

Joshua 7:1, Personal and Corporate Sin

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Overview

Our purpose is to understand the relationship between 7:1b (Achan's personal transgression) and 7:1a,c (imputation of the transgression to the children of Israel, and God's wrath against them all). Part of a very large issue in the spiritual life: in what ways does God deal with us as individuals, and in what ways does he deal with us as a community?

- We know that "in the matter of salvation, each of us must stand and give answer before God (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10, "every one").
- Yet Josh 7:1, and other passages both OT and NT that we shall consider, show that our temporal condition depends very much on what other members of our spiritual community do.

The contrast is well summarized in Gal. 6:2,5, "bear ye one another's burdens ... every man shall bear his own burden."

1b, What did Achan do?

He violated the ban by taking some of God's property for himself.

1a, c, How does it affect the nation?

1a, They are accused of "faithlessness" or "treachery."

"Commit a trespass" = *ma'al*. Basic sense is to act treacherously or in violation of trust. Almost like an opposite of *xesed*. Mostly describes human sins against God, but three times applied to human failings:

- Num. 5:12,27, of a woman committing adultery against her husband
- Job 21:34, "falsehood," describes the answers that Job's friends bring to his questions
- Prov 16:10, for a king to behave this way would be unfaithful to justice.

Thus the basic idea is that the nation has violated the sacred trust laid upon it. They were entrusted with caring for God's property, and they violated this trust.

1c, God is angry with them

A fearful thing, when God's wrath flares up against his own people. Here, takes the form of defeat at Ai, with the death of 36 Israelites.

- Frequent in the OT; compare Deut. 32:15-21, note repetition of "provoke."
- But we ought not to be cavalier about this danger; alluding to Deut. 32, Paul warns the Corinthians not to "provoke the Lord to jealousy," 1 Cor. 10:22.
- Also to believers, Heb. 10:31, "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Other Examples of Corporate Responsibility

Confessions of OT Saints

In prayer to God, men distinguished for their piety do not point the finger at their sinful compatriots, but recognize that they are tainted by the transgressions of their fellows. Contrast the attitude of the Pharisee in the temple in Luke 18:11, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men [are], extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.”

Ezra 9:6, describes the intermarriage as “our iniquities ... our trespass”

Dan 9:4-15, assumes the whole sin of the nation on himself

Neh 1:5-7

Acts 5:1-11, Ananias and Sapphira

Similar on several points to the Achan story:

- The sin relates to the abuse of God’s property.
- A secret sin is publicly rebuked by the leader of the community.
- The family dies for its sin.
- (Less well recognized:) the sin blocks God’s blessing to the community as a whole.

To see this latter point, note:

- 4:29-30, the church prays for boldness in witness and for signs and wonders.
- 4:31, 33, the boldness is granted immediately.
- Signs and wonders don’t come until 5:12. What holds them up?

Answer: need to deal with sin in 1-11. Corporate blessing requires corporate purity and holiness. The sin of one family holds up God’s full answer to their prayer. Note the three “greats” in this story:

1. “great power” toward unbelievers in witness (4:33)
2. “great grace” toward one another (4:33)
3. “great fear” of God in our midst (5:5, 11).

Application

Are we dissatisfied with the answers to our prayers? Do we feel, like the church in Acts, that some things are being withheld; like Daniel, that the promised blessing is slow in coming?

- Recognize that God will withhold his hand if there is sin in the camp.
- Follow the example of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah: search out your own heart first of all.

Implications for the Church

The foundational teaching that underlies the dynamics both of Joshua 7 and of Acts 5 is 1 Cor 12, the teaching of the Body. We are all involved in one another, and the well-being of the whole depends on each of us. Achan and RGM/2 are two sides of the same coin. There, a few exerted themselves for the benefit of the whole. Here, we are concerned about the damage that a few can do to the well-being of the whole. Leads to two very practical exhortations.

The body needs to purge out sin.

1 Cor. 5:1-13, need for the assembly to purge out the leaven that would contaminate it.

1 Cor 11:27-29, need to discern the body at the Lord's Supper

Application: We must not take lightly the presence of sin in the assembly. People often exhort us from Matt. 7:1, "Judge not, that ye be not judged," but neglect v.5, which goes on to instruct us to judge others *after* we have judged ourselves. The order in 1 Cor. 11 conforms to this. We need to keep short accounts with sin, first in our lives, and also in one another's lives.

But church discipline is only half of the story, and the sin with which it must deal is sometimes unfortunate result of letting early problems go uncorrected. Specifically,

The body needs to identify and encourage weak members.

Heb 12:12-15, need to comfort the weak, lest "many be defiled." As we encourage and care for one another, paying special attention to the weak, we may be able to forestall the discouragement and bitterness that can lead to rebellion against the Lord and the resulting consequences for the congregation as a whole.