

Meditations on the Book of Joshua

Joshua 7

Ai and the Accursed Thing

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We have just been considering the brilliant picture of a divine victory obtained by faith over Satan. After such a conquest, we say, Israel will surely proceed from one victory to another; but not so. Joshua 7 opens with the registry of a defeat. A little town, an insignificant obstacle in comparison with Jericho, and "few people" are enough to put to flight three thousand men of Israel, and to cause the hearts of the people to melt and become as water.

There are secrets of defeat as there are secrets of victory, and the believer's chief danger lies in victory. After having gained it in real dependence upon God, the soul, if occupied with the results, willingly attributes something to itself, and the next defeat dates from that moment.

Notice the case of Joshua: "Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai." (v. 2) He repeats what he had done in Joshua 2: 1 with regard to the land and Jericho. Then it was the path of God, but now the very same act becomes a human and fleshly expedient. The spies had returned from reconnoitring Jericho, saying: "Truly the Lord hath delivered into our hands all the land." What need then to send further emissaries? It was in some measure a lack of dependence on God, a confidence in human means.

More than this, Joshua sent them "from Jericho," which is not the true point of departure, he forgets Gilgal, where they learnt what the flesh is, or perhaps he does not yet know that it is the place to which they must return. Joshua had found in the victory an opportunity for trusting in the flesh. He who, until now, had been a type of Christ by His Spirit acting in the believer, so as to bring him into possession of his privileges, descends to the level of an ordinary man. The typical Joshua disappears, to make room for Joshua as a man.

Is it not often so with us? Every believer in his measure is a representative of Christ, an epistle intended to make Him known, which, directly we forget Gilgal, disappears to give place to the old man which we have neglected to judge.

But the people, alas! follow the example of their leader. The men sent by Joshua having returned, said unto him: "Let not all the people go up: but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither, for they are but few." (v. 3) They have the most implicit confidence in themselves; they will "smite Ai." What is it for us and our men of war? Have we not shown our capability at Jericho?

Dangerous confidence! But there is not only this lack of dependence on God, and self-confidence, the fruit of unjudged flesh; there is more; coveted things, hidden from every eye, are buried in the earth in the midst of a tent; the accursed thing is there.

God had cursed the town of Jericho; all that belonged to it was under the curse; no one dared keep any of it lest he should make himself and the camp of Israel accursed. (Joshua 6: 18) One man only had disobeyed, and, hearkening to his lusts, had stolen of the accursed thing. Which of us is free in heart from this?

This man had followed his natural inclinations, he had begun where we all begin, where the first man began. "I saw." (v. 21) "When the woman saw" is said in Genesis 3: 6. He had eyes which knew how to discern the goodly things amongst the spoil. His eyes were the avenue to his heart, but there was no sentinel to watch, no "qui vive" to resound in case of an attack. It is through the eyes that the accursed thing takes possession of the heart, and provokes it to lust: "I coveted them." "Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin": "I took them." The goodly Babylonish garment which could adorn the pride of life, the silver and gold which could satisfy every lust, became the prey of Achan; nay, rather, these things make him their prey! Fatal and Satanic chain which links the world to man's natural heart, in order to make him the sport of the prince of this world.

Notice now how the sin of one man has to do with all Israel. (v. 1) "But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing . . . and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel." The people might have said: Does that concern us? How could we have known about a hidden thing, and not having known it, how are we responsible? To all that we reply, that God always has the unity of His people before His eyes. He considers individuals as members of one whole, and responsible the one for the other. The suffering and sin of one is the suffering and sin of all, and if it is thus with Israel, how much more so with us, the church of God, one body united by the Holy Spirit to the Head which is in heaven.

If, however, their souls had been in a good state, God would have manifested the hidden evil in their midst. The power of an ungrieved Spirit in the assembly brings to light all that dishonours Christ amongst His own. The reason it was not so with Israel, was that there was something unjudged in the people and their leader. The hidden evil of Achan is the means of bringing out the hidden evil in the heart of the people. When the assembly is in a good state, although always answerable for the sin of one of its members, it is made aware of it by the

Holy Spirit, and finds itself in a position to put away the evil from its midst, and, as the case may be, to put out the wicked person.* It was thus in the early days of the church, in the case of the cutting off of Ananias and Sapphira; the power of the Spirit of God discovered and judged the evil immediately. But here in Israel, hearts had to be brought by self-judgment to bear the sin of one as the sin of all before God.

{*See Deut. 13: 6; Deut. 19: 19; Deut. 21: 18, 21; Deut. 24: 7; 1 Cor. 5: 13. It is well to observe that the cases where a man may be designated as a wicked person are not all specified in the word of God. No mention is made of a murderer, etc. The judgment being left to the spirituality of the assembly.}

Is it thus with us in these days of ruin? Do we feel the evil in the church? Do we recognise our responsibility as to all the corruption which has been introduced? Or are we self-confident enough, in the presence of the rubbish, to think that we could do better than others, and that the ruin of the church is not our doing? If our hearts are not habitually thus before God, we are sectarian; and, more than this, we may have to be reminded by a terrible defeat of the humility which becomes those who ought to have remained at Gilgal. See how differently from our miserable hearts God judges. He says: "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." (v. 11)

In verses 5 and 6 we find the chastisement of the people. Three thousand men of Israel flee before Ai; and the hearts of the people melt and become like water because thirty-six of them are smitten. They are prostrate; strength and energy fail them; fear takes possession of their souls, for their courage has been carnal. So proud of their previous victory, they fall now to the level of the Amorites whose "hearts melted" when they heard of the crossing of Jordan. This was a sad but necessary experience, for they had forgotten Gilgal; and Satan undertakes to teach them through the bitterness of a defeat, what amount of strength they possess, and how much confidence can be placed in the flesh. Ah! if they had been with God they would have been preserved from a defeat, as we see very remarkably in the Apostle Paul's experience. He had been triumphantly caught up to the third heavens, into paradise, and there he had heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter, but when he came down again to the earth, a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, was given to buffet him. The flesh was in him, and would have exalted itself, but God anticipates it and hinders his beloved servant from being puffed up.

The danger was great, for had he listened to the flesh, how many flattering things he would have said to himself in consequence of this wonderful vision, thus compromising . not only his peace, but even his apostleship and his course. But God takes care of His servant, giving him the necessary corrective, in order that the course of his victories may be uninterrupted. Paul learns by "the thorn" which is his Gilgal, that the flesh, even the best, is worth nothing. God says to him: Never mind the infirmity — the thorn in the flesh; stay at Gilgal, it is precisely what you need, for in this way the power will be entirely mine and will obtain the victory; and as for thee, my grace is sufficient! It was a place of suffering and humiliation for Paul, but of wondrous blessing! He was with God, in communion with the Lord, and the messenger of Satan is but the means of keeping him at Gilgal, and not of bringing him back there by a defeat.

And Joshua the man of God? Alas! he rends his clothes and falls to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord. (v. 6) Where was the ark in the war with Ai, before which the walls of Jericho had fallen? Joshua's godly soul acknowledges its worth, but he does not know what to do, and, ignoring the accursed thing, he gives vent to regrets, not regrets as to what he has done, not as to what the people have done, but, alas! as to what God had done when He brought them over Jordan! "Would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan!" said he. How plainly these words show what man's heart is! This blessed place is the only one that Joshua would fain have avoided.

The tone of his request betrays weakness. First it is Israel, the name of Israel which occupies his thoughts; then it is the Canaanites, the world. "Israel turneth their backs before their enemies!" "The Canaanites . . . shall hear of it." They shall "cut off our name from the earth." Then quite at the end: "What wilt thou do unto thy great name?" (vs. 8, 9) The example given us in the history of God's faithful servant Moses is very different. (Ex. 32: 11, 13) He had been on the mount of God, and there God reveals to him the evil which had gone on in the camp; the sin of the people does not remain hidden from the eyes of Moses. Aware of it before coming down from the mount, does he think of Israel's shame? No, he is occupied with what is suited to the Lord's name. He recognises the claims of offended holiness. As for the nations his only concern is, as to whether God would be glorified in the eyes of the Egyptians by the defeat of His people. As for Israel, he appeals to the grace of God, to the only thing which glorifies Jehovah's name in the presence of guilty Israel. Moses had no need, like Joshua, to recover lost communion; he can intercede for the people, and he is heard.

Joshua, on the contrary, is found precisely in the attitude in which he ought not to be. "Get thee up," said the Lord to him, "wherefore liest

thou thus upon thy face?" (v. 10) To humble himself for his lack of power was not the only thing to be done: it was time to act. We find the opposite to this in Judges 20, where Israel ought to have humbled themselves first and then acted. Miserable flesh! What disorder does it not introduce into the things of God! Always outside the current of His thoughts, if not in open hostility to Him. May we join with the apostle in saying: "We, who have no confidence in the flesh." Joshua had to act; the accursed thing had to be put away from amongst them.

The children of Israel had soon forgotten the presence of the Lord, which alone could open their eyes to the evil in their midst. Joshua himself had been in some measure taken in this snare of Satan, and involved in the people's weakness. If he had realised in his soul the attitude he assumed in Joshua 5, in loosing the shoe from off his foot, he would have understood the necessity of holiness for the people, if God's holy presence was to be with them. But Joshua falls to the earth upon his face and almost reproaches God for His grace, forgetful of His holiness: "Wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan?" He was not, for the moment at least, in the current of God's thoughts, and God makes him feel it. His thoughts were out of tune. When the accursed thing enters into the testimony of God, what we have to do is to sanctify ourselves, and to put away the evil from our midst. It is not a question here of power, but of holiness and of obedience. God said to Joshua: "Up, sanctify the people." To sanctify oneself is to separate oneself from all evil to God. It is impossible without holiness to have God with us.

This is one of the most important truths for the present day. What should characterise us now, as in Philadelphia, is communion with "the holy and the true." I am speaking merely of an ordinary case of excommunication, and not of a case of discipline complicated, it may be, by the incapacity of the assembly to judge evil. I would not for a moment omit the true humiliation which should always accompany action in a case of discipline.

It was necessary that Israel should both individually and as a nation pass in review under the searching eye of Jehovah Himself (vers. 14, 15); their conscience was thus awakened and self was judged; each one took his place in presence of the judgment. It was the same when the wicked person at Corinth was put away. "Godly sorrow" had worked in the Corinthians a "repentance to salvation not to be repented of." Sorrow had produced humiliation, accompanied by activity and zeal in purifying the assembly of God from evil. Thus true humiliation and action went together. "For behold this self-same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of

yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!" (2 Cor. 7: 11)

To return to the question of holiness. In Joshua 5 we have individual holiness, and in Joshua 7 corporate. In order that Israel should not be defiled and partakers of the accursed thing, they must put away what had entered into the midst of the congregation. Rarely do we find intelligence amongst the children of God with regard to these two aspects of practical holiness. Christians more often seek the first, that is individual holiness. and esteem the second of no importance.

Let us take an illustration to show that individual holiness is never fully entered into apart from corporate holiness. Supposing I have a son who is blameless as to his character, and whose virtues are everywhere spoken of. He is respected in the town, and on all sides I hear the remark, "What a good son you have!" Now, this son of mine, though he does not himself drink, spends every evening at the public-house, in the company of drunkards, instead of remaining in his father's house and taking his place at the family board. Can I call him a good son?

From 2 Corinthians 6: 16 to 7: 1 we learn the close connection between these two aspects of holiness. God begins with corporate holiness "Ye are the temple of the living God." (v. 16) The temple of God is holy." (1 Cor. 3: 17) It is positional holiness. "What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" "Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate." (Ver 17) This is practical corporate holiness. Then he adds: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." (2 Cor. 7: 1) This is individual holiness, and it is inseparable from corporate holiness and the promises attaching thereto.

But the corporate side is not understood by the generality of God's people who go through the world, alas! without troubling themselves about their fellow Christians, and to whom such a thing as corporate responsibility is unknown.

One often hears it said: "Oh! I do not concern myself about others; I am alone with God; I take the Lord's supper individually," &c. This is not how God views us. Let me repeat it: He sees us altogether as forming one body, united by the Holy Spirit to His glorified Son. The sin and the suffering of one member is the sin and suffering of the whole body. One more word in passing, on the sentence referred to above, which one so often hears from the lips of Christians: "I take the Lord's supper for myself." What does Scripture say? "For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." (1 Cor. 10: 17) Who are the "many" with whom you profess to be one body? You take