

Meditations on the Book of Joshua

Joshua 9

The Snare of Gibeon

H. L. Rossier

brought to nought by the cross of Christ.* Christ bore on the cross the curse which was pronounced at Ebal on man as a responsible being, to redeem us from it. Israel could see in type on the gibbet at Ai, what we see in the cross of Christ, Satan, our chief enemy, defeated and annihilated; but we see also, as has been already remarked, all the curse under which we lay at Ebal, for ever gone in the actual judgment of Him who took this place for us. In Galatians 3: 10, 13, we find the same blessed connection between Ebal and the cross. "For it is written" (Deut. 27: 26), "Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." The curses at Ebal close with these words, but the apostle adds: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." This is the hanging of the king of Ai.

{*It should be noted that the altar here was built upon Mount Ebal, not on Mount Gerizim, and served, so to speak, as a counterpoise in grace to the curse.}

A further result of discipline was that Israel, now humbled, were in a state to worship. "Then Joshua built an altar unto the Lord God of Israel in Mount Ebal and they offered thereon burnt-offerings unto the Lord, and sacrificed peace-offerings." With us likewise, there can be no communion without self-judgment, and no worship without communion. The altar in Mount Ebal was the provision in grace for the curse of the law on transgressors. In the altar we have propitiation, which is the basis of all true worship; only here it is in presence of a people threatened by the curse if they do not obey. The cross which has put an end to the curse for us, is the starting-point or centre of our worship, and sheds upon us the full light of divine grace.

But grace itself never weakens our responsibility as God's children. There are conditions under which the land is taken possession of. A duplicate of the law was to be written upon great stones set up and plastered with plaster. (Deut. 27: 2, 3; Joshua 8: 32) This same law was read aloud "before all the congregation of Israel." (v. 35) Let us never forget that Jesus Christ is at the same time our Saviour and our Lord, the One who has pardoned us, and the One who has every claim over us. The knowledge of His grace fills our mouths with praise in worship; the sense of our responsibility leads us to persevere in holiness and truth, to fight the good fight, to take possession of the promised land.

Joshua 9

THE SNARE OF GIBEON

As we advance in the study of our chapters, the enemy presents himself under new aspects. Satan knows how to make war; he knows how to place his batteries, to attack openly, and to overwhelm by numbers; but he also knows how to employ subterfuge, to deceive by craft, and to ensnare, Jericho, as an obstacle, gave way before faith; but Satan is not discouraged, he gets at Israel by means of their lusts, and the accursed thing enters into the camp; he occupies the soul with past victories, and self-confidence takes possession of the heart. Israel, forgetful of the whole armour of God, is caught in the enemy's nets. But Satan's victory is the school of God for the righteous. They cease trusting in themselves, and entering into the claims of God's holiness, they seek their safeguard in the word of God, owning, at length, their responsibility, of which they seemed previously scarcely aware.

In Joshua 9 we find more particularly "the wiles of the devil," and it is expressly against these that we are cautioned in the word. In order to stand firm, we must "put on the whole armour of God; be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might."

We see the power of God under various aspects in the Epistle to the Ephesians, and in the first chapters of Joshua. In Ephesians 1: 19, His power toward us corresponds typically with the crossing of Jordan. In Ephesians 3: 16, 20, His power in us corresponds with the divinely-spread table in Joshua 5; and in Ephesians 6: 10, His power with us, and the armour, in its various parts, corresponds with the conflict with the power of evil, such as we see in the succeeding chapters of Joshua.

We have already seen what vessels God takes up, through which to glorify Himself in this conflict; creatures so weak, that their only resource is to depend on Him. As I have often said, God makes use of two classes of instruments to accomplish His work: first, those who have no value in themselves. "God hath chosen the foolish, weak, base things of the world, and things which are despised, and things which are not." (1 Cor. 1: 27, 28) Could stronger language be used to convey the nothingness of the vessels God deigns to use? But He also takes up instruments which are of great value in the eyes of men and to themselves. Saul of Tarsus was a man looked up to — learned, religious, energetic, conscientious; to all appearance he lacked in nothing of that which God could turn to account, Yet God lays hold of him, strikes him to the ground, on the way to Damascus, and, so to speak, breaks the vessel to pieces. Then He says, Now I can use him.

The consciousness of our nothingness as instruments keeps us in constant dependence on the hand which makes use of us, and this is the pathway of power. It was thus at Jericho, but the people had yet to learn that

without dependence they became the prey of Satan. In closing the description of the armour, the apostle adds, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching "hereunto with all perseverance." (Eph. 6: 18) Prayer is the expression of dependence; continual, persevering prayer is the expression of habitual dependence. Now the Israelites' chief fault, in Joshua 9, was, "that they asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord." (v. 14) We saw, at the close of the preceding chapter, that the word of God had recovered its importance for them; but here they forget to go to God, so as to have communion with Him as to His mind for them.

Notice how Satan succeeds in making them lose the sense of dependence. He intimidates them by something calculated to strike terror into their hearts; the hatred of the world, a confederation of kings assembled for war. (vs. 1, 2) He begins by engaging their attention with this formidable power prepared to crush them, and then, without losing a moment, he offers them his resource: the inhabitants of Gibeon come to the camp at Gilgal. Israel was not prepared for this, they had not on the whole armour of God. The leaders of the people failed in detecting what seems to have occurred to the minds of the simple — for a moment, at least; and it is often so; humility and a single eye go together, and are accompanied by true and divine intelligence. "Make ye a league with us," said the Gibeonites. What a good opportunity for Israel! "The enemy is before you," whispered Satan; "this would be a splendid way of overcoming him."

These men came, with all sorts of good intentions, seeking an alliance with the people of God, and openly acknowledging their moral and spiritual supremacy. "We are thy servants," they said to Joshua (v. 8), words well calculated to influence him in their favour. Finally, they proclaim the power and fame of Israel's God, and what He had done in Egypt and the wilderness, though, it is true, they do not say a word about Canaan; Satan would betray himself by chancing to speak of heavenly places and their conflicts.

The character of the Gibeonites, and their religious convictions, are very strongly marked, but they are Canaanites in disguise, the world under an external form of piety — the religious world. Up to this Israel had been kept from seeking human aid, but it was hard to resist those who professed to have the same object, and the same aspirations. Is it not a legitimate thing to form an alliance? We own Jehovah, as you do, and, in case of need, we could co-operate with you as your servants.

Ah! how little the children of Israel suspected at this moment that the Gibeonites were those very Canaanites whom they were commanded to

drive out from the land of promise. They are caught in the enemy's net, having neglected to take counsel of the Lord, and, as a sign of fellowship, they take of the victuals of these men. The treaty is concluded; the world is introduced into the midst of the congregation of Israel. What a diabolical artifice! Satan suggests to the people the introduction of the world into the camp, as a method of conquering the enemy, thus offering himself as a means of overcoming himself. He knew well that the moment he had succeeded in bringing in this element, the way would be paved for everything else.

Do not these things remind us of the church's history? The hearts of the Lord's people had begun to be corrupted as early as the days of the apostles, by the outward attractions of a religion suited to the earth and the world, which was creeping in everywhere, and which obscured the heavenly position, its interests and hopes, beguiling souls into an alliance with the world which had crucified Christ. Satan gained his end. He set up his throne in the midst of the church, and the apostle was obliged at length to say, "among you, where Satan dwelleth." (Rev. 2: 13) Henceforth, alas! it is no longer a question merely of conflict with enemies outside, but of standing against the power of evil in the church.

But the grace of God is with Israel, and although this chapter gives us the entrance of evil into the congregation, we do not find its development. God delivers us from certain consequences of our sin, and allows others to remain. The people of God had to undergo the mournful experience of keeping the Gibeonites in their midst, as a lasting witness to their failure. Having begun by murmuring against the princes, the children of Israel are brought eventually to a truer sense of their duty. There was but one thing to do, namely, to bear with the Gibeonites in their midst, whilst keeping them in the place of the curse. "Now, therefore, ye are cursed," said Joshua unto them. (v. 23) Israel could only view them as an accursed race. The judgment of the king of Ai was pronounced, not executed, upon them, and in the meantime their safety lay in the name of Jehovah. Israel could not touch them; they must bear their humiliation, and avoid henceforth having any fellowship with those whom they left under the weight of the divine curse.

We, too, in the church have to undergo the consequences of our unfaithfulness, and to be humbled on account of the evil which has crept into the house of God. But, whilst truly alive to this our shame, we shall yet, if faithful, be able to distinguish between what is of God, and what merely bears His name outwardly. The word discerns and reveals to us the mixture, and faith leaves the religious world under the curse, at the same time acting in grace towards it.

In 2 Samuel 21 we find another chapter of the history of the Gibeonites; and here we clearly see that God's purpose was in nowise to remove them from the place which they had usurped in the congregation of Israel. Saul, animated by ardent zeal for the congregation, but in nowise for God, being completely ignorant of His mind, had exterminated them. Years pass, and suddenly we find a famine breaking out in Israel. David seeks the face of the Lord, and inquires into the cause of this calamity; and the Lord answers: "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites." The flesh, which has brought in the evil, is eager, above everything, to get rid of it. The way of God is quite otherwise: His children must feel the evil, and it is thus that their communion with Him shows itself in an evil day. In Ezekiel 9: 4, the Lord tells the angel to set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh, and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst of Jerusalem. Those who felt the evil were expressly sheltered from the destructor.

Beloved brethren, principles such as these should guide us in these closing days. It is not for us to take the sword, and cut off the evil, but to groan and sigh, saying, "The evil is mine." We cannot purify the place; it only remains for us to humble ourselves, and, at the same time, purge ourselves from vessels to dishonour. This is what a worldly Christian never learns; he is not humbled by the presence of the world in the church; he defends it, and deems it an impossibility to distinguish between the Gibeonites and the children of Israel. Far from pronouncing them accursed, or robbing them of any part of the blessed liberty of the children of God, or declaring them strangers to His people (cf. Deut. 29: 11), he would be tempted rather to become their servant, and to cut wood for the house of their god.

The seven sons of Saul were hung, and became accursed, on account of this bloody deed of slaying the Gibeonites, which was a pretence at purifying the congregation. How many similar cases the history of the church affords. The extermination of heretics, real or supposed, was no other than the crime of Saul, and will be reckoned to its perpetrators.

May God give us a spirit of constant dependence upon Him, that so we may be enabled to resist the snares of the devil. This chapter gives us only one of his wiles, but, if alive to the danger, we shall discover that his design in every artifice is to turn away our gaze from heavenly things, and so to lower our Christianity, that it should be nothing more than what the world can share in with us.