churches. Listen to the promise God gives:

*<sup>6</sup>“But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations” (Exodus 20:6 / NLT).*

Look, Achan’s little sin led to his death the death of his family, the death of 36 soldiers, thereby ruining 36 families, and placing a social and financial burden on

the community to now care for these 36 families. During this Lenten season, I want to encourage us to think about the malignancy of sin. We have a serious choice to make. Our sin can destroy us and everyone around us. On the other hand, our acts of righteousness can bring incredible blessings to ourselves, our families, and our church family.

Let's go back to our beginning scenario. A woman went to regular checkups and took good care of herself. Further, because cancer ran in her family, she was extra vigilant. One day, she noticed a lump and went right to the doctor. Sure enough, it was cancerous. But since she caught it so soon, it was cut out, she was treated, and she enjoyed a long life with her husband, she raised her children and they grew up to be fine young men and women because they had the love of a loving mother.

If we want to be a blessing, then we must be just a vigilant in our battle against sin. The choice remains with us. We can be a curse to our family and church for four generations, or we can become a blessing to ourselves, our families, and our church for a thousand generations.