Secret Sins Destroy Our Victory

Summary

Drawing from Joshua 7, the sermon contrasts Israel's victory at Jericho with its defeat at Ai, showing how Achan's hidden disobedience affected the entire nation. It emphasizes three lessons: great victory can lead to temptation and self-reliance, our sin hurts others, and God brings hidden sin to light. As the congregation prepares for revival, the message calls believers to examine their hearts, confess and turn from hidden sins, and depend on the Holy Spirit rather than their own strength. Genuine spiritual renewal requires repentance and a renewed commitment to holiness.

Reflection Questions

1. Where might recent victories have made me overconfident or less dependent on God, and how can I remain watchful against temptation?
2. How might sin I have treated as private be hurting my family, church, or others around me?
3. What hidden sin do I need to confess to God and turn from, and what concrete step will I take toward repentance as I prepare for revival?

Complete Sermon Text

Joshua 7:2–13 (NLT): Joshua sent some of his men from Jericho to spy out the town of Ai, east of Bethel, near Beth-Aven. 3 When they returned, they told Joshua, "There's no need for all of us to go up there; it won't take more than two or three thousand men to attack Ai. Since there are so few of them, don't make all our people struggle to go up there."

4 So approximately 3,000 warriors were sent, but they were soundly defeated. The men of Ai 5 chased the Israelites from the town 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.

6 Joshua and the elders of Israel tore their clothing in dismay, threw dust on their heads, and bowed face down to the ground before the Ark of the LORD until evening. 7 Then Joshua cried out, "Oh, Sovereign LORD, why did You bring us across the Jordan River if You are going to let the Amorites kill us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side! 8 Lord, what can I say now that Israel has fled from its enemies? 9 For when the Canaanites and all the other people living in the land hear about it, they

will surround us and wipe our name off the face of the earth. And then what will happen to the honor of Your great name?”

10 But the LORD said to Joshua, “Get up! Why are you lying on your face like this? 11 Israel has sinned and broken My covenant! They have stolen some of the things that I commanded must be set apart for Me. And they have not only stolen them but have lied about it and hidden the things among their own belongings. 12 That is why the Israelites are running from their enemies in defeat. For now, Israel itself has been set apart for destruction. I will not remain with you any longer unless you destroy the things among you that were set apart for destruction.

13 “Get up! Command the people to purify themselves in preparation for tomorrow. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Hidden among you, O Israel, are things set apart for the LORD. You will never defeat your enemies until you remove these things from among you.”

We are one week from revival services dedicated to changing us, reviving our spirits and causing us to become white-hot for our God. As we all know, revival is not something we do for ourselves. It’s something that the Holy Spirit does within us individually and within us as a body of believers. It’s a time to refocus ourselves on the holiness of God. It’s a time to stop and recognize that it is only God’s Spirit within us that gives us the motivation to live a life pleasing to Him.

We’ve just read the story of a serious defeat for the children of Israel right after their victory over Jericho. I want you to realize that this group of people had not lost a single battle before they crossed the Jordan with Joshua. And they had just defeated the mighty city of Jericho. They were actually on an emotional high because of what God had done through them and in their situations. They were so excited about their victory over Jericho. And they had not lost even one soldier!

But suddenly, their victory chants turned into running scared. And Joshua and the leaders were face down in front of the Ark crying out and asking why. Had God brought them all this way just to destroy them? Have you ever felt like that? You might have been seemingly moving from one mountaintop to another and suddenly, you’re down in the valley, defeated. Well, that’s exactly what happened here in this story.

This is the story of one man’s sin that brought the nation of Israel into a terrible defeat. It comes right after the great victory at Jericho. And almost everyone remembers that story. However, probably very few know this story that comes in the very next chapter.

Yet the two stories are intimately connected. *If Joshua 6 is the thrill of victory, then Joshua 7 is the agony of defeat*. And the truth is that we like to hear more about victory than we do about defeat.

Here are two fascinating facts about what happened in Joshua 7:

1. This is the only recorded defeat the Israelites suffered in the conquest of Canaan.
2. This is also the only recorded loss of Israelite life during the conquest of the land.

Let's begin with Joshua 6:27, the last verse in the story of the great victory at Jericho: "So the LORD was with Joshua, and his reputation spread throughout the land." After a verse like that, you'd expect Chapter 7 to begin by saying, "So Joshua and his people rolled from victory to victory." And why not? After all, Jericho was the chief Canaanite city. If Jericho could fall to Joshua, what city could stand against him? If the Israelites were overconfident, one could hardly blame them. *Victory has a way of making us complacent and careless*. No doubt that's part of the explanation for what happens next:

Joshua sent some of his men from Jericho to spy out the town of Ai. It was a smaller town just northwest of Jericho, up in the mountains. Jericho was down near the Jordan River, not far from the Dead Sea.

When the scouts returned, they told Joshua, "There's no need for all of us to go up there; it won't take more than two or three thousand men to attack Ai. Since there are so few of them, don't make all our people struggle to go up there." (v. 3).

From a military standpoint, this made sense. Ai was a tiny outpost compared to mighty Jericho. Unfortunately, the spies were acting as if they had conquered Jericho in their own strength, but Jericho fell because God was with them. Now they are leaving God out of the equation. It's as if they said, "General, let's send the new recruits up there because they didn't get much combat experience at Jericho. These young ones can take care of Ai."

So approximately 3,000 warriors were sent, but they were soundly defeated. The men of Ai [5] chased the Israelites from the town 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. (vv. 4-5).

This was not just a defeat; it was a shellacking. What should have been an easy victory turned into a near total disaster. Now there were 36 graves to dig, and the people were melting in fear.

How in the world could this have happened? Having crossed the impossible river and defeated the impossible city, how could they have been defeated at Ai?

This is how Joshua responded in verse 6: "Joshua and the elders of Israel tore their clothing in dismay, threw dust on their heads, and bowed face down to the ground before the Ark of the LORD until evening." Something had gone badly wrong. God had promised to be with them wherever they went, but somehow the people of God had lost their way. *At this point in the story, only God knows the true explanation*.

The key to this story is the instruction Joshua gave to the soldiers before the attack on Jericho. He told them to burn the city and kill the inhabitants, but no one was to take any of the plunder (Joshua 6:17-18). They were to bring any precious metals to the treasury of the LORD. Everything else must be burned. Of the thousands of soldiers involved in the attack, only one man violated that order. And that man's greed led to Israel's defeat at Ai.

One man disobeyed, and that's why there are 36 funerals.

One man disobeyed, and that's why the army was defeated.

One man disobeyed, and that's why the nation was put to shame.

This is not a message for outsiders or for unbelievers. It's not for the folks who never go to church. This passage speaks to those of us who go to church every Sunday. The more faithful you are, the more you need to hear what God is saying.

There are many things we should learn from this story. Let me point out just a few of the obvious lessons:

1. Great victory often leads to great temptation.

If you read the first few verses of Joshua 7, it's clear that no one expected a defeat at Ai. Compared to Jericho, Ai should have been an easy victory, but it wasn't. *An easy victory turns into a shameful defeat*. This should not surprise us. The same thing happens today.

And when God grants an individual victory over some powerful sin, that individual is apt to feel there is less need to pray so earnestly. But such a spirit is disastrous (Pink, "Gleanings in Joshua," Loc. 4749). In the LORD's work, it is better to feel weak than to

feel strong. At least in your weakness you know you need the LORD. The individual who thinks they stand in their own power is heading for a shameful fall.

When we boast, we set ourselves up for failure. Now, most of the time we don't make a big deal of boasting, but we must be careful about what we are thinking in our minds. When we start thinking, "Oh, I've got this," we are setting ourselves up for failure.

2. Your sin always hurts other people.

But it wasn't the whole nation that sinned; it was just one man. The rest of the nation had nothing to do with it. *But God held them all responsible for one man's sin*. That's what it means to be part of God's family. When one person sins, we all suffer the consequences. You may ask how that can be. Well, the truth of the matter is that your sin becomes a roadblock for the group of believers around you. The Holy Spirit is not given freedom to work as He wants to work both in you and in the church body. Every evil word, every evil deed, every evil thought hurts those around you. That's Paul's whole point in 1 Corinthians 5 when he talks about the man who was sleeping with his father's wife. He tells the Corinthians to put the man out of the local assembly not only to bring the man to repentance but also to protect the purity of the church. If there is cancer growing in your body, you can't ignore it, or it will spread. That's why Paul reminded them that "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (v. 6). Sin spreads like yeast in a ball of dough. If you leave it alone, it will permeate every part of the church.

3. God knows how to bring our sin to light.

Here is part of the irony of the story. Achan was a wealthy man. He had children, oxen, donkeys, and sheep. He came from the leading tribe of Judah. *He took the loot because of greed, not poverty*. The rules Joshua laid out in chapter 6 were clear. The soldiers were not to touch the loot they found while Jericho burned.

There is no such thing as a private sin. Achan knew what God had commanded, but in choosing to ignore it, he sealed his own fate.

It must have been a long day for Achan. As the process of elimination went on, he knew they were coming closer and closer to the truth. Every time someone walked by his tent, he probably shook. His nerves were shot, his guilt was rising, and he felt the misery of a guilty man waiting to be caught. That long day illustrates the truth of Proverbs 13:15b: "The treacherous person is headed for destruction."

The LORD told Joshua to bring the nation before Him by tribes. Then He said, "It's Judah!" Then the tribe of Judah came forward by clans. The LORD said, "It's the Zerahites!" Then the clan of the Zerahites came forward. The LORD said, "It's Zimri!" Then the family of Zimri came forward, and the LORD said, "It's Achan!"

Be sure your sin will find you out.

God had already decreed the punishment in verse 15: "The one who has stolen what was set apart for destruction will himself be burned with fire…." So this is a capital punishment case. And the reason is given, "He has broken the covenant of the LORD and has done a horrible thing in Israel!" God takes all this very seriously.

Write one verse over this story: "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23).

Let me boil all this down for us this morning. We have been seriously preparing for revival. And God wants to do tremendous things in our congregation. But just as Achan's sin impacted the whole nation of Israel, our hidden sins can stop the moving of God in our church. Last week we brought up the issue of our pet sins, the hidden sins. Now, I don't know what you've got going on in your life, but I know that hidden sins will stop the movement of God in our services. And if we hang onto grudges, bitterness, unforgiveness, envy, God will not walk with us. Maybe it has to do with spiritual pride and self-righteousness. Maybe it has to do with needing to be right about everything. Maybe it has to do with something else that you think you have hidden from everyone like sexual immorality or lust. Maybe it's pornography. Perhaps it's gossip or critical fault-finding. Maybe it's simply hypocrisy, living a double life that is radically different from the public reality. But God – But God sees and knows. And just as God called out Achan, He will call us out.

I want you to decide this morning to confess it to God and turn from it. Let's scrub every bit of the sin out of our lives so that God can come and set us on fire for Him! You never sin alone. Your sin is impacting the total community of believers. God always sees what you do even when you think you got away with it.