

JOSHUA:
and the Land of Promise

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A.

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CHAPTER TEN
THE VALLEY OF ACHOR
(Joshua 7)

“No cloud across the sun
But passes at the last, and gives us back
The face of God once more.”
- Kingsley

WAS it a sudden gust of temptation that swept Achan before it when, with the rest of the host, he entered Jericho? or was it that some long growth of unjudged evil flowered into that act which has made his name a reproach to all after-time? It is impossible to say. Only the terribleness of his fate seems to indicate something more than a transient yielding to sin. This, at least, is clear, that in the late afternoon of the day of Jericho's capture, and before the lurid flames of its conflagration rose to Heaven, he had pilfered one of those robes of exquisite texture for which the plain of Shinar was famous, together with gold and silver the latter coined, the former in a wedge, and had borne them surreptitiously away.

We can imagine him bringing them into his tent, where he probably found it necessary to acquaint his children with his deed; for if they had not been party to the crime and its concealment, they could hardly have been involved in his terrible fate. With their help he dug a hole in the sand and hid the spoil, which by the special ban of Joshua had been devoted to The Lord.

The whole proceeding had been conducted in such absolute secrecy, and he was so confident of the collusion of the inmates of his tent, that, amid the general inquiry for the thief, he braved detection, and held his peace until the unerring finger of God pointed him out, as if he had said, “**Thou art the man!**” But what anguish he must have suffered in the meanwhile!

Long before his deed was unmasked, conscience had borne witness against him; and the lot had been cast within the circle of his heart. The scene in which he played so prominent a part on the plains of Jericho was rehearsed where no crowds of awestruck spectators gathered round, no blanched faces looked upon his, and no horror-stricken messengers ran to the tent to unearth the hidden treasure.

When the first excitement of his new acquisition had passed, and the fever had subsided, the dull, heavy sense of wrong-doing began to gnaw at his heart. In the lull of reaction, conscience spoke; and when he marched with the rest up the long ravine to Ai, when he saw his comrades turn to flee, when he joined in the breathless rush back to the camp, when he met the relatives of the six-and-thirty men who had fallen in the battle, when he saw the dismay beneath which Joshua and the elders of Israel were over whelmed he knew, by an unerring spiritual perception, that it was his sin that was bringing shame and disaster to Israel.

It must have been a positive relief to him when his secret was torn from his breast, and there was no need to preserve longer the appearance of comparative unconcern.

Let us turn aside and study this scene in which Achan's sin was detected and dealt with; for whilst we do so, we may learn something of the action of that sharp, two-edged sword which pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart.

I. WE SHOULD GRIEVE MORE FOR SIN THAN FOR ITS RESULTS

Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening; smarting from the disgrace inflicted upon his people, and aghast at the results which would probably ensue so soon as the tidings had been bruited abroad. Judging simply by human standards, the very worst consequences might be expected when the nations of Canaan suddenly discovered that the Israelite hosts were not invulnerable. This was Joshua's fear, that the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land should hear of it, and compass them round, and cut off their name from the earth.

As soon as we have committed sin, we look furtively round to see whether we have been watched; and then we take measures to tie up the consequences which would naturally accrue. Failing this, we are deeply humiliated. Saul was much more moved by his desire for Samuel to worship the Lord with him, and so honor him in the presence of the elders of Israel, than by his disobedience to the divine will.

We dread the consequences of sin more than the sin itself; discovery more than misdoing; what others may say and do more than the look of pain and sorrow on the face that looks out on us from the encircling throng of glorified spirits.

But with God it is not so.

It is our sin, one of the most grievous features in which is our failure to recognize its intrinsic evil, that presses him down, as a cart groans beneath its load.

The boy grieves because sickness shuts him away from his companions the excursion on the river; the game in the woods; the swift gliding over the deep blue ice on the ringing skate; but the mother grieves over the disease, of which the burning fever or the labored breath is the symptom.

In the heart of the mother, sorrow for the disappointment of the child is almost obliterated by the eager anxiety that bends over his bed.

Very few of us realize what sin is, because we have had no experience of a character without it, either in ourselves or in others. People speak of being entirely delivered from sin, but they know not what they say, or whereof they affirm. None that has been born of woman, save One, has ever had the experience of a perfectly sinless character. Babes seem pure as the unfolding lily, which has not been freckled or soiled by contact with earth-stains, but they had been purer; Christian maidens are sweet and lovely, but they had been lovelier; saints seem blameless and harmless, but they had been saintlier if they had not been originally connected with a fallen race.

It is, of course, possible to learn something of the exceeding sinfulness of sin by viewing the agony, heart-break, and shame, of the dying Lord; by remembering its infinite cost to the love of God; by recalling the comparisons of Scripture, in which the most loathsome forms of disease are its chosen types; or by considering the worm that never dies, the fire that is never quenched.

And yet the true way to a proper realization of sin is to cultivate the friendship of the Holy God. The more we know him, the more utterly we shall enter into his thought about the subtle evil of our heart. We shall find sin lurking where we least anticipated in our motives; in our religious acts; in our hasty judgment of others; in our want of tender, sensitive, pitying love; in our censorious condemnation of those who may be restrained by the action of a more sensitive conscience than our own, from claiming all that we claim to possess.

We shall learn that every look, tone, gesture, word, thought, which is not consistent with perfect love, indicates that the virus of sin has not yet been expelled from our nature; and we shall come to mourn not so much for the results of sin, as for the sin itself. This is the godly sorrow that needs not to be repented of. Here are tears which angels catch in God's tear-bottles. In hours like these we approach most nearly the world where sin is hated; not because it cost us Paradise, for that has been more than replaced but because it is sin.

II. WE SHOULD SUBMIT OURSELVES TO THE JUDGMENT OF God

“And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?”

It was as if he had said, “Thou grieveest for the effect; grieve rather for the cause. I am well able to preserve my people from the assaults of their foes, though all Canaan beset them; and I am equally able to maintain the honor of my name. These are not the main matters for concern: but that a worm is already gnawing at the root of the gourd, and a plague is already eating out the vitals of the people whom I have redeemed. With my right arm I will screen you from attack, whilst you give yourselves to the investigation and destruction of the accursed thing.”

Whenever there is perpetual failure in our life, we may be sure that there is some secret evil lurking in heart and life. It may not always be possible for us to go direct to the spot where the evil has made its lair. But we may be sure that there is an accursed thing somewhere in our midst, and that therefore we cannot stand before our enemies.

Somewhere there is a fault in the insulation of the wire through which the currents of divine power and grace come to us; and it is useless to pray that they may be renewed until we have repaired the defect. Much of the time spent in public and secret prayer would be better employed by subjecting our dealings with each other and our walk before God to a searching scrutiny.

It is a mistake to be on the face pleading with God for a blessing and especially for the blessing of Pentecost whilst there is some evil thing in our hearts needing to be dealt with ere the divine energies can come to us. It is not a question of God's willingness or unwillingness; but of the laws of the spiritual world, which make him unable to ally himself with consciously permitted sin.

Hast thou, reader, been beaten back in thy Christian work, or exposed to perpetual defeat by some petty temptation? Then it would be well to call a halt: not to hold a prayer-meeting; but to order thy heart-life before God, that, if thou canst not discern the evil thing that lies at the root of thy trouble, he may discern it for thee, whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and in his hand a sharp sword.

(1) In searching out the causes of failure, we must be willing to know the worst; and this is almost the hardest condition.

Ostrich-like, we all hide our heads in the sand from unwelcome tidings. It is the voice of an iron resolution, or of mature Christian experience, that can say without faltering, "Let me know the worst." But as we bare ourselves to the good Physician, let us remember that he is our husband; that his eyes film with love and pity; that he desires to indicate the source of our sorrow only to remove it; so that for him and for us there may be the vigor of perfect soul-health and consequent bliss.

He will communicate the result of his search by methods which are known to his delicate tenderness. Do not get into a fever. Do not rush from one to another for advice. Do not bewilder yourself with trying to detect his voice amid the tumult of voices that are sure to clamor for hearing when you bend down your ear to listen. **"Be still and know."** The responsibility of showing you your mistake is wholly with Him, if you have placed all in His hands, Leave it there and wait. If He has anything to say, he will say it clearly, unmistakably, and certainly. If He says nothing, it is because the set time has not come. But to-morrow, in the morning, it may be, He will speak to you and tell you all.

In the meanwhile, wait and trust.

(2) When God deals with sin, he traces back its genealogy.

Notice the particularity with which, twice over, the sacred historian gives the list of Achan's progenitors. It is always, **"Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah"** (1:16-18).

There, in the early morning, Joshua and Phinehas stood to discern the transgressor with the aid of the Urim and Thummim of Judgment.

The princes of Israel passed before them first; and the prince of Judah was taken. Then the families of Judah; and that of the Zarhites was taken. Then the Zarhites, and Zabdi was taken; then Carmi; then Achan. How his heart must have stood still, as he saw the inevitable closing in of his destiny! like the contracting walls of a chamber of horrors on a hapless victim.

But sin is sporadic. To deal with it thoroughly, we need to go back to its parentage. All who have carefully watched the processes of the inner life bear witness, that a long period will often intervene between the first germ of sin, in a permitted thought or glance of evil, and its flower or fruit in act. We generally deal with the wrong that flames out before the sight of our fellows; we should go behind to the spark as it lay smoldering for hours before, and to the carelessness which left it there.

We only awake when the rock disintegrates and threatens to fall upon our cottage roof; God would lead us back to the moment when a tiny seed, borne on the breeze, floating through the air, found a lodgment in some crevice of our heart; and, although the soil was scanty, succeeded in keeping its foothold till it had struck down its tiny roots, and gathered strength enough to split the rock which had given it welcome. And by this insight into small beginnings, our God would fore-arm us against great catastrophes.

What we call sin is the outcome of sin permitted, days perhaps weeks before; which, in the meanwhile, had been gathering strength within the heart. An avalanche is the result of the dislocation of a few flakes of snow, which had fluttered from their place weeks before the villagers were overwhelmed and smothered in their beds. There is reason therefore for the advice of the wise man: **“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”**

If we would be kept clear from great transgression, we must see to it that we are cleared from hidden faults, so subtle and microscopic that they would elude any but a conscience kept sensitive by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In the light of these thoughts we shall better understand what is meant by one of the deepest passages in the Epistles. James tells us and none could better discourse on such a theme than the saintly president of the Apostolic Church; that **“Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.”**

A word which surely suggests that temptation is not wholly a matter without the soul, as some think! And he goes on to say, **“Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”**

Mark those words, **“when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth”** they are very deep. In nature there is an interval, a period of incubation. If, therefore, you have fled before Ai, do not be content when you have discovered Achan; but continue your search till you have learned what gave him power to hurt you, and so work your way through the links in the long chain till you discover his remote ancestor in something which you did not suspect for the moment, but which was the guilty progenitor. Achan’s own words shall enforce the necessity: **“I saw . . . I coveted . . . I took.”**

(3) It is a good thing at times to muster the clans of heart and life.

We must make the principal tribes of our being pass before God - the public, and private; our behavior in the business, the family, the church until one of them is taken. Then examine that department, going through its various aspects and engagements, analyzing it in days, or duties; resolving it into its various elements; and scrutinizing each. The auditor of accounts in some great business house, called in to discover the source of leakage, will for obvious reasons eliminate from his inquiry certain of the ledgers representing the more prosperous branches of the trade; and thus he narrows his inquiries within a smaller and yet smaller range.

This duty of self-examination should be pursued by those who have least relish for it, as most likely they really need it; whilst those who are naturally of an introspective disposition will probably apply themselves to the task without being reminded of the necessity of so doing, and should guard against its excess and abuse. Whoever undertakes it should do so on reliance on the Holy Spirit; and give ten glances to the Blessed Lord for every one that is taken at the corruptions of the natural heart. It is **“looking unto Jesus”** which is the real secret of soul-growth.

III. WE SHOULD HOLD NO PARLEY WITH DISCOVERED SIN

“And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor . . . And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones” (Joshua 7:24-25).

Then The Lord repeated the words which had preceded the capture of Jericho, **“And the Lord said unto Joshua, Fear not! . . . see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land.”**

Then up the long defile Joshua marched with thirty thousand men the mighty men of valor. There was a sense in every breast of an integrity which had put away all cause of failure and defeat.

The preparations were skillfully made; the appearance of flight on the part of Israel drew forth the men of Ai to headlong pursuit; and the city was left at the mercy of the ambush, which at the sign of Joshua’s uplifted javelin arose, entered the city, and set it on fire. And in that very place where Israel had met with so disastrous a defeat, the people took great spoil, specially of cattle, which they drove down in triumph to the camp at Gilgal. God never reveals an evil which he does not require us to remove.

And if heart and flesh fail, if our hand refuses to obey our faltering will, if the paralysis of evil has so far enfeebled us that we cannot lift the stone, or wield the knife, or strike the flint-stones for the fire, then he will do for us what must be done, but which we cannot do.

Some are cast in a mold so strong that they can dare to raise the hatchet, and cut off the arm just madly bitten, and before poison has passed from it into the system; others must await the surgeon's knife. But the one lesson for all the inner life is to be willing for God to do his work in us, through us, or for us.

So the Valley of Achor becomes “**the Door of Hope.**”

From that sterile, mountain-guarded valley, Israel marched to victory; or, to use the highly colored imagery of Hosea, it was as though the massive slabs opened in the cliffs, and the people passed into cornfields, vineyards, and oliveyards, singing amid their rich luxuriance as they sang in their youth in the day when they came up out of Egypt.

Ah! metaphor as true as fair! for all our inner life, there is no Valley of Achor where the work of execution is faithfully preformed, in which there is not a door of hope entrance into the garden of the Lord; and a song so sweet, so joyous, so triumphant, that it would seem as if the buoyancy of youth were wed with the experience and mellowness of age.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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