

November 17, 2013
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TERMITES! Joshua 7

While Laurie and I were on vacation a couple of months ago we stayed a few days at a beautiful hotel that on some signs used those Hawaiian pictographs that look like stick figures. We got a kick out of one they put around the property when it rained to warn people that the pavement was slippery when wet. It had the stick figure guy falling over with his arms and legs flying out. It just looked funny.

We're all familiar with warning signs. In our litigious society everybody tries to protect themselves from getting sued by putting labels on the products. So we get some pretty odd messages like the Vidal Sassoon hair dryer that comes with the warning "Do not use while sleeping" or the Nytol sleep aid that carries the notice, "May cause drowsiness."

I love a "No Parking" warning I saw recently. It said, "The wrath of ancients will fall upon your head. Your shoelaces will not stay tied. Rabid squirrels will invade your home. Your vehicle will start making that expensive knocking sound again and no one will talk to you at parties."

I bring this up because the story we are going to consider today is like a warning sign. Only this one isn't funny, it's one we need to pay careful attention to. We will find the story in Joshua 7.

THE INCIDENT

ISRAEL LOST A GIMME

In verse 1 we are told something that neither Joshua nor the rest of Israel knew until later. One man named Achan had disregarded God's clear instruction about the loot he found in Jericho. Instead of destroying it or handing it over to the priests as God had commanded, he kept some for himself. We will get details later in the account.

Verse 1 says, "*the Israelites* acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things." Hey, wait, it wasn't the Israelites. It was one Israelite. How come the whole nation gets blamed for the actions of one man? Good question. You'll see as we go on and you'll find the answer is important for us.

Unaware of Achan's actions Joshua plans his next move in the campaign to gain control of Canaan. Next up was the town of Ai. We know little about it except that it was relatively minor. When Joshua sent a recon team to check it out they reported, "No worries, General. This is a slam dunk. We could take this place in our sleep. You don't even need to send a division on this one. A brigade will be plenty." They think between two and three thousand soldiers will be sufficient. Military strategists typically figure that to take a fortified defensive position an attacking force needs 3 to 1 superiority. This suggests that the town of Ai had less than a thousand defenders.

In golf parlance a very short putt that you can't miss is called a gimme. Ai seemed to be a "gimme." Israel should win the battle against them easily. In football a team an unusually easy opponent is called a cream puff. In this day when a single loss can knock top teams out of the hunt for a national championship in college football and when lesser teams are looking for enough wins to get an invitation to a bowl game, most teams schedule a few cream puffs to inflate their win total. For Israel Ai was a cream puff. All they had to do to win this one was show up with a token force.

At least that's what they thought. Coming into this season there was considerable optimism for the Oregon State Beavers, the football team coached by our friend, Mike. Everyone thought they were going to be good. In addition their first 7 games were against what appeared to be one real challenge and 6 cream puffs. Many were predicting the Beavs would start out 7 and 0. Their opening game was against Eastern Washington. Excuse me, who? Did they schedule them because they couldn't schedule someone more formidable like Pomona College? Talk about a gimme. Most people figured this was going to be a glorified practice. Nothing like starting your season against the Eastern Washington University Cream Puffs.

Uh, not so fast. I watched that game on television. It was like watching a three hour long train wreck. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had this growing suspicion as the game progressed that it wasn't going to end well. It didn't. To the shock of almost everyone the Cream Puffs smacked the Beavers right in the nose and the Beavers suffered an embarrassing, heartbreaking loss 49-46.

That's exactly what happened to Israel. They sent that brigade up to Ai assuming that the Ai-ites (Ai-ans, Aisters?) would roll over and play dead. But they did no such thing. They fought back. After having walked over the demoralized people of Jericho the Israelites were shocked and didn't know how to handle it. They broke and ran. The fact that they only lost 36 in the fighting tells you that the Israelis

didn't put up much of a fight. They apparently broke at the first sign of resistance. They thought God was going to pave the way for them so that their enemies would just fall before them. They weren't prepared to deal with a determined resistance.

They didn't fail because as some preachers claim they didn't pray about his step before attacking. They lost the First Battle of Ai because they had forfeited God's power working on their behalf due to the actions of one man, Achan.

GOD ANSWERED JOSHUA'S FEARS

Joshua and all Israel, freaked out. Look at his prayer in verses 6-9. He prayed, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?" Does that sound familiar? That's like the ancient Israeli national anthem, the famous song "You brought us out here to die."

Joshua fears God has played a dirty trick on them. Stop the Jordan River from flowing, collapse the walls of Jericho and give them a wipe out victory over that powerful city just to set them up to get spanked by the Ai Cream Puffs. In verse 9 he extrapolates from there. You know what's going to happen now, don't you Lord? Everybody in Canaan will hear about this. Before this upset loss they were all afraid and demoralized, cringing in fear of us, but now they're all going to be encouraged. They're going to say to each other, "Hey, did you hear that those Israelis just got spanked by stinking Ai? I was afraid of them, especially after what they did to Jericho. But now? Hey Israel, bring it on. If Ai can beat them anybody can beat them."

You know what that means, don't you, Lord? It's going to be one whopping big black eye for you. You said we are your people. You said we would carry your name. You said everyone would fear the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Excuse me, but who's going to fear your name now? I'll tell you who. Nobody, that's who. And let's be real clear. Do you know whose fault this is? It's your fault because you said you'd fight our battles for us then you didn't show up. You hung us out to dry. When people laugh at your name you'll have no one to blame but yourself.

Joshua generally was an optimistic kind of guy. When Israel approached Canaan the first time they sent in a 12 man recon team to check it out. They all liked the land, but 10 of them said "too bad, though, because we have no chance to take it over. The people there are way too strong for us." There were 2 dissenters, Joshua and Caleb. Optimistic Joshua said, "Hey God is on our side. We can do this!"

That's his bent. That tells you what a shock this loss was because it ripped the optimism that was so characteristic of him right out of him and sent him straight to the worst case scenario.

Poor Joshua is envisioning a humiliating and devastating future for Israel. The now emboldened and encouraged Canaanites are going to band together and kick their Israeli rear ends up one side and down the other. The few of God's people that survive the battles are going to end up straggling back across the Jordan to lick their wounds wondering how come the God who could part seas, stop rivers and knock down huge city walls suddenly turned into a 90 pound weakling with every guy on the beach kicking sand in his face.

Fortunately God had an answer for him. God responds in verse 10, "Stand up." In other words, "oh, call the Waa-ambulance. Stop your whining, Joshua. You want to know why this happened? Verse 11 says, "Israel sinned." That's the problem. God didn't blow it, Israel did. The Lord tells him the problem is they did exactly what he told them not to do and kept some of the loot for themselves. The end of verse 12 is full of hope. "I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction."

That's a hopeful statement because it says this need not be a permanent condition. Fix the problem. Deal with the contraband then I will be with you in your battles again. And you and I both know that if I am with you there will be no more running away and no more defeats.

ISRAEL HAD A TRIAL AND CONVICTION

Israel did what God instructed. They had a sort of *American Idol* competition where they start with a whole bunch of people and winnow it down to one "winner." However, in this case instead of eliminating people a few at a time until they find the star singer, they eliminate people a few at a time until they find the star sinner. First all the tribes try out, and they kick out all except Judah. Then all the clans of Judah try out and they kick out all of them except the clan of Zerah. Then all the families of the Zerah clan try out and they eliminate all but the family of Zimri. By this time it has gotten very exciting. The ratings are sky rocketing as they get down to just a few people in this final family. Out of all the people of the family of Zimri one man wins the coveted "Star Sinner" title. It is a man named Achan.

Joshua confronts Achan and he fesses up. He admits in the sacking of Jericho he knew the orders, but he violated them. He saw a terrific robe and some easily

portable gold and silver. He looked both ways, saw that no one was looking and figured, “Who’s going to know? This stuff will give me a leg up when we finally get established in the land.” So he fingered it and buried it inside his tent. How human is that? Who was going to be hurt by him skimming just a few items out of all the loot of Jericho? No one. It’s not that big of a deal. It’s not like he’s stealing from somebody or taking something God needs. What is God going to do with a robe and some precious metals?

They took Achan, his entire family and all of his animals and possessions to a valley where they stoned him and his family and then burned their bodies. I assume all their animals and possessions were forfeited or destroyed with him. What a ghastly sentence! Even his family was executed. It is possible that they were executed because they were complicit in his actions. They might have helped him hide the contraband. But there is a larger reason for this action as we will see. It is hard for us to swallow, but God was making a significant point in these actions.

So that’s what happens in this chapter. Any questions? There is a lot in this story that is difficult for us to accept. Some of it has to do with things that are beyond our pay grade. We wonder why so much violence? We will think about this some more later, but in the end we must trust in the goodness of God. Still there are some questions we need to think about. Specifically, didn’t God way overreact here? Isn’t this cruel and unusual punishment? It doesn’t seem like the punishment fits the crime. Yes, Achan took a few banned items, but execution for that is like lethal injection for somebody because they cheated on an algebra test in high school, isn’t it? The punishment here seems more than extreme. Furthermore how is it fair for all of Israel to suffer for what he did? How is it fair for 36 Israeli soldiers to die because of something they knew nothing about? How is it fair for Achan’s entire family to be executed for what he did? Doesn’t God come off seeming like a vindictive, irrational tyrant who flies off the handle at a tiny provocation in this story?

We could simply say that we don’t have the right to question God, because he is truly just and we aren’t. But that’s not a very satisfying answer. What we do need to know is that God was using this incident to teach his people, including us, some crucial truths. What was God telling them and us?

IMPLICATIONS

GOD REALLY IS HOLY

We heard in chapter 5 that God is holy. The Bible says that a lot. When Isaiah was given a glimpse of God on his throne he saw awesome beings there crying out,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” Exodus 15:11 says God is majestic in holiness. In the final book of the Bible in Revelation 4:8 we see again the throne with angelic beings crying out to God, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.”

Fine, God is holy, but what does that mean? The heart of the idea is that he is a cut apart, he is separate. There is no one like him. But it also means that he is separate from evil. There is absolutely no evil in God. Psalm 92:15 says, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is *no wickedness in him*.”¹ John 1:5 says “God is light; *in him there is no darkness at all*.” Habakkuk 1:13 says of God, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; *you cannot tolerate wrong*.”

God is 100% pure, unadulterated good. If he was mostly good, even overwhelmingly good with just a hint of evil he wouldn’t be truly holy. Though the concept of “holy” gets downplayed and even viewed critically in our society, in truth it is a beautiful thing. It means God is absolutely good. We are drawn to that which is truly good with no phoniness, no pretense, no hidden motives, no dangerous, lurking evil. If there was even a little bit of evil in God we could never really trust him because trusting him would be a sort of divine version of Russian roulette. You would never be sure if you might just happen to hit that one evil spot in God and he would do something foul to you.

Because he is absolutely holy, pure good, that also means that he cannot abide even a little bit of evil. Remember Habakkuk’s words. God cannot tolerate wrong. If he did accept evil he wouldn’t be good. The reason for this is that evil is, well, evil. Why do we call something or someone evil? It is because it harms and destroys. You don’t call something that heals or gives life evil. You don’t even call something that is neutral evil. Dirt, for instance, is neutral. It is great in a garden where you want to plant some vegetables or flowers. It is not so great on your wife’s brand new dress. Dirt on a dress is bad, but it is not evil because it isn’t doing harm to anyone. You call something that hurts people or destroys them evil. If God is good he absolutely cannot just ignore that which inevitably hurts and destroys others. How could you think of anyone as good if he just accepted people doing things that caused injury to others and said, “That’s okay”?

Disobeying God, even in a small way, the littlest sin, is departing from that which is good. If it is not good what is it? It is not neutral. It is evil. That means that every disobedience to God, even the smallest, is bringing harm to someone. We look at Achan’s little theft and think it was wrong but it wasn’t that big of a deal. After all, who did it hurt? So if God was going to punish him shouldn’t the punishment have

been maybe return the items, pay a fine of some sort, perhaps offer an extra sacrifice at the Tabernacle and maybe do some community service. Didn't God make a mountain out of a molehill here?

Achan's punishment was absolutely appropriate before a holy God. That's what is hard for us to accept, but it is true. Achan got exactly what he deserved and God wanted all of Israel to get that message. He wanted us to get that message too. When we choose disobedience to God in any way what we deserve is death. And the reason is that while we may not comprehend the danger of what we do, our tiny choice to disobey God is evil, which means it is bringing harm and/or death to us or someone else. That's the next point we need to consider.

THERE IS NO SMALL EVIL

We tend to view Achan as a regular guy who did something maybe bit quite right but understandable and not all that horrible. It wasn't like he actually stole something from someone. It wasn't all that awful was it?

The problem with things that appear small on the surface is that they can be a manifestation of a much deeper and much more disastrous inner fault. Consider Eve in the Garden of Eden. All she did was eat some fruit. What's so awful about that? There was nothing about the fruit itself that was terrible. The only thing wrong with it was that God said to leave it alone. The problem was that Eve chose to do what God said not to do. He could have said, "Don't pick this particular flower" or "Don't chop a limb off that tree" or "Don't pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time." The point was not the fruit, it was choosing to do what God said not to do that was the problem.

This past summer we were making up a bed in what used to be Toby's room when we noticed a small collection of what looked like tiny wood shavings. Uh oh. Where did that come from? We know what makes those little piles. Termites. We looked on the wall above the bed and found a tiny little pin prick of a hole. The little bit of shavings in that room presented no threat to our house. The minute little hole did not cause us to fear that the house is going to collapse. Those things in and of themselves were not awful and they were no big threat. But those tiny, seemingly insignificant indications were signs that behind the walls something much more important was going on. An inspector came out and checked in our attic and other places and sure enough, we learned that our house was serving as a cafeteria for a large population of termites. Left alone they literally would have eaten us out of house and home. The small sign was the indicator of a big problem underneath. It was a problem that cost us a whole bunch of money.

Eve's decision and Achan's were like those little termite shavings. What made Eve's choice so awful was that it required two things: first she had to be something that she wanted more than she wanted to be in relationship to God and to obey him. Second she had to believe that God would try to keep something good from her. She had to believe that God is dishonest and selfish, that there is something good that he wants to keep for himself and not let her have. Her choice to eat that fruit revealed what was going on in her heart. She had decided that what she most longed for, true life, came from disobeying God.

Achan had the same problem. That one little act may not seem all that bad, but it revealed something disastrous about his heart. What he wanted most in life was more stuff. *He wanted that more than he wanted to obey God.* He did not believe that trusting God would be what was best for him. What would be best for him is getting some good stuff to help him get ahead of everybody else.

What is so bad about that is that kind of thinking is the source of all of the evil that has ever existed in the world. All of the suffering of all of the human race can be traced directly back to that one choice, manifested in the seemingly harmless decision to eat a single piece of denied fruit. Achan made the same choice that Eve did and for essentially for the same reason. The problem is as soon as you open that door anything, even the most unimaginable horrors that you can perpetrate on other people, is now in play. Unbounded selfishness and even cruelty and abuse of others have now become possible.

Anna had something happen to her this summer that really made me mad, to say nothing of how it impacted her and Toby. She got what seemed to be a very good job that was a good fit for her. But after she worked for the company for nearly a month they announced they were out of money and could not afford to pay her or any of the other employees. They were very apologetic, said nothing like this had ever happened before and promised they would make it right and get everybody paid. This dragged on for a couple of weeks, but it got more and more obvious that her employers were not ethical. She cut ties with them and eventually learned that they had previously done the same thing to other employees. In fact, when they interviewed her for a job they were before the Labor Board essentially being sued for doing exactly the same thing to the person Anna was hired to replace! How could you be that dishonest? How could you treat people that way? Here's how. You start by thinking that while God may say that you should love others, you should always speak the truth, you should serve others and treat them as more important than yourself, something else is more important to you. You want to

have your business succeed and you want to keep your money. In effect, you want to serve yourself. That becomes the source of real life and what is important to you. As soon as that becomes more important to you than what God says you have opened the door to any despicable action. It all started with Eve, but Achan went down that same path, and so do we in every deviation from God's will, no matter how minute and insignificant it might be. The act itself may be relatively minor, but what is behind it is monstrous and holds potential for unlimited evil.

EVIL IMPACTS WIDELY

We still have this question of why all of Israel got consequences for the poor choices of one man. Why did his family suffer the consequences? We get it if they aided and abetted him, but we don't know that. The answer is that God was communicating a profound truth to Israel. The poor choices of one person always have consequences for other people.

That is the nature of disobedience to God. We can't just disobey him in isolation and have the consequences fall on us alone. Every time we choose to disobey God it will impact other people. Once again we see that message in the events of Genesis 3. Eve let the termites loose in her life, made one bad choice and reaped the consequences. But she wasn't the only one. You and I are reaping the consequences to this day. Laurie just had to have a couple of surgeries. Her doctor actually had to go in to her body and cut out some original, factory-installed equipment. He had to do that because Eve had termites and let them do their thing. They led her to a bad choice, and that choice introduced decay and death into the system. Every single human being suffers from disease, experiences the ravages of age and ultimately dies and it all stems from that one choice. Evil impacted everyone, not just Eve!

Have you ever been in a group of people, say a family, and one member decides to be selfish and only think about him or herself? What happens? Everyone is impacted. A family in the church was telling me about an outing they had that they looked forward to. It was going to be a great family day full of fun and good memories. It didn't turn out that way. One of the kids got off to a bad start and everything from that point on in his eyes was just bad. He essentially had a selfish meltdown. Do you suppose he was the only one impacted by his actions? Every parent here knows that feeling of frustration of driving home with everyone upset and a day ruined because one person just decided to let the termites loose. The entire family is impacted by one person's choices.

That's a minor incident, but it happens in much more serious ways. Consider the man who decides to indulge his passion for pornography. That's kind of like Achan, isn't it? It doesn't involve anyone else, and who is hurt by it? Sin is never that benign. Here's who is hurt by it. His wife is hurt by it because it will impact his relationship with her. And as that marriage is damaged by it there will be impact on the children. It may impact their future marriages and eventually their children.

God was not overreacting in Achan's case. He was communicating the truth that disobedience to God, no matter how small, is always a communal event. It has consequences for everyone and those consequences will ultimately end up being deadly at some level.

APPLICATION

How should we respond to the events of this passage? I will suggest two ways.

GIVE THANKS FOR JESUS THE EXTERMINATOR

We all have termites. None of us is free of the thinking that caused Eve to make her cataclysmic choice and Achan to follow suit. That is why Jesus had to die on a cross. Without Jesus' work of grace and sacrifice and love on our behalf we all would have been left with two options: Either make your entire life a frantic termite hunt that will inevitably end in futility, or just give up and live in a hell of a world where we let the termites loose and experience all the horrifying consequences of that.

Religion typically is the eternal termite hunt. You have to root out every trace of termites. But I want you to think about what that would be like. What if my response to the termites in our house had been that I wanted no part of fumigating, so I'm going to hunt those little suckers down one by one. I'm going to find and kill every single bug in that house. How would that have gone? Not well. First my life would have been tedious beyond belief, trying to find, chase and eradicate every little bug one at a time. Second it would be the ultimate in futility because there's no way I could ever be successful.

So it is with us. Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate fumigation. It was good to come back to our house and know that all the bugs were dead. It had been taken care of. It was expensive, but worth it. Jesus has taken care of the problem for us, so we trust in what he has done. We can be relieved, relaxed, rested and be thankful for him and for what he has given to us. It was expensive beyond measure, but worth it.

DON'T LET THE TERMITES RULE

Wait, didn't you just say going on a termite hunt is tedious and inevitably futile? Yes, but it becomes tedious when we think we must do it to somehow make God stay connected to us. But Jesus' work on the cross made a permanent connection between us and God. He said he would never leave us or forsake us, no matter what.

So now when I try to get rid of termites it is simply because I know the damage they will inevitably do to me and to others. Termite living inevitably hurts other people and brings death to me. The little things I like to dismiss in myself as relatively minor and benign and in fact more like clostridium botulinum bacteria, holding potential for massive destruction not only in my own life but in people around me. I should stay as far from it as I can, wear a spiritual hazmat suit as I take it straight to the incinerator to be destroyed.

1 Peter 3:15-16 says, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'be holy, because I am holy.'" God calls on us to be holy, to never compromise with termites. Holiness is life. Holiness is health and wholeness. So we must do all we can to avoid the kinds of choices Eve and Achan made, they only lead to death.

Researchers have discovered a new form of the clostridium botulinum bacteria according to a new study revealed in a recent issue of *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*. Dr. William Schaffner, professor of infectious diseases at Vanderbilt med school, says this bacterium may be the most deadly substance on the planet. A tiny amount of it can cause paralysis and death in humans. A single gram of the bacteria could kill more than a million people. A gram is 3.5 hundredths of an ounce. How much of that stuff would you like to play around with? Would you want to get anywhere close to even a tiny bit of that stuff? Clearly we want nothing to do with it. Spiritually disobeying God is more dangerous than clostridium botulinum. So let's make sure we do everything we can to steer as clear from it as we possibly can, not because God won't love us if we don't, but because that stuff is death and we want no part of it.