

**GETTING IN AND OUT OF THE VALLEY OF TROUBLE****JOSHUA 7 & 8**

David Buss of the University of Texas asked his students if they had ever thought seriously about killing someone, and if so, to write out their homicidal fantasies in an essay. He was astonished to find that 91 percent of the men and 84 percent of the women had detailed, vivid homicidal fantasies. He was even more astonished to learn how many steps some of his students had taken toward carrying them out. A few years ago, a poll was taken and it revealed that 60% of the people surveyed would indeed murder someone they knew if they could get away with it! Just about the most obvious thing in the world is that sin and evil are all around us and, if we're honest about it, in us. Author Steve Farrar put in a memorable way, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you're willing to pay." We reluctantly have to agree with the Bible's assessment – every person in here and out there has a deeply embedded mass of destructive, ungodly attitudes and thoughts that, more than often, get expressed in some kind of wrongful actions. The Bible puts it like this, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jer 17:9 NLT) I don't think you even have to be follower of Jesus to admit this fact, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom 3:23 NLT)

We're in the Old Testament book of Joshua this summer. It's the story of how the people of Israel – God's people – marched into and eventually took over the Promised Land – the land of Canaan. It had been given to them in principle by God some 400 years earlier through their ancestor, Abraham. But the Israelites had to get what they'd been given. They had to possess their possessions. They had to march into the literal Promised Land, defeat and drive out the people who lived there, farm the land, and settle down in its cities and villages. Today's message is about a sad chapter in that great story. It happened soon after Israel's fantastic, miraculous defeat of Jericho – a major fortress/city – that we reflected upon last week. Let's read what about happened next (Joshua 7). Now Achor literally means "trouble." That became the name of the place where this incident occurred – "the valley of trouble." Just as it was true for God's people in the book of Joshua, sin causes you and me immense trouble. It sabotages getting what we've been given spiritually. It undermines possessing our possessions. Let's take a closer look at the trouble sin causes.

**GETTING INTO SIN'S TROUBLE**

I believe the book of Joshua is an accurate, historical record of how the Israelites invaded and subdued the Promised Land. But I also believe it's intended to be a massive illustration of spiritual principles that God's people can apply to our lives at any time and in any place. What was God's intent for the Israelites by giving them the land of Canaan? Canaan wasn't Heaven – there were battles to fight, enemies to conquer and obstacles to surmount. Instead, it was the life God wanted for them - a place where they could live full, rich lives worshiping God and enjoying fellowship with those who belonged to Him. The Promised Land is a picture or an image of what God wants His people today to experience here and now spiritually – the full, abundant life Jesus

promised when He said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (Jo 10:10 NIV) No, we aren’t in Heaven yet. We, too, have battles to fight, enemies to conquer and obstacles to surmount. Perhaps the greatest battle, the greatest enemy and the greatest obstacle to getting what we’ve been given spiritually is this thing called sin. This story provides some great insights into the trouble sin causes us and how to deal with it.

Lesson number one. Self-confidence and prayerlessness opened the door to disaster for Israel. Jericho’s defeat was so spectacular and convincing that it seemed downright silly and unnecessary to send tens of thousands of Israelite soldiers against the nearby town of Ai. Just a small force of 3,000 was deemed necessary to conquer little Ai. I wonder if Israel forgot that their victory over mighty Jericho had very little to do with them and a whole lot to do with God. I wonder if they became self-confident. There’s no mention of anyone praying and asking God for His battle plan regarding Ai. I’d like to think that had Joshua asked the Lord, “What should we do about Ai?” the Lord would have told him Israel was about to face a humiliating defeat. There’s a spiritual principle right there. When you and I become self-confident and prayer is no longer a priority, we open the door to spiritual defeat and disaster. When things are going well in life, we start to buy into the myth that we’re better than we really are. We become less dependent on God and less apt to go to Him in prayer asking, “Lord, what should I do here?” Self-confidence and prayerlessness will get you into the Valley of Trouble!

Here’s a second lesson that the Valley of Trouble teaches. The consequences of my sin are never limited to just me. Do you see how this story reveals that sin causes great trouble for more people than the person who actually commits the sin? Apparently, Achan was among the soldiers who invaded Jericho and who killed everyone and everything. God had made it explicitly clear that anything valuable that was recovered – gold, silver, jewels – had to be given back to the Lord. Achan saw some attractive stuff, coveted it, ignored God’s command, and took it for himself. As a result, God removed His hand of protection and blessing upon His people. A few days later, Achan’s sin caused the death of 36 innocent soldiers. His sin caused the defeat of Israel’s army. His sin resulted in his death and the death of his family, too.

Your sin and mine is never just this personal, isolated act. That’s probably what Achan thought. “Yeah, I know what God said, but what’s it going to matter if I take a little something for myself? How’s it going to hurt anyone else?” Sin has a ways of setting into motion a whole series of reactions and consequences that are bitter, painful and lead to even more sin. Probably everyone here has witnessed how sin has this incredible power to disintegrate and destroy the joy of a friendship, the happiness of a family, or even the unity of a local church. Sure, a personal sin has personal consequences, but it never just stops there! If someone in your place of work is acting dishonestly or treating others with disrespect, it affects everyone there. If you’re a member of a family, your sin affects your family directly and negatively in some way. Sometimes just two or three people in a congregation are all that’s necessary to create division, gossip and discontent in an entire church. If your own spiritual life is cold and dead, it lowers the spiritual temperature of everyone else around you. God treated

Israel as a whole in chapter 7. Bible scholars refer to as “corporate personality.” When Achan sinned, the whole of Israel sinned. Sin causes lots of trouble. Your sin will affect other people around you – in your home, in your friendships, in your marriage, in your workplace, in your church - in ways you find hard to imagine.

There's a third lesson that the Valley of Trouble teaches. Sin causes spiritual defeat and separation from God. Isn't that illustrated for us in the story of Ai and Achan? God will not allow you to move forward spiritually when you are excusing and rationalizing known sin in your life. If you decided to coddle and tolerate known sin in your life, God will withdraw from you. I'm not saying you lose your salvation and forfeit Heaven, but you build a spiritual wall between yourself and God. The Bible puts it like this, “If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” (Ps 66:18 NLT) In another place it says, “It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.” (Is 59:2 NLT)

Remember God was treating Israel as a single entity. When Achan sinned, Israel sinned. As a result, God withdrew His presence and Israel was defeated by Ai's puny little army. When you refuse to confess and turn away from sin, God will withdraw His power and you will suffer all kinds of defeat in your life. Joshua's prayer sounds a little like this, “Lord, why did You let this happen?” What is God's answer, “Get up! Why are you lying on your face like this? Israel has sinned and broken my covenant!...” (Jos 7:10-11 NLT) When you sin, you choose spiritual defeat and temporary separation from your Heavenly Father. God doesn't make it impossible for you to sin. Instead, He makes it possible - by His grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit - for you *not* to sin. Defeat and separation from Him is something you choose.

The final lesson of the Valley of Trouble is a stark one indeed. Sin always results in some kind of death. 36 innocent men lay dead on the battlefield near Ai. A great mound of stones marked the spot where the lifeless bodies of Achan and the members of his family lay buried after being executed by the Israelites. I know many of us balk at that scene, because God seems so severe here, so merciless, so lacking in grace and forgiveness. But we forget some things. We *forget* that Achan knew the penalty for his sinful action before he committed it. We *forget* Achan knew that if he took this stuff from Jericho that had been devoted to the Lord – set aside for destruction – he was calling down destruction upon himself and his family. He knew it all in advance and did it anyway. We *forget* that that his family undoubtedly knew what was buried in the ground under Achan's tent but refused to expose it. We *forget* what the Bible says plainly, “For the wages of sin is death....” (Rom 6:23 NLT) Sin leads to and causes death in so many ways: spiritual death, emotional death, physical death, relational death, financial death – just to name a few. We *forget* that while God is gracious and loving beyond our wildest imagination, He is more than capable of judgment when He deems it necessary. We *forget* that God is not a soft, sentimental granddaddy type who winks at our sin. We *forget* that God is the Judge of the universe who must be respected and reverenced as much as He is loved and appreciated. We *forget* that even Jesus – in whom we see God Himself – could weep over the city of Jerusalem with great tenderness and then throw out the money changers in the Temple in great anger – *all on the same day!* The

story of Ai and Achan certainly illustrates how to get into the Valley of Trouble – the trouble caused by sin. But, thankfully, it also reveals how to get out of that valley, too.

## **GETTING OUT OF SIN'S TROUBLE**

First and foremost, my sin must be confessed to the Lord. You can't hide sin and pretend it isn't there or didn't happen. It has to be brought out and spread before the Lord like Achan's hidden loot. Recognize sin for what it is. Call it for what it is without excuse, justification or rationalization. Ironically, Achan's confession is a good one. "... 'It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. ...I saw... I wanted... I took...." (Jos 7:20-21 NLT) Now, it's true that Achan's confession didn't save his own life, but that's to miss the point of the story. God is treating Israel as a corporate personality here. The deeper lesson is that God could not have been with Israel until this sin was uncovered and confessed.

I'm convinced that our Roman Catholic friends take the importance of confession more seriously than we do. Yes, I know we object to the need of confessing our sins to a priest. We can go straight to Jesus and receive forgiveness. True enough, but I wonder sometimes if we throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I wonder if we do much confessing of our sin at all to Jesus or anyone else. The Bible says, "People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy." (Pro 28:13). It also says, "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." (I John 1:8-9 NLT) It's vitally important to build regular times of confession into your everyday, walk around life with Jesus.

It's more customary to provide for an extended period of confession before we partake of communion, but today I want to reverse the order. We've remembered what Jesus did for us at the cross and the empty tomb. Let's boldly approach His throne of grace just now and confess any sin that He reveals to us. John Wesley founded the Methodist church back in the 1700s. He pioneered small discipleship or accountability groups to help Christians grow in their faith. Along the way he crafted some self-examination questions for participants in those groups to use that I have found particularly searching for my own life. I'd like to put those up on the screen for a few moments. You may not find all of them challenging. But if and when the Holy Spirit brings something to mind, confess it as sin and ask for God's forgiveness. Let's confess our sins to the Lord.

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Do I confidentially pass on to others what has been said to me in confidence?
3. Can I be trusted?
4. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
5. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
6. Did the Bible live in me today?
7. Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?
8. Am I enjoying prayer?
9. When did I last speak to someone else of my faith?
10. Do I pray about the money I spend?
11. Do I get to bed on time and get up on time?
12. Do I disobey God in anything?
13. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
14. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
15. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
16. How do I spend my spare time?
17. Am I proud?
18. Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican?
19. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
20. Do I grumble or complain constantly?
21. Is Christ real to me?

But, here's a second thought. Confession of my sin must lead to my turning away from it. Confession of my sin is only as good as what it leads me to do. God not only wants me to recognize my sin but He wants me to reject and turn away from it as well. God will never reveal anything wrong in you that He doesn't require you to remove. God cannot and will not forever tolerate sin in your life or mine. As painful and hard as it may be, Achans have to be removed from your life if God is going to continue to bless and empower you with His presence. Now, let's be content to trust God with what happened eternally to the literal Achan and his literal family members. Understand, instead, the spiritual principle being illustrated here. Achan represents sin that has to be removed if God's presence and power is going to be experienced again. The closer you walk with the Father, the more you follow Jesus, and the more you let the Holy Spirit fill your life, the more sensitive you are going to become to those sometimes hard to detect sins that hid in the crevices and corners of your heart and mine – things like our motives, our attitudes, our hasty judgments of others, our lack of love, those little, everyday hypocrisies we indulge and tolerate.

Our story illustrates what happens when we confess and turn away from our sin. What is it? Victory. That's the wonderful message found in the next chapter of Joshua – chapter 8 (Joshua 8:1-2, 24-29). To be sure, a battle still needed to be fought. We have to fight against and defeat those Ais that come against us. I wonder what it is that's defeating you today. Is it a particular temptation you feel powerless against? Is it

an inability to get some part of your life in order? Is it discouragement over some situation that just kind of paralyzes you? Is it a relationship that you do not want to reconcile? Confess that to Jesus today. Ask Him to remove it from your life. Yes, anticipate a fierce struggle or battle to eradicate those things from your life. But in the midst of that battle, know that ultimate victory is already assured.

The final verses of Joshua 8 provide a fitting conclusion to this story. Let's read what happens there (Joshua 8:30-35). The slopes of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim form a natural amphitheater. Two amazing and impactful things happened there. One, the people sat and listened to Joshua read God's Word to them as it was given to Moses 40 years earlier at Mt. Sinai. Two, sacrifices of worship to God were offered up. There's a final principle to observe right here. When you confess your sin, when you turn away from your sin, when you begin to experience victory over sin in your walk with God, you get to experience fellowship with God all over again. Your ability to worship and enjoy Him is renewed and restored.

I love the symbolism that this scene provides. On the one hand, there is God's Word, isn't there, symbolized in the reading of the Law? Just like the people of Israel, when we hear God's Word and obey it, life is lived successfully and well. But there was more than God's Word present there at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. There was also grace. That altar of sacrifice pointed to the need for someone to die in our place if our sins are really going to be forgiven by God. God removes your sin and mine because Jesus became our sacrifice upon another altar: the cross. It was there that sin – your sin, my sin, everyone's sin, all sin – was defeated. Don't ever get too far from the cross of Jesus! It's at the cross where we find – as we have again today – a place of communion, a place of restoration, a place of worship. When we stop playing at being a follower of Jesus and come right out before God - standing there fully conscious of our failures, our sinfulness, our falling short of what God wants - then God says, "...the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jo 1:7 NLT) God also says, "And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins." (Jer 31:34) When that happens, it can be said of you and me, "He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west." (Ps 103:12 NLT)

A Catholic priest was living and ministering in the Philippines – a much-loved man of God who once carried a secret burden of long-past sin buried deep in his heart. He had committed a sin many years before during his time in seminary. No one else knew about this sin. He'd repented of it and suffered deep remorse over it for many years. He was never able to have a sense of peace, joy or God's forgiveness. There was a woman in this priest's parish who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke to Jesus and He with her. The priest was a bit skeptical of her claims, frankly. On one occasion, he said to her, "You say you actually speak directly to Christ in your visions. Let me ask you a favor. The next time you have one of these visions, I want you to ask Him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed and went home. When she returned to the church a few days later, the priest, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, He did," she replied. "And

did you ask Him what sin I committed in seminary?" the priest asked. "Yes, I asked Him." Well, what did He say?" "He said, 'I don't remember.'"

No, the woman's response doesn't prove she actually spoke with Jesus. But her answer is a biblical one. When God forgives your sins, they are forgotten. It's all too easy to get into the Valley of Trouble. But it is possible through Jesus to get out of the Valley of Trouble. Confession is the first step. Turning away from our sin is the second one. When that happens, we start to experience victory. And our fellowship with God is restored and renewed. What God forgives, He forgets.