



Fighting Temptation

1) When You've Just Lost the Battle

Most know the tune, right? "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho... and the walls came tumbling down." Today we read about what happened after Israel defeated Jericho. You don't hear anyone singing about Joshua and the next battle. That's because at Ai things went terribly wrong. The miraculous triumph at Jericho was followed by the tragedy at Ai. What happened? At Jericho they had really lost a more important fight: the battle against temptation. This morning we begin a new series for Lent as we go over several readings from the Old Testament. Our series is titled, "fighting temptation." How do you fight temptation when you just lost the battle? We see our answer in Joshua 7.

It started as a success story for Israel. The people marched into the land of Canaan to conquer it. The Canaanites were given hundreds of years to repent. But now the time for God's judgment had come. Israel marched across the Jordan River, entering into ancient Canaan as God divided the waters and let them pass on dry land. I'm sure they felt nothing could stop them! They now approached the strong fortified cities of the Canaanites with bold confidence that they could not fail. Under the Lord's direction they marched around Jericho. After several days they gave a great shout and the city walls came crumbling down. Jericho never stood a chance! The men of Israel entered strait into the city right over the crumbled walls.

Their success, of course, belonged to the Lord their God. God caused the walls to crumble. And since the battle belonged to the Lord, all the plunder was to be dedicated to him and to his glory. Their God was fighting their battle for them.

But in the midst of all the victory at Jericho one man was losing the battle against temptation. There among the plunder he saw it: "A robe from Babylon—a beautiful one, five pounds of silver, and just over a pound of gold." This soldier, Achan, coveted it and took it. You can picture him shoving it all in his pockets and putting the robe under his cloak. "Just a little something for the family." Then he went on to celebrate. He lost the battle against temptation but thought nothing of it.

And his sin soon caught up to him. The great victory at Jericho no doubt bolstered the confidence of Israel's military. "The Lord is on our side! Who can stop us?" Joshua sent scouts to the nearby small village of Ai. It was a weaker small town, so they sent a small division of just 3000 to take it. But the Israelite men who went after Ai were routed in a disgraceful defeat. The miraculous victory at Jericho was followed by a tragic defeat at Ai. "What happened?" the people wondered. Joshua covered himself with ash. He fell face down in mournful prayer. He didn't understand. Had God left them? The Lord gave a direct answer, "Israel has sinned." God hadn't abandoned Israel. Someone in Israel had turned away from God.

Achan's sin was deadly serious. He did more than simply take something he wasn't supposed to. His battle with temptation began with the sin of coveting. Then his coveting gave birth to more sin. He took it. And this was not just an ordinary "covet your neighbors' stuff" crime. He coveted and took what belonged to God. He broke the 7th, 10th, and 1st commandments. This was idolatry. Couldn't Achan already see the deadly nature of his sin?

Joshua didn't waste any time. He got up early the next day and according to the Lord's direction he would find whoever had broken God's agreement with them. The tribes presented themselves. The Lord indicated it was the tribe of Judah. What was going on in Achan's mind as the tribe of Judah was selected? Was it perhaps, "There's probably someone else in the tribe of Judah who committed an even worse sin than me. This fuss can't be all over my little stash." Then the tribe of Judah was presented by clan and the Zerahites were singled out. Achan still didn't come forward. Then the family of Zimri was chosen. Was Achan still thinking he could avoid getting caught? He had hidden the loot pretty well. His family promised not to tell anyone. Then members of the family of Zimri were chosen, and it fell on Achan. The jig was up. Joshua didn't waste any time, but Achan had wasted all the time that was left to him. Joshua confronted him, "Tell me, my son, what is it you have done! Don't hide anything from me. Give glory to the Lord the God of Israel that is due him."

Sin isn't something you can hide for long. When you've lost the battle against temptation it's no use trying to bury it or hide it. You can't hide from God. Achan's guilt only grew greater the longer he tried to hide it. His heart grew colder. He wouldn't repent. He had allowed his sin to bring the whole nation down. Because of his sin many Israelites were widows and orphans. Many soldiers died. How many lives would have to suffer before he'd admit his guilt? But Achan couldn't, wouldn't concede until he was forced to admit his sin. He had to be rattled out, drilled by Joshua to speak. It started with a small temptation, ended in tragedy. His sin owned him. In a terrible and frightening fate, once you let sin take hold, it will never let go. The moray eel has a bite that will not let go of its prey. It locks on. It even has a second set of jaws that will bite twice without ever letting go. When divers disturb them, they can be bitten with a deadly poison. Sin is like that. Once you let temptation bite, it doesn't ever want to let go. It takes a hold and only grabs tighter. In the end it kills.

There are certainly **a lot of things God wants you to learn from this account.** He is serious about sin. That is clear. The tragic results of giving in to temptation are all too real to us. We learn how our sin harms the people around us. For Achan it affected the lives of so many others. We know how true that is. One person sins and it trickles down to hurt many others. We learn how sin is often shared by a family. Achan's family allowed him to hide his loot. Guilt spreads to us when we tolerate it. But the main thing we must take away from this account is that sin must be dealt with. When you've already lost the battle to temptation you have to face the music. You can't delay, can't hide, can't cover it up.

What makes Achan's sin and his family's sin so terrible is not just the fact that they sinned. The people of Israel sinned daily and in many ways. So also people in God's church will sin daily. Sometimes those sins are even worse than coveting and stealing. They can include sins of lust, murder, and adultery. Where they failed was to lose the fight against temptation because he refused to turn to God for the victory. Achan's family tried to deal with sin with a cover-up. He lied to his fellow Israelites, he lied to God. The stash was buried and hidden, but you can't just bury guilt. It must be dealt with. Achan was living in idolatry. His heart was where his treasure was: dead and in the ground.

We learn this from the tragedy at Ai: **We must deal with our guilt or it will spread**. The guilt was already spreading destruction. What would happen to his children when they saw him get away with this sin? What would happen years later to the neighbor who found out Achan succeeded in his greed and idolatry? How long would it be before his sin took the family of Zimri, before the clan of Zerah was guilty of it, before the tribe of Judah shared in it, before Israel had indeed all sinned with him? What will happen to your family if you try to cover up your own sin? How much will it end up harming those around you in your home and in your church? It must be dealt with.

What sins might we try to put off dealing with by hiding? When a Christian friend decides he wants to carry on an immoral night life which he insists on keeping hidden from his church what ought to be done? He can hide it from his church, but not from his God. When a Christian family member decides to carry out the sin of living together with a boyfriend or girlfriend, what does one do? Hope God won't notice? Hope it won't cause trouble for the rest of God's people? Hope no one else will see it and be affected by its temptation? When a man or woman turns to pornography, they can try to hide the sin, but they can't cover up the guilt and remove the harm it has caused. Anytime we sin in any manner we are tempted to think we can just cover it and hide it. What sins do you want to hide? Do you and I really think God doesn't know about them? If you will hide it from him, he will reveal it. On judgment day we will all be made to step forward.

When you or I have lost the battle against temptation, what are we to do? We must start like Joshua, by first covering ourselves in ash and humility before God. It starts by examining our own dangerous hidden sins of idolatry. Then not just reforming our sin but putting it to death. You can't fix sin, it must be killed. Sin always brings death. Joshua didn't waste any time. They had lost the battle, but they hadn't lost God yet. The Lord's direction had to be followed carefully and quickly. Not only did he get up early that morning to address the issue. When he found it, he then sent runners to verify that Achan's story was true. They displayed the items. God had asked that all that was impure be destroyed, that it be removed from Israel. No one would rest until this was dealt with. Achan's had been given plenty of time to repent. But now time for God's judgment had come. Achan and his guilty family were dragged outside the camp. The punishment of idolatry was to be put to death outside the camp. And so Achan was along with all his possessions and family by being pelted to death with stones and then burned. The valley was called the valley of Achor, meaning "valley of trouble." And a pile of stones was tossed onto his charred remains. This was to never be forgotten by God's people. So serious were they that years later when the priest Phineas was nearly ready to start a civil war over idolatry, he reminded the people of the danger of Achan's sin, noting his sin caused many others to die. We dare not forget either.

How do you fight temptation when you've just lost the battle? Don't let it grip you down to the grave! God has provided a way to deal with that defeat! He had given a provision for the people of Israel to give up a sin offering. The sin offering given for atonement was taken and burnt outside the camp. It was there that the awful sacrifice for sin was made. Achan was killed outside the camp. And the Lord turned aside his anger on Israel. God's provision for us is to fight for us the battle we could not win. Our sin was appropriately dealt with. How did Jesus handle temptation and its tragedy? That's the awesome part! Jesus too faced temptation. The tempter sought to get him to join the ranks of those who have coveted, stolen, and lied. But as we read earlier Jesus did not give in. He was completely without sin. And the tempter, Satan, fled in defeat. Yet Jesus did die for us outside the camp. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us: Heb 13:11-12 ¹¹The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹²And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood." We have him who was without sin but took the punishment in our place. All our sins were placed on him—even the sins we might have once tried to hide from God. Our sin was covered and dealt with as he was brought outside the city to suffer and die. Our sin was put to death with him. God has brought each and every one of us from the tragedy of temptation to triumph. We have no cause to cower and bury our sin in the ground. We give glory to God and give it to him to deal with. We don't need to wait until the final judgment comes to be forced to declare our guilt. We already confess that guilt and have it taken away to the cross.

If you have a hidden sin, however great or small, look to Jesus. If you or someone you know someone is trying to hide a sin from God look to the pile of rocks in the valley of Achor. Then look to the triumph of Christ on their behalf. Look to the empty tomb of Jesus who defeated sin's grip for us. The battle is won by him alone. God is serious about sin. So serious he'd die on the cross. God is fighting for us! We approach each new battle with confidence he is on our side. It brings us from a terrible tragedy of defeat to a miraculous triumph by our God.