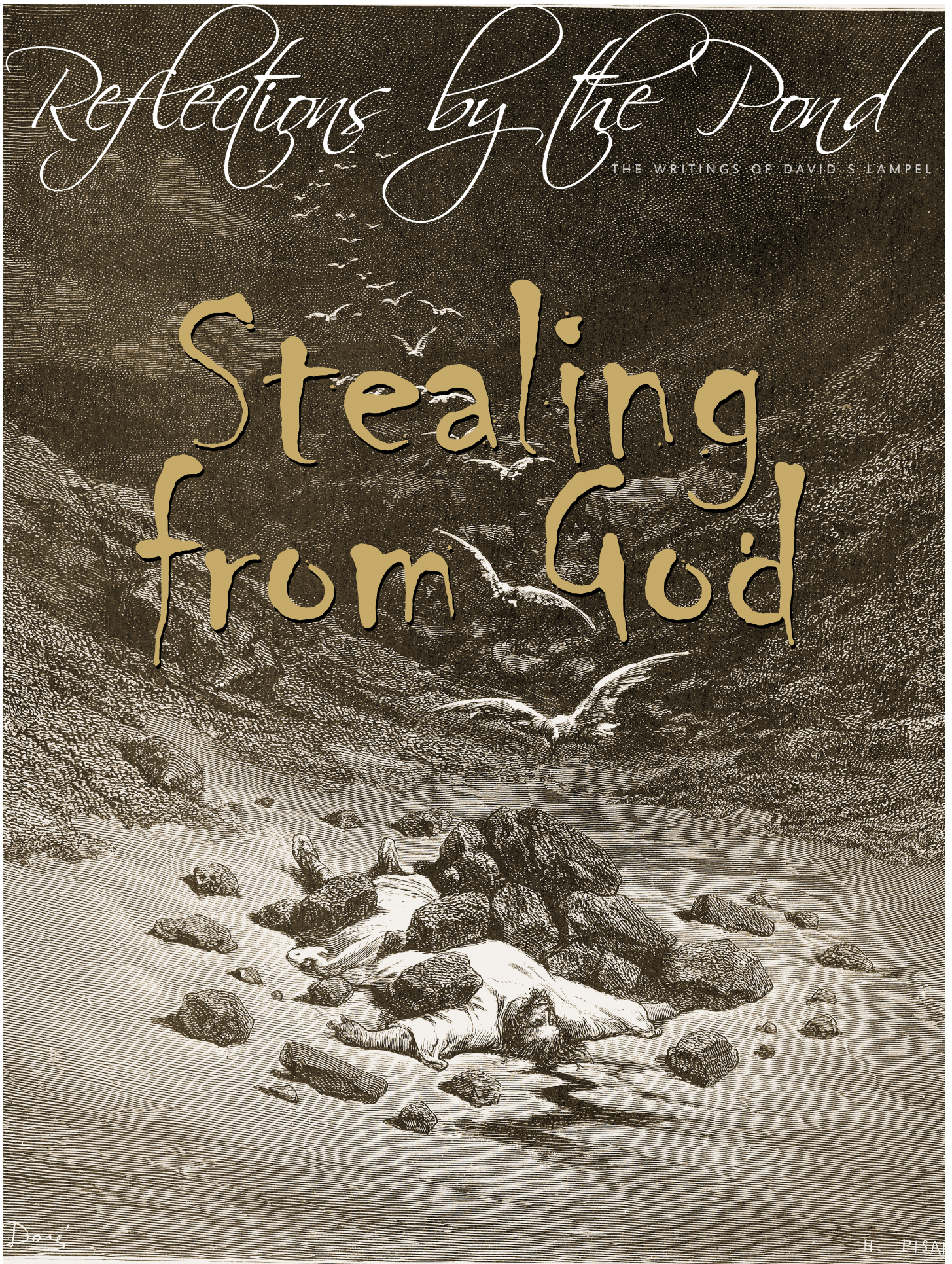


Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

Stealing from God



Do-15

H. PISA

“...when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it.”

Joshua 7:21

Issue #838, February 2020.

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“Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel...”

For generations children, sitting in their miniature chairs in a semicircle before the teacher’s flannel graph, have heard the story in their Sunday School classes. Israel trooping around the city. Blowing their horns on the final circuit. The walls of Jericho falling down in a heap. Their parents would know the story of Rahab the harlot who secreted the two Israeli spies, earning herself a place henceforth not only in the community of Israel, but a place in the line of David, and thus the line of the Messiah.

“Shout! For the LORD has given you the city.”

Each day for six days the army of Israel, along with those carrying the ark, and seven priests with rams’ horns, marched once around the walled city, the only sound coming from the priests’ horns. Then they would return to camp. On the seventh day they did the same, except this time they marched seven times around the city. On the seventh pass Joshua gave the command for the people to shout with all their might, which they did.

And the walls of Jericho fell.

“They utterly destroyed everything in the city...”

One more part of the story the children in their Sunday School class would probably not be taught is that once the wall fell and the Israelite army moved in, in obedience to the Lord they put to death with the sword every living thing in the city, “both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey.” And there was one more command of the Lord they were to obey.

“But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, so that you do not covet them and take some of the things under the ban, and make the camp of Israel accursed and bring trouble on it. But all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.”

Out of all the armed men that destroyed that city and its inhabitants there was one man—just one man—who disobeyed that last order, and kept some of the treasure for himself.

His name was Achan.



Presumption

IT MAY BE THAT JOSHUA, the strong and righteous leader of Israel, was a little too full of himself after the resounding victory in their first engagement after crossing the Jordan into Canaan. The defeat of Jericho (along with the miracle of the Jordan river drying up) was critical to Israel's conquest of Canaan; it set the tone for what would come later by setting a deep fear of Israel in the hearts of the kings and leaders of the Canaanite cities. For they, like the king of Jericho, knew there was an other-worldly force guiding their fate. They knew they would be battling more than just men.

Now it came about when all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard how the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the sons of Israel.

Joshua 5:1

their hands that had toppled those walls, but the Lord God. The result was preordained.

So when it came time to move onto the next battle, the record says nothing about Joshua seeking the Lord's will. In the consideration of Ai, the scouting of the city and its defenses, the attack, and the aftermath there is no mention of anyone consulting with Yahweh over whether or how to win the city.

Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, "Go up and spy out the land." So the men went up and spied out Ai. They returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not let all the people go up; only about two or three thousand men need go up to Ai; do not make all the people toil up there, for they are few." So about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

Joshua 7:2-5

Then Joshua called upon the Lord. He and the other elders went through all the customary motions of humble mourning and entreaty, bowing and scraping in torn clothes with dust upon their heads. But in the words of his pleading we hear little humility, and no confession of wrong. In fact what we do hear are echoes of all the other leaders who have come before God looking to cast blame anywhere but on themselves. In fact Joshua dares to question the decisions of the Lord Himself. "O Lord, why did You...," "What will You do for Your great name?" There is an impatient tone to the Lord's response.

So the LORD said to Joshua, "Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed



But perhaps Joshua forgot this, if just for a moment. In the heady euphoria of victory, it may have been too easy for the leader to forget that it was not at all Israel's doing, but the Lord's. Yahweh had declared to him, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand." It had not been the skill of the warriors or battle engines constructed by

My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things.”

Joshua 7:10-11

The Lord God knew the moment it occurred in Jericho, but only later, after Israel had suffered this humiliating defeat at Ai, did He inform Joshua of the reason for that defeat: someone had stolen from Jericho sacred treasure intended for the temple. The order from the Lord had been clear, as Joshua had relayed to the people before they attacked:

“But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, so that you do

not covet them and take some of the things under the ban, and make the camp of Israel accursed and bring trouble on it. But all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.”

Joshua 6:18-19

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump...” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7) In God’s eyes, the disobedience of the one did not just *infect* the whole; the disobedience of the one made the whole disobedient. Because Achan stole the banned treasures, this made all of Israel guilty of the same.

Stealing from God.

“I Coveted...and Took”

WE CANNOT KNOW what was in the heart and mind of Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah. We can know, however, that whatever it was, it dwells within us as well. The impulse to break the rules, to look out for oneself, to give into temptation—within every one of us there simmers the same thing, for this is how we are made.

We must *learn* obedience; disobedience comes naturally.

The human mind is factory-wired to rationalize and then excuse sin. When Achan, one of the men moving into the city after Jericho’s walls collapsed, saw the opportunity, he may have thought, *With all the gold we are collecting for the Lord, who will miss these few pieces?* He may have thought, *I’m owed this; to the victor go the spoils*, forgetting that the Lord was the true victor at Jericho. Or he may have just grabbed in the heat of the incursion, not giving much thought to it at all.



The Lord God’s perspective on this moment is fascinating. First, from this as well as other passages in His word, He seems to see Israel

as a discreet unit—that is, the Lord does not declare that an *individual* has sinned, but that “Israel has sinned.” And then he repeatedly employs the third-person plural pronoun: “They... they... they...”

Second, in His response to the sin we see His absolute holiness. The Lord declared that all the precious metals in Jericho belonged to His temple—“the treasury of the Lord.” He is a holy and jealous God who will not countenance worship of other gods, or the disobedience of any one of His people, as He stated in His Ten Commandments.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

We who are in Christ are pleased to remind ourselves that when we sin against this same

holy and jealous God we are already forgiven; we stand before Him covered in the shed blood of Christ Jesus. The truth of that does not change the fact that we *have* sinned against Him. Although we are indeed justified by the blood, the Lord God nevertheless still waits for us to confess our sin and ask His pardon. Our failure to do that, to effectively try to hide our transgression from Him, not only reflects badly on us, but on His holiness and jealousy.

In the case of Israel after Jericho, because one person had sinned—had disobeyed the direct command to dedicate *all* the treasure to the Lord—all Israel was deemed guilty of the transgression. Thus far no confession had been made, no pardon had been requested, no sacrifice had been offered for the sin.

And the evidence for that sin was hidden.



Achan carried his treasure back to camp and buried it inside his family’s tent. Why did he do it? Why did he sneak out of the Jericho ruins with a bag of treasure that was to be dedicated to the Lord? His answer, once Joshua determined, by casting the lot, the name of the individual who had “taken some of the things under the ban,” should send a chill down the spine of anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord.

Why did he take the items? He “coveted” them. That familiar old churchy word (a word one seldom hears outside the church sanctuary or Sunday School room) translates the Hebrew *hāmad*, and means to delight in, to take pleasure in something, and thus desire it. Achan saw things he had to have; sight of them ignited a passionate desire within that could only be quenched by taking them for himself. In his own words, “I saw... I coveted... and took.”

Why should his answer trouble Christians today? Why should it put the fear of God in us? Because for every believer today there is something that child of God covets—something, if seen, he *must* take for himself. For every individual there is something—some unholy thing—that exerts an almost irresistible impulse to take. The same word *hāmad* was used by Moses to describe the fateful tree growing in the Garden of Eden.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:6

Eve saw the tree and its fruit and to her they were “desirable”—she coveted them. And this world and its people were forever changed. Likewise her descendant, Achan, saw the treasure and he desired it. And his momentary sin—just like that moment Eve bit into the forbidden fruit—meant a bitter defeat in battle for Israel, and the death of many of her soldiers.



Portrait of a Godly Man

“Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the LORD, the God of Israel, has said, “There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you have removed the things under the ban from your midst.” In the morning then you shall come near by your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the LORD takes by lot shall come near by families, and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households, and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. It shall be that the one who is taken with the things under the ban shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel.”

Joshua 7:13-15

ACHAN WAS FOUND OUT. Joshua followed the Lord’s instructions: He cast the lot by tribe, and Judah was taken; he cast the lot by families within the tribe of Judah, and the family of the Zerahites was taken; he cast the lot man by man within the Zerahites, and Achan was taken.

We cannot hide our sin from God.



Much later in the history of Israel, after the nation had worked its way through a series of “judges,” it would demand to have a king, just like the other nations. The Lord God did not want them to have a king; *He* would be their king. His prophet Samuel did not want them to have a king; he knew such a move would not bode well for the nation. But like little children demanding their candy, the people of Israel insisted: “No, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations...” (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

Israel’s first king was Saul, son of Kish, a Benjamite. He was tall, good looking, a strong soldier—and a poster child for every reason Israel was not to have a human king. Oh, and he was one thing more: unrepentant.

When Saul got impatient waiting for Samuel to show up and make the necessary sacrifices before a battle with the Philistines, he assumed the priestly office for himself, and made the sacrifices. Immediately thereafter Samuel showed up. He was a prophet, as well as priest, and he already knew of the offense Saul had made before God. “What have you done?” Samuel demanded of Saul, in the same way the Lord God called for Adam in the garden, saying, “Where are you?”

God knew, and Samuel knew.

And Saul said, “Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.’ So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.”

1 Samuel 13:11b-12

Excuses.



Later, Samuel came to Saul and told him that the Lord was going to punish the Amalekites for their treatment of Israel. “Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”

So Saul went to war with the Amalekites and he was victorious. But he was also disobedient to the Lord’s command.

He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

1 Samuel 15:8-9

As before, Samuel subsequently showed up. Saul greeted the prophet with bravado—then lied to him. “Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord.”

“What then is this bleating of the sheep in

my ears,” Samuel said, “and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?” Note Saul’s weasel words in his reply; first he blames the people, then he dissociates himself from God.

Saul said, “**They** have brought them from the Amalekites, for **the people** spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD **your** God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.”

1 Samuel 15:15 (emphasis added)

When challenged by Samuel, Saul repeats his story, blaming everyone but himself. Even when he later confesses his sin, Saul is still blaming others.

Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the LORD and your words, because **I feared the people and listened to their voice.**”

1 Samuel 15:24 (emphasis added)

I had no choice. The people made me do it!



In the behavior of Israel’s second king we see the mark of “a man after [God’s] own heart.” King David was not a perfect man, but his response to being caught in sin was dramatically different from that of his predecessor.

Enthroned in Jerusalem, David was riding high and feeling very kingly. It was spring, the time of year when “kings go out to battle,” but this time David stayed home.

He should have gone to war.

With time on his hands he is up one night, wandering about the roof of his house, and he spies a woman bathing. Even a man after God’s own heart is, sadly, still a man, and he gives into his urges. We know the story: He sends for the woman Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, has sex with her, and she turns up pregnant. David’s first solution to this problem is to immediately send for her husband and have him bed his wife, so that he will think the child is his. When this doesn’t work, when Uriah refuses to sleep in his bed and lie with his wife while the rest of the troops remain out in the field, David opts for a second solution. This time he sends word to his commander, Joab, to place Uriah in the front when the battle is fiercest, then withdraw the rest of the army. That is, he was telling Joab, *Make sure Uriah dies at the front.*

One might rightly ask at this juncture, What

makes David any better than his predecessor Saul? The difference is seen when he is called on the carpet. David had committed adultery (one might even call it rape, as a woman in that situation would be powerless before the demand of the king), and murder. What he had done “was evil in the sight of the Lord.”



Every one of us, every follower of Christ without exception, has failed; every one of us has given into temptation; every one of us has, at times, really blown it. And every one of us has been confronted by a holy God regarding his or her sin.

King David really blew it. But when confronted with the evidence against him he refused to behave as his predecessor Saul, but demonstrated the character of a godly man: when Nathan the prophet confronted him with his sin, David confessed and took his lumps.

Nathan then said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’”

2 Samuel 12:7-10

David’s response was direct and sincere: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’” No excuses, no whining, no blaming others. David was guilty, he knew it, and he stood speechless before a holy God for His judgment.

Nathan tells him that the child that would be born from the unholy union of David with Bathsheba would surely die. What comes next is truly remarkable. David accepts the judgment, but nevertheless pleads to God for the life of the child. He fasted, he went without bathing, he wept and prayed for nights on the ground.

Then the child died. The servants were afraid to tell him, fearing that, after his previous behavior, he might harm himself. They were astonished by his reaction.

But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate.

2 Samuel 12:19-20

The child—a son—was dead. David knew that there remained for him future penalties, future judgments, *painful* judgments from God.

"Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised

Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.'"

2 Samuel 12:10-12

All this and more David would endure without complaint, because he was a man of God, and knew his God to be just. Proving this, the first thing King David does upon hearing that the child has died is to pick himself up, bathe and anoint himself, and go to church. He went to the temple and worshiped the Lord.

This is what a true man after God's own heart does when he has been caught in sin. He repents, he confesses, and he accepts without complaint the chastisement of a holy God.

Then he worships.

Confession

Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I implore you, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me."

Joshua 7:19

FROM A HEAVENLY PERSPECTIVE (yet expressed in human terms) the cost of letting Achan's sin slide was too great. The laws of God for Israel had just been handed down forty years earlier, and they must be enforced. On the ground, Israel would never take possession of Canaan without the Lord's sanction, and that would not be forthcoming—Ai!—unless this sin, this flagrant disobedience, was purged from Israel. It was a fresh new cancer; if permitted to remain and spread it would overwhelm the entire nation and Israel, as a nation, would fail.

Therefore everything and everyone connected to this tragic event must be destroyed. Achan surely knew already the form of punishment; God had made that clear, and during the discovery process that word would have filtered down to everyone in the camp. Even with that

in mind, Achan unswervingly, without excuse, confessed.

So Achan answered Joshua and said, "Truly, I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the



silver underneath it.”

Joshua 7:20-21

Achan had sinned. That sin undiscovered or unpunished would have corrupted the entire nation of Israel; that sin discovered and confessed would still spread beyond Achan himself. His sin, his moment of secret greed, would envelop his family, his entire household.

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was concealed in his tent with the silver underneath it. They took them from inside the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the sons of Israel, and they poured them out before the LORD. Then Joshua and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the mantle, the bar of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent and all that belonged to him; and they brought them up to the valley of Achor.

Joshua 7:22-24

Achan had stolen from the Lord, and now the treasure had been returned to Him, “poured... out before the Lord.” The Lord God had commanded that all the treasure within the fallen walls of Jericho belonged to Him; all these items were “holy to the Lord.” Achan may as well have



So Joshua burned Ai and made it a heap forever, a desolation until this day.

Joshua 8:28

walked into the tabernacle and stolen the golden lampstand. He had stolen from God. And now he and everyone involved in his disobedience must be purged from the nation of Israel.

Joshua said, “Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.” And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. They raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the valley of Achor to this day.

Joshua 7:25-26



The ancient story of Achan stands in dramatic contrast to our time. We live in a world of sloppy religion and sloppy faith. Church pulpits and public airwaves alike have become corrupted by this culture’s philosophy of “Well, that’s all right.” Some things are *not* “all right,” and even under the sacrificial blood of Christ God still hates sin.

One man stole an armload of forbidden goods, and as a result thirty-six men died outside of Ai, the entire Israelite nation was threatened, and Achan’s family and household were executed and burned. Any one man’s sin is never an island unto itself. Corruption, like cancer, spreads. Others are inevitably hurt.

Nonetheless there is a brightness to the end of Achan’s life. Unlike King Saul, Achan did not equivocate, he did not try to blame others, he did not deny his transgression. Like King David, he freely and immediately confessed his sin, *called* it sin, and acknowledged *Yahweh Adonai* as God and Lord of Israel—his Lord and Sovereign. Achan’s last act was a righteous act. We can’t say for sure, but it may even be that we will meet Achan when we get to heaven.

Achan did what Christians today are called to do.

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:8-9