

Meditations on the Book of Joshua

Joshua 8

The Way of Recovery — The Recovery of Gibeah — Results of Discipline

H. L. Rossier

the supper individually to excuse your alliance with the world at the Lord's table, and you do not see that you profess to be one body with the murderers of our Saviour, for it is the world that crucified Him.

Let us notice another point in the chapter. God said, "Sanctify yourselves against tomorrow." (v. 13) We are called to sanctify ourselves before and not at the moment of action. Whence comes our frequent incapacity to judge evil and to act for God? Because we have not sanctified ourselves beforehand. Why is it that so often at the worship meetings our hearts are cold and our lips silent in praise? Because we have not been obedient to the word: "Sanctify yourselves against to-morrow." It is the same in 1 Corinthians 5. The apostle possessed the power, but not the Corinthians. They were simply to obey in purging out the old leaven to be a new dump; they had to put away the wicked person from their midst.

Achan had partaken of what was under the curse of God, and he had to be put away. It was done in the valley of Achor.

But, wonderful to say, we read in Hosea 2: 15 this comforting word respecting Israel: "I will give her the valley of Achor for a door of hope." Yes, beloved friends, it is always thus; blessing is given to us on the very threshold of judgment. It is at the place of judgment that the soul at the time of its conversion finds the door of hope; it is there that it meets Christ. And later on, the believer finds the time of discipline to be the birth place of hope and joy. It will be in this valley where God pronounced their judgment, that the people of Israel will, by-and-by, be blessed of God. It was there that Joshua was recovered in soul for a walk henceforth with God, while leading the people to victory.

Joshua 8

THE WAY OF RECOVERY

The wicked person had been put away from the congregation of Israel, but by the presence of evil in their midst, God had brought them to the discovery of their own self-confidence. Such cases often present themselves when an assembly is satisfied with its state, and begins to boast of it, and of its blessing and growth. Israel did this, placing their reliance not in God but in their late victory, and thus preparing a way for defeat. They had to be judged, and then to purify themselves from the evil. But restoration of soul does not consist only in self-judgment and practical sanctification. Communion with God, which sin has interrupted, must be restored.

Here I would make a remark which is perhaps of importance. In Joshua 6 God manifests His power in connection with Israel in the victory over the

enemy at Jericho. This same power is strewn too in the Christian's life. It may be that one has been in the enjoyment of divine power and the victories thereby obtained, without perhaps having really known either God or oneself.

And yet there was no excuse for Joshua's want of apprehension. The Captain of the Lord's host had revealed Himself to him with the drawn sword in His hand, as the Holy One armed with power for the conflict. Then, in company with the people, Joshua had witnessed the exercise of this power before Jericho; but his conscience had to be brought in contact with divine holiness, and he had as yet no sense of what it necessitated from the people as to the character of their walk. The anger of the Lord (Joshua 7: 1) had to be made known to Israel and their leader, before they could learn that God in His holiness could not tolerate the accursed thing. The knowledge of God in power is not all. To possess a true and complete knowledge of Him much more has to be learnt.

With regard to Gilgal and the learning of ourselves, it might seem that when once this point in the soul's history is reached, self ought to be done with, but in reality this is only practically realised in the measure that one keeps at Gilgal. How little did the people know themselves after the victory of Jericho! Though God had taken a thousand pains to prove to them that all was of Him in the victory, what self-sufficiency, what forgetfulness they show in attempting to face the enemy without Him!

Flight and trouble are the result, and when they resume the offensive, their path becomes difficult, laborious, and full of complications, thus exposing to their view their own weakness, which had been already made apparent to the enemy in their defeat. They have to retrace their steps, forced afresh to the discovery of themselves, but it will now be a lesson learnt through grace with Christ and not with Satan.

Notice in Joshua 8 how complicated everything becomes, through not having followed the simple path of faith. The soul, humbled, finds itself once more with God, and His presence with it, but the consequences of a carnal walk remain; and although God can ultimately use these for their blessing, the path has no longer the simplicity of the early days of faith. It is a very simple path, for, to the believer who follows God's guidance in human dependence on His word, victory is assured. It was thus at Jericho, and the same power which had brought down the walls of the accursed city is with Israel at Ai; it has not changed, although the army must manoeuvre and separate into two corps, five thousand men lying in ambush, whilst the rest entice the defenders of Ai out of their stronghold.

In Joshua 7 the spies had said in their report: "Let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai, for they are but few." And now about

thirty thousand chosen mighty men of valour are required. What a humiliation, and how it lowered Israel in their own estimation! They had to go up by night, and whilst some hid, others feigned flight before the enemy. What room for boasting after this?

But you may say: You have shown us that at Jericho it was not a question of human means, and now here are all sorts of contrivances for conquering the enemy. I reply: If you are content to use means which bring your incapacity into prominence, leaving on man the impress of his total weakness, and humiliating him so that his only resource is to flee before the foe, all well and good. But it is not in your power to do this. In truth at Ai they are no more human means than at Jericho. The difference is, that there God ordered the arrangements so that Israel might learn his power, whilst at Ai His object was to teach them their own weakness.

But in the one case and the other, let me repeat, the power of God had not changed, Israel gained the victory at Ai by means of it; Joshua was there, Joshua with the spear in his hand. At Jehovah's command Joshua stretched out the spear that he had in his hand toward the city. (v. 18) "For Joshua drew not his hand back, wherewith he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai" (v. 26) It remained stretched out all through the conflict.

One often hears it repeated: "What does it matter if there are divisions? Have we not all the same end in view? Are we not all fighting for the same Lord, although it may be under different standards?" Is this then the teaching to be gathered from these chapters? No, they maintain one great prevailing truth. The people were one; one in their victory, one in their failure, one in their defeat, one in the judgment of the evil, one in their restoration. We see around us the poor children of God scattered and divided, and they are content to say: "What does it matter?" Brethren, for what purpose did Christ die? Was it not "to gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad." (John 11: 52) Does God scatter them after He has gathered them? No, it is the wolf who scatters the sheep. (John 10: 12) And can we say: "What does it matter?"

Diversity is not division; for it displays itself in unity. The ambush take Ai and set it on fire, whilst the twenty-five thousand men flee before their enemies, until advised by the smoke of the city to turn back upon them. Just as they begin to fight, the ambush issuing out of the city join in the battle (v. 22), and then all the Israelites return unto Ai and smite it with the edge of the sword. (v. 24) Thus there is diversity in the action and service, but it is an action in common. The body is one; the several parts are joined together, and Joshua with his spear is the bond of union. If the unity is lost sight of, defeat is the result.

In 1 Corinthians 12, we find diversity and unity closely brought together in the church. "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," "and there are diversities of operations; but it is the same God which worketh all in all." (vs. 4, 6) "For as the body is one and hath many members" (this is diversity in unity), "and all the members of that one body being many are one body" (this is unity in diversity), "so also is the Christ." We are united in one body, the Christ, and yet every child of God has his appointed work which no one can accomplish for him. Each one is entrusted with a different service; I cannot do yours, nor you mine.

Israel is now restored to communion with God. Throughout this scene the activity of the people is blessedly characterised by the presence of Joshua. When they were going to war, we read: "Joshua arose, and all the people." (v. 3) On the eve of battle: "Joshua lodged that night amongst the people." (v. 9) When the march was about to begin: "Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley." (v. 13) When it was a question of enticing the enemy: "Joshua and all Israel made as if they were beaten." (v. 15) When they had put to flight the enemy: "Joshua and all Israel slew the men of Ai." (v. 21) And finally when the victory was decided in their favour: "Joshua drew not his hand back until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai." (v. 26)

THE RECOVERY OF GIBEAH

The effect of the defeat at Ai was that the Israelites learnt to know their own hearts better, and at the same time the character of the God who went before them. Before noting the practical results of what God had taught them through discipline, I should like to point out a resemblance between Joshua 7, 8, and Judges 20, 21.

It is an accepted fact that the book of Judges after Judges 17 does not follow any chronological order (Judges 20: 28), but gives us a picture of what took place before God raised up the judges, of the history of Israel immediately after the death of Joshua. There had been utter and rapid decline; idolatry and moral corruption reigned everywhere. At the beginning and end of these chapters we find the statement: "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." No such thing as dependence on God and His word, man's conscience being the measure of good and evil. Each one walked according to his own sense of right and wrong, making conscience the measure of his conduct.

Is not this a picture of Christendom and of what happened after the departure of the apostles? Was decline less complete and sudden? Leaving aside the corrupt principles of popery, which does enlightened Protestant Christendom bring forward as the rule of conduct, the word of God or conscience? Does it teach subjection to the Scriptures, or is its

watchword liberty of conscience? If conscience is taken as a guide, absolute confusion is the result, each one hastening to follow his own opinion.

But a horrible sin had taken place at Gibeah; and that not as in Joshua 7, the accursed thing, hidden failure, but as a sin committed openly before God and man. The unhappy Levite himself publishes his shame, every tribe in Israel being apprised of it (Judges 19: 29). And the people, what of them? Well, God uses the sin of Gibeah, as He did the sin of Achan, to lay bare their moral condition, to humble them and to awaken within them the consciousness of what is due to God. Only here the moral state of the tribes is more serious; they have sunk much lower than at Ai. Indignant at the wrong done to themselves, the thought of the wrong done to God is entirely overlooked. They speak of the folly wrought by Gibeah in Israel, of the wickedness done amongst those of the tribe of Benjamin, but not a word of the dishonour brought upon the Lord's name. How evident the declension, and how different are the words of Phinehas to the two and a half tribes: (Joshua 22: 16) "What trespass is this that ye have committed against the God of Israel?"

To this first symptom of decline, we may add a second; namely, that they had abandoned what might be called their first love. The Lord was no longer before their eyes; their affection for Him, and consequently for those born of Him, had diminished. They forgot that Benjamin was their brother. "Which of us shall go up first to the battle against the children of Benjamin?" (v. 18) and these last on their side "would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel." (v. 13)

A third symptom of decline is that they lose sight of the unity of the people. No doubt, to all appearance, the eleven tribes presented a unity nearly as perfect as when Israel purified themselves from Achan and were restored at Ai. Nevertheless it was no longer God's unity. It was in vain that the people "were gathered together as one man" (v. 1), or that they "arose as one man" (v. 8), or that they were knit together as one man" (v. 11), against Gibeah: God could not recognise the unity of Israel whilst Benjamin was lacking. Beloved, these links in the chain of declension are riveted one to the other; forgetfulness of the presence of God, surrender of the first love, contempt for the real unity in spite of a show of the same.

And was not Benjamin guilty? Yes, exceedingly so. One sees that his mind was made up from the outset not to judge evil. Warned equally with the other tribes (19: 29) of a crime patent to all, knowing that the children of Israel were about to judge the evil, in fact warned, albeit in a carnal spirit, that he would have to purify himself, he yet turns a deaf ear

to the call of duty. By establishing the principle of independence, he disowns the unity of Israel, and far from purifying himself from the crime of Gibeah, he links himself with it, at the same time resorting to a useless and miserable attempt at making a distinction. (v. 15) Benjamin had to be judged, but the state of the people as a whole was too bad to admit of a divine judgment on their part, and they must be sifted before being able in truth to purify themselves from the sin of Gibeah.

If Israel had had a right sense of things, they would have first humbled themselves before the Lord, taken counsel of Him, and then acted; instead of which they begin by consulting one another, miserable result of forgetfulness of God's presence; they take measures, and decide very scripturally "to put away the evil from Israel," quite forgetting that they are themselves infected by the evil, that Benjamin is in fact part of them. After having made all their arrangements and numbered their warriors, "they arose and went up to the house of God and asked counsel of God." (v. 18) This is also the spirit of declension, and it is to be found everywhere in Christendom, and often amongst the children of God; in fact it is a widely established principle. We propose some plan to ourselves, and at the moment of its execution, often after all is arranged, we ask the blessing of God.

The result of this total oversight of divine principles, was that in the first day twenty-two thousand Israelites were destroyed down to the ground. Then they went up and wept before the Lord; their hearts are now full of sorrow instead of carnal indignation, and they call Benjamin their brother. Their love and sense of responsibility one to another is revived. After this they again set their battle in array and lose eighteen thousand men in a second defeat. God in His goodness sought to produce a perfect result. Sorrow in itself was not everything, neither the proclamation of the bonds which united them; what was needed was a full and complete judgment of self; repentance before God. To enjoy once more the presence of the Lord and His communion, they must retrace their steps in the pathway of declension. Thus it is said: "Then all the children of Israel and all the people went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace-offerings before the Lord." (v. 26)

What comes next bears a striking analogy to the scene at Ai. They were obliged to set liars in wait (v. 29), to flee before Benjamin (v. 32); and after all their previous losses to have thirty men wounded to death, and to make a great flame like smoke rise up out of the city, to serve as a signal. Thoroughly judged and restored to communion with God, Israel can now discharge the painful duty of judging Benjamin for his profanity; but ah! what weeping and tears follow on the victory. (Judges 21: 2) How

different from the scene at Jericho, where "the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat." (Joshua 6: 20) Here it was a question of their own brethren, of a tribe all but cut off in judgment. But God in grace restores the gleanings of Benjamin, notwithstanding the many complications brought about by the carnal haste of Israel in their first decisions.

There is however one part of the congregation of Israel which the restored people treat with more severity than Benjamin himself. There came none to the camp from Jabesh-Gilead to the assembly. (Judges 21: 8) It was bare-faced indifference, and neutrality with regard to the evil of which they took no account; far worse than the spirit of fleshly indignation in which Benjamin had revolted, despising a decision of the assembly, and which had led him to take arms against his brethren, while associating himself with evil. Jabesh had to be utterly destroyed.

RESULTS OF DISCIPLINE

But to return to Joshua and the people. Israel had learnt in the pathway of humiliation not to trust in themselves, and this expression at once bears fruit. Henceforth if controlled by the word of God, and trusting in its perfect guidance, they would escape further falls. In verses 27-35, we see Joshua and the people obeying the Lord's commandment (vers. 27, 31, 33, 35), and depending on what is written in the book of the law. (vs. 31, 34) The effect of being humbled is that Joshua and the people are reminded in heart of the statutes laid down in Deuteronomy 27.

More than this: the hanging of the king of Ai shows that Joshua is informed as to the details of his conduct by the word of God. "As soon as the sun went down, Joshua commanded that they should take his carcase down from the tree." (c.f. Deut. 21: 22, 23) To all human appearance this would be a detail of no importance, but a heart fed by the word of God could not overlook it. To neglect it, would have been to lose sight of the holiness of God, and Joshua would then have failed in the very point which brought down chastisement on the people. "His body shall not remain all night upon the tree for he that is hanged is accursed of God; that thy land be not defiled which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance." (Deut. 21: 23) And again: "Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the children of Israel." (Num. 35: 34) In a word, a holy God could not dwell in the midst of defilement; this was the blessed lesson which Joshua received from the Lord of hosts before Jericho, which he learnt amidst tears in the valley of Achor, and which, with a conscience exercised in the school of God, he blessedly realised in the day of victory.

We learn another lesson in the judgment of the king of Ai. The bringing together in Deuteronomy 21: 18-23 of the two events contained in Joshua 7 and Joshua 8, the cutting off of the wicked person and the judgment of the enemy, is not without significance. This is practically always the case. The assembly must purge out the evil from its midst before it can silence and bring to nought the evil outside. You will find, where evil is tolerated in the assembly, a total absence of that decision and firmness which deals with the enemy as such, without coming to terms, and puts him at the outset in the only place assigned to him of God, according to the scripture: "He that is hanged is accursed of God."

There is one more striking coincidence in the verses we are considering. The gibbet of the king of Ai was the place of the judgment and curse of Israel's enemy. But here the people are obliged to stand themselves on Mount Ebal, where the curse of God is pronounced upon them. This terrible conclusion of the law which Israel could not escape, God had