

Joshua

And
The Land of Promise

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WILES OF THE DEVIL

(Joshua 9)

“The perils that we well might shun
We saunter forth to meet;
The path into the road of sin
We tread with careless feet.
The air that comes instinct with death
We bid it round us flow;
And when our hands should bar the gate
We parley with the foe!”

- Bright

THE whole country was in arms. Minor differences were obliterated, a truce was given to tribal wars, and those who had been deadly foes were driven by the very necessities of the case into a combination against the dreaded invader. Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were hereditary foes, combined to destroy Christ, so did all the kings whether Hittite or Amorite, Perizzite or Hivite gather themselves together to fight with Israel and with Joshua, “**with one accord.**” In front of that common danger all minor contentions held their peace.

Tidings of this formidable coalition found their way into the camp of Gilgal, whither leader and people had recently returned from their pilgrimage to Shechem. Probably Joshua heard the tidings without great dismay; but to the princes it was welcome news to learn almost simultaneously that there was the possibility of forming a league with those who were likely to stand by them at that solemn juncture. This league, however, was to cost them as much anxiety, if not more, as the sin of Achan. Whenever we are threatened with unprecedented difficulty, we may expect to encounter just such a temptation as that which the Gibeonites presented to Israel.

I. “THEY DID WORK WILILY.”

One day a strange spectacle presented itself at the gates of the camp.

A group of strangers announced themselves, who seemed to have come from a far country. In every article of dress, as well as in the trappings of their asses, there were the signs of long journeys. Their shoes were clouted; their garments faded; their sacks in holes; their wine-skins patched; and when they turned out the remnants of their bread, the mold suggested the days that had passed since it left the oven.

All the camp gathered to see them enter; and as they passed through the lines of eager spectators, from one to another the word passed, "Who are they? whence came they? Wherever they come from, they are evidently foreigners in this country."

Compassion would be freely expended on them for the weary fatigue of their travel; and no one suspected for a moment that beneath the clever disguise was concealed a band of Hivites. But so it was. For the first time, within the precincts of the camp which was holy unto the Lord, there stood a company of those inhabitants of Canaan which Israel had been expressly commissioned to destroy.

Had it not been for their disguise they would not have been permitted to come within the circle of the tents. A cry of horror would have passed from lip to lip, drowning any attempt of theirs to speak; but their story was so reasonable, their references to The Lord so reverential, their appearance so in keeping with the account they gave of themselves, that they threw Joshua, princes, and people completely off their guard.

It is in this way that we are tempted still more by the wiles of Satan than by his open assaults; more by the deceitfulness of sin than by its declared war. And it is little matter for wonder that those who succeed at Jericho and Ai fall into the nets woven and laid down by the wiles of Gibeon. Better to meet Caiaphas than Judas. A black devil is less to be dreaded than a white one.

Take up the chronicles of the early Church. With no prestige, or wealth, or human learning to help her, she swept forward on her beneficent mission, during the first centuries of her existence, freeing the slave, lifting woman from her degradation, smiting down gigantic systems of idolatry and philosophy, and winning myriads of trophies for Jesus Christ.

There was no reason to doubt that she would speedily accomplish the will of her divine Founder in encompassing the world with the tidings of redemption, and proclaiming his Gospel to every creature. All through these days each step was taken at a great cost of agony and blood. The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. Ten awful persecutions rolled up against the Ark, threatening to engulf it in their blood-red waters. The great dragon persecuted the woman; and the serpent cast out of his mouth after her water as a river, that he might cause her to be carried away by the stream.

But the effect of all this was most salutary. There was no temptation to hypocrites to join the ranks of the faithful; and these counted not their lives dear unto themselves, if only by word and life they might commend the Gospel of their Lord.

Those were the days when the saints walked the earth in white, and God was not ashamed to be called their God, and men were attracted by the sheen of a celestial beauty.

Then, since the adversary could not prevail by force, he had resort to wile. Constantine was his agent, through whom an alliance was effected between the new young faith and the expiring systems of paganism. The great fasts of the Christian faith were commemorated on the days consecrated from time immemorial to heathen festivals; and after a while in the garments and with the rites by which those festivals had been signalized. A league was formed between the Church and the world; between truth and falsehood; between the new and the old: and the religion of Jesus Christ struck hands in solemn covenant with the old shoes and clouted, the old garments, the moldy provision of Babylonish idolatry.

From that moment a change passed over the Church of Christ.

What she gained in prestige of worldly power she lost in character and spiritual strength. From that moment the course of the professing Church has been always downward; and to-day it is her weakness and shame that she has so unaccountable a liking for the old relics of a defunct paganism.

Many a soul that has withstood the attacks of the more pronounced forms of temptation has succumbed before the treacherous arts of the flatterer.

Young Christians have much to fear from those who introduce themselves as being also religious, and as enthusiastic as they, and who proceed to urge them “not to overdo it.” We have all to beware of those insinuating themselves into our affections, our counsels, our homes, or our businesses; who assume an interest in religion which they do not feel; who talk glibly and falsely of the fame of God; and who offer to do all in their power to further and help our interests whilst they are plotting our ruin.

There are plenty of Gibeonites about.

- **“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”**

“Bear with me; . . . But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”

II. “THEY ASKED NOT COUNSEL OF THE LORD.”

The leaders of Israel seem at first to have been a little suspicious of their visitors.

“And the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us, and how shall we make a league with you?”

But their suspicions were allayed as they listened to their story, and saw the apparent evidences of their long journey.

Here surely was an opportunity of proving their sagacity.

They had not been allowed as yet to show their bravery and might, but they could at least now give proof of their superior insight! This was altogether too obvious a matter to need to be referred to Phinehas with his Urim and Thummim! And so they took of their provisions, moldy as they were, in token of their willingness to count them allies and friends; indeed, the princes of the congregation swore unto them. But they “**asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord.**”

What an ominous sound there is in those words! They portend disaster and it befell. Up to this moment the initiative had always been taken by the Lord. Now for the first time it is taken by Joshua and the people. In all the previous chapters the words run thus: “**And the Lord said unto Joshua;**” but there is no such phrase in this. Israel through her chosen leaders acted for herself, and easily fell into the trap. If only they had inquired of the Lord, the dimming light in the sacred stone would have betrayed the fatal secret and arrested the formation of the league.

Let us lay the moral to our heart. Earth’s somber tints and cross-lights are very perplexing; and it is often extremely hard to detect the truth.

- The foolish virgins are so much like the wise;
- The tares so resemble the wheat;
- The hireling imitates so precisely the Shepherd’s voice;
- The devil’s mimicry of an angel of light is so exact;
- By-path Meadow is parted from the King’s Highway by so narrow a boundary.

We urgently need, as the Apostle prayed for his Philippian converts, that we may have not only all knowledge, but all discernment, so that we may prove the things that differ (Philippians 1:10).

In one place this power to discriminate is said to result from use (Hebrews 5:14); whilst in the passage already quoted it is attributed to an abounding love. But following the suggestion of the narrative before us, we may say that it will follow naturally on the careful cultivation of the habit of asking counsel at the mouth of the Lord. Never trust your own judgment. When your common sense is most sure of the rightness of a certain course of action, it will be best to make assurance doubly sure by lifting up your soul to God, that it may dim with his No, or glisten with his Yes.

When voices within or without would hasten you to decide on the strength of your own conclusions, then be careful to refer the whole matter from the lower court of your own judgment to the supreme tribunal of God’s. If there is any doubt or hesitation left after such reference, be sure that as yet the time has not come for you to understand all God’s will. Under such circumstances wait. Throw the responsibility of the pause, and all it may involve, on God; and dare still to wait.

As a traveler over the hills, when the mist has come down, elects to stand or lie where it overtakes him, rather than wander on, perhaps to the brink of a precipice - so wait. If you trust God absolutely, it is for him to give you clear directions as to what you should do. And when the time for action arrives, he will have given you such unmistakable indications of his will that you will not be able to mistake them or err therein. “**For they shall not be ashamed that wait on me.**”

Life is full of difficulties. The pointed spear awaits the unwary at the bottom of the pit, the top of which is covered by a slight film of earth. The snare of the fowler, the pestilence that walketh in darkness, the net privily laid, the decoy-bird, the devil in the wily serpent form - of these we need to beware. But prayer is like the spear of Ithuriel; and before its touch evil will be compelled to show itself in its native deformity, so that we may be thrown instantly upon the watch.

Before entering into any alliance taking a partner in life, going into a business with another, yielding assent to any proposition which involves confederation with others be sure to ask counsel at the mouth of the Lord. He will assuredly answer by an irresistible impulse by the voice of a friend; by a circumstance strange and unexpected; by a passage of Scripture. He will choose his own messenger; but he will send a message.

III. "HEWERS OF WOOD AND DRAWERS OF WATER."

There are some oaths better in the breach than the observance, as would have been the case with Herod's. And if there had been certain peril that these Hivites would corrupt Israel, it had been better for them, notwithstanding the oath of the princes, to have been cut off like the rest of the Canaanites. But all danger of this peril accruing was carefully guarded against by their reduction to servitude. **"Hewers of wood and drawers of water, for the congregation and for the altar of The Lord."**

This position they retained; and in after years heavy disasters befell Israel, because Saul, in his mad zeal, broke the solemn league and covenant into which Joshua and the princes had entered with them (II Samuel 21:2).

This is a beautiful and comforting example of the way in which God overrules our mistakes, and brings blessing out of our sins; as the chemist obtains his loveliest dyes from the refuse of gas retorts.

Inadvertently, and without due consideration, some reader may have entered into alliance with a Gibeonite whether in marriage, in business, or in some other sphere. Are they therefore to abandon their high privilege, and forsake their lofty ministry to the world? Must they cease to be God's portion, and the priests of men? Not necessarily.

Let them turn to God in repentance and confession, and he will teach them how these very hindrances may become great means of help; so that they shall hew the wood for the burnt-offering, draw the water for the libations, and promote the prosperity and well-being of the soul. **"Out of the eater shall come forth meat, and out of the strong shall come forth sweetness."**

"If any brother hath an unbelieving wife, and she is content to dwell with him, let him not leave her. And the woman which hath an unbelieving husband, and he is content to dwell with her, let her not leave her husband. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the brother. How knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O husband, whether thou shalt save thy wife? But God hath called us in peace."

It is very sweet to think of the grace of God which forgives our sins, as the preliminary condition to transforming the results of those sins to blessing.

How often, in the lives of God's saints, the ancient prediction has been realized, that instead of the thorn should come up the fir tree, and instead of the briar the myrtle tree, that these may be to the Lord for a name and an everlasting sign.

It is true that the natural consequences of our sin may have to run their course. The hand of the reclaimed drunkard will still tremble. The constitution of the prodigal will never be able to throw off the effects of the fever contracted from the swine-troughs. The Gibeonite will always, in this world at least, be tied to you. But these things shall not rule, but serve; shall not impede, but promote. They shall hew the wood and draw the water for the inner shrine of character, and for the promotion of the loftiest standard of Christian attainment.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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