

Joshua

And
The Land of Promise

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A.

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CHAPTER NINE

ARREST AND DEFEAT

(Joshua 8:1, 2)

“Now, Christians, hold your own the land before ye
Is open win your way, and take your rest.
So sounds our war-note; but our path of glory
By many a cloud is darkened and unblest.”
- Keble

THE conquest of Canaan occupied seven years, and during the whole of that time Israel lost but one battle; indeed, the six-and-thirty men smitten in the headlong flight before the men of Ai seem to have been the only loss which their hosts sustained. The story of this defeat is told with great minuteness, because it involved lessons of the greatest moment to Israel, and of incalculable value to ourselves.

The experience of defeat is far too common to the majority of Christians. They are constantly turning their backs before their enemies. They are defeated by indwelling sin and the assaults of Satan, and by the mighty evils which they assail in the name of God. But instead of taking their defeats to heart, they become inured to them. For the time they are filled with mortification and chagrin, but the impression soon wears away. They do not lie on their faces before God, eager to discover the cause of failure, to deal with it, and to advance from the scene of defeat to wider and more permanent success. If we but carefully investigated the causes of our defeats, they would be only second to victories in their blessed results on our character and lives.

There were three causes for this defeat.

I. THEY WERE SELF-CONFIDENT BECAUSE AI WAS SMALL

Jericho was a heap of smoldering ruins. Man and woman, both young and old, and ox and sheep and ass, all had been utterly destroyed with the edge of the sword.

The only relics were the silver and gold and vessels of brass and iron which had been placed among the precious stores of the Tabernacle; the woman Rahab, her people and her property; and a certain Babylonish garment, some silver shekels, and a wedge of gold, of which we shall hear again.

Fearing no attack from the rear, Joshua at once set his face toward the interior of the country, and chose a deep gorge or ravine, which lay a little toward the north, as the passage-way for his army. Eight miles from its opening on the Jordan valley this ravine met another, in a wild entanglement of hill and valley, and near the junction of the two stood the little town of Ai, with a population of twelve thousand persons.

The proportion of fighting men has been calculated at about two thousand; but the situation was strong and commanded the pass, so that Joshua had no alternative but to mete out to it the same terrible fate as that with which he had visited Jericho.

Speaking after the manner of men, there was considerable force in the report of the spies sent up the valley to reconnoiter. The place was much smaller than Jericho, and would apparently require much less expenditure of time and strength for its capture. Jericho may have needed the entire host; but for Ai, some three thousand men would surely suffice. **“Make not all the people to labour thither; for they [i.e., the men of Ai] are but few.”**

But this recommendation went on the supposition that Jericho had been overthrown by the attack of the hosts of Israel; whereas, in point of fact, they had had singularly little to do with it. They had walked around it, and shouted that was all. It had been taken by their great Captain and Leader, and by him given into their hands. The silence that reigned over its site was no criterion of their might, but of his. To speak as they did was to ignore the real facts of the case, and to argue as though the victory were due to some inherent qualities in themselves; with the inference that because they had conquered at Jericho they must therefore necessarily conquer at Ai.

There is no experience in the Christian life so full of peril as the hour when we are flushed with recent victory.

Then comes the temptation to sacrifice to our net, and burn incense to our drag. We magnify our part in the conflict till it fills the whole range of vision. We boast to ourselves that we have gotten the land in possession by our own sword, and that our own arm has saved us. Counting from our great triumph at Jericho, we despise such a small obstacle as Ai.

Surely, we argue, if we have carried the one, we shall easily prevail at the other! And so it frequently happens that a great success in public is followed by a fall in private; that those who had swept all before them in the pulpit or on the platform are overcome by some miserable appetite, or by petulance in the home; and the bitter regret of that sin wipes out all the glad exhilaration of the hour of victory.

We never so need to observe the injunction to **“watch and pray”** as when the foe is flying before us.

When the mighty convocation breaks up, its convictions having been turned by our single voice as in the story of Elijah and as the people are departing to their homes, and the bodies of the priests of Baal choke the Kishon, we must be careful to go up to the top of Carmel, where we had girded ourselves for the conflict, and, bowing to the earth, put our face between our knees in prayer.

Had Joshua acted thus, he would never have been induced by the words of the spies to reason on mere military grounds; he would never have presumed on the insignificance of the little town; and he would never have had the anguish of seeing his panic-stricken soldiers come rushing down the rugged pass, or sheltering in the stone-quarries on either hand, whilst the men of Ai, in full pursuit, were cutting down the hindmost and least nimble.

There is nothing small in Christian life - nothing so small that we can combat it in our own strength. Apart from God, the smallest temptations will be more than a match for us. So weak are we, that occasions of sin, which are perfectly contemptible in themselves, will overthrow our most confident resolutions. The victories which we have won in fellowship with God have imparted no inherent might to us; we are as weak as ever; and directly we are brought into collision with the least of our enemies, apart from him, we shall inevitably go down before the shock. The faith, watchfulness, and fellowship with God, which availed before Jericho, can alone serve as the key to Ai.

II. THEY FAILED TO WAIT ON God

An accursed thing in their midst broke the link of fellowship between them and the hosts that served beneath the celestial Warrior who had appeared to Joshua. And though it must have been a severe sorrow to The Lord to inflict sorrow on his people, yet for their sake, and for the sake of his holy name, the sin must be judged and put away. Joshua pleaded, “**What wilt thou do for thy great Name?**” But it was for that very reason that the defeat had been permitted.

There is not the least doubt that if Joshua had been in abiding fellowship with God, the Spirit of God would have indicated the presence of evil in the host; so that Achan and his sin would have been discovered and judged before the march to Ai. It was so in an analogous case in the Acts of the Apostles. What Achan was to Israel, that Ananias and his wife were to the early Church. The fifth chapter of the Acts would have recorded some great defeat or crushing disaster, if it had not contained the story of the discernment on the part of the apostle Peter, and by the Holy Ghost, of the accursed thing to which the guilty pair were privy.

If we may dare to imagine what would have been the consequence in the primitive Church had that root of evil been left unextirpated, we should be obliged not only to wipe out the record of the signs and wonders wrought amongst the people, of the unity of the disciples, and of the burst doors of the prison; but we should have to interpolate an account of how the hosts of God, in diminished numbers, gave back before the fury of their adversaries; of how Peter lay with his face in the dust of the Temple courts; of how panic and dismay filled the hearts of leaders and led; and of how the name of the Lord Jesus was blasphemed, and his character traduced. But none of these things befell, because the Spirit of God was able to utter his unhindered testimony. Very important is it for us to heed the Apostle’s warning,

“For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.”

God sees the little rift in the lute; the spot of decay in the fruit; the ulcer in the flesh, threatening to eat away its vitality. These may not be realized by us; but he knows how inevitably they must lead to defeat. Nor is he slow to warn us of them. Yet of what use is it for him to speak to deaf ears; or to those who are self-confident in their own wisdom; or who pride themselves on victories which were wholly his gift?

- Amid the gaiety of the revel, we do not see the handwriting on the wall;
- Amid the unanimous advice of the false prophets, we do not inquire for the one voice that may speak evil of our plans;
- Amid the radiant sunlight of the morning, in which the dancing wavelets flash, we do not care to see the falling glass, or be guided by the dark prognostications of the weather-beaten sailor.

Probably there is no single temptation which has not to claim permission of God before it touches us. He who permits it prays for us, raising his voice in lonely vigil whilst we sleep, anticipating the attack by ambushes of intercession. Yea, not content with this, he warns us not once or twice; he even touches us with fingers that would thrill us were we not insensible, steeped in spiritual lethargy.

Where God’s children, like Joshua, are oblivious to the warning voices which speak in ever fainter tones as they are disregarded, God is compelled to let them take their course until some terrible disaster flings them on their faces to the ground.

Ah, if Joshua had only prostrated himself amid the shoutings of victory over Jericho, there would have been no need for him to prostrate himself amid the outcry of a panic-stricken host! If he had only sought counsel of God before he sent the spies up the pass, there would have been no need to ask what he should do to repair his defeat. The iron priming-knife of trouble has to do for many of us, roughly and hurtfully, what the silver pruning-knife of the Word of God might have effected.

Before ever we make some new advance, although the point of attack be but an Ai, it is our duty, as it is our best policy, to get back to Gilgal. Joshua does not seem to have returned there after the fall of Jericho. We ought to seclude ourselves in spiritual converse with our Almighty Confederate, asking if he has aught to say to us; entreating that he should reveal any evil thing that he may see in us, and mustering the tribes of our heart before his scrutiny, that the Achan lurking there may be brought to light before, instead of after, the fight.

III. THEY HAD COMMITTED A TRESPASS IN THE DEVOTED THING

(1) Joshua was inclined to lay the charge of their failure on God.

It seemed to him as if the Almighty had done ill by them in bringing them into the heart of such mighty difficulties. In his judgment, warped by the presence of disaster, it appeared as if it had been better for the camp to have remained on the other side of Jordan.

The dreariest anticipations of defeat and destruction passed in spectral form before him. He spoke as one whom faith had deserted, the locks of his might shorn, and himself no longer a hero, but, like the Canaanites themselves, whose heart had melted as his did now. But, in point of fact, the blame lay not with God, who was engaged in conducting his people within reach of superlative blessedness, but wholly with themselves.

There are times in our lives when we are disposed to find fault with God. “Why, Great Potter, hast thou made me thus? Why was I ever taken out of my quiet home, or country parish, or happy niche of service, to be plunged into this sea of difficulties? “When we are smarting from some defeat, caused by the overpowering might or the clever strategy of the foe, we are prone to blame God; either that our nature was not stronger, or that he has brought us from the shelter of comparative obscurity and placed us on the mountain slope where the storms expend their wildest fury.

Alas! we forget that our Father brings us across the Jordan to give us larger experiences, to open before us vaster possibilities, to give us a better chance of acquiring his unsearchable riches. There is no task without sufficiency of grace; no foe without a sufficiency of victorious power; no trial without a sufficiency of resource by which, as in the old dream of the alchemist, the hardest, commonest metal may be transformed to gold.

The defeats that we incur in the Land of Promise are not necessary. They are due entirely to some failure in ourselves, and they cause grief to the immortal Lover of our souls. There is no reason for defeat in the Christian life; always and everywhere we are meant to be more than conquerors. The course of the Christian warrior should be as the sun when he goeth forth in his strength, and in regular gradients drives his chariot from the eastern wave up the steep of Heaven. Child of God, never lay the blame of your failure on God; seek for it within!

(2) *One Israelite only had trespassed, and yet it is said, “The children of Israel committed a trespass in the devoted thing.”*

Not one of us stands alone; we cannot sin without insensibly affecting the spiritual condition of all our fellows. We cannot grow cold without lowering the temperature of all contiguous hearts. We cannot pass upward without lifting others. No asteroid revolves through space without affecting the position and speed of every member of its system. No grain lies upon the seashore without influencing all its companion grains. “**None of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself.**” “**Whether one member suffereth, all the members suffer with it; or one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.**”

If Israel had but realized how much the safety of the whole depended on the obedience of each, every individual would have watched his brethren, as he watched himself, not for their sakes alone, but for his own; and did the members of Christian communities understand how vast an influence for weal or woe depends upon the choice, the decision, the action of any, there would be a fuller and more intelligent obedience to the reiterated injunctions of the New Testament for the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak; for the loftiest to stoop to wash the feet of the lowliest; and for all to look not on their own things only, but also on the things of others.

“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God.”

Should these words be read by any soul which is conscious of playing an Achan's part, let it take warning, and whilst it is called To-day, confess, restore, and repent. Not only that it may escape an inevitable judgment; but that it may not bring disaster and defeat upon those with whom it associates, dragging the innocent down into the vortex of a common fate. The hands of Achan were stained with the blood of the thirty-six that perished in the flight to Shebarim.

(3) How careless we are of God's distinct prohibitions!

Nothing could have been more clearly promulgated than the command to leave the spoils of Jericho untouched. The city and its contents were devoted to utter destruction, a specified number of articles only being preserved for Tabernacle use. This ordinance was probably intended to preserve the children of Israel from the temptation which must have accrued, had they glutted themselves with the spoils of the city. The abstinence tended to strengthen their character, and to educate their faith. But to Achan, the will of God was overborne by the lust of his eyes and the pride of life. The strong tide of passion swept him over the barrier reared by the divine word.

Let us not, however, judge him too hardly. He is not the last who has acted in distinct violation of divine commands. The Bible is full of prohibitions against the love of the world, the love of dress, the love of money; against censoriousness, and pride, and unhallowed ambition; against the Babylonish garment and the wedge of gold; and yet thousands of Christian people live in complacent disobedience, as if God were one of themselves, or as if his words were unsubstantial as smoke.

What wonder that the forces of his Israel meet with defeat, and that the old word is verified in individual experience and in the history of the church, **“Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you”** (Joshua 7:11-12).

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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