

August 8

Scriptures: Read Joshua 7

Key Verse: “There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you.” (Joshua 7:13)

Overview

This story is the main tragedy and the only military defeat in the book of Joshua. Ai was a small-fortified city that had strategic importance, since it guarded the pass leading from Gilgal to the center of the country. It was necessary for Israel to take it before they could move onward. After the miraculous crossing of the Jordan and the defeat of Jericho, Israel would have been confident and encouraged, their defeat, however, must have come as a tremendous shock. Israel did not lose because of weakness or a wrong report from the spies, but as the Lord explained, they lost the battle because of sin in their camp.

With that shameful defeat, “the hearts of the people melted” (v.5), not because of fear, as was the case with the people of Jericho (2:11), but because it appeared that the presence of the Lord, upon which they had relied, was no longer with them, and that was devastating. Joshua expressed his distress and humiliation by tearing his clothes and putting dust on his head. He turned to the Lord for help and the answer. He feared God had forsaken them and that the Canaanites would now gain fresh hope and join forces to attack Israel. Most of all, like Moses, he was concerned about God’s honor which was at stake in the eyes of the inhabitants of the land (v.9; cf.Num.14:13).

The Lord’s response to Joshua, as well as to any believer who experiences defeat, was that he should get up, stop lamenting, and get working. God wanted to see Israel restored to the proper relationship with Him, but sin in the camp was preventing it. Sin cannot be covered up; sooner or later it will be exposed and it must be dealt with (Ps.69:5; Mark 4:21-23). The sin of even one man can have an adverse affect on many others (22:20). If Israel did not act quickly and do something about it, God said: “Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you” (v.12). Moses had repeatedly stressed that the whole congregation of Israel was responsible to put away the evil from among them or else God would not work through them as a unified body. The same is true within the body of believers today.

Joshua was to order all the people to sanctify themselves in preparation for God’s presence among them. God will never work in unclean vessels; they must first be purged of sin. When Israel was thus prepared, God’s guidance caused the culprit, Achan, to be found out. It may have been by some kind of lot or by the mysterious Urim and Thummim that the high priest wore upon his breastplate (cf.Num.21). Achan knew full well that to take from Jericho any spoil that was devoted to the Lord was an awful crime. When he confessed his sin he said, “I saw”, “I coveted”, and “I took” (v.21). This typical three-step pathway to sin, however, does not stop there. The fourth step is always the involvement of others who are made to suffer. In Achan’s case, it involved the whole nation upon which he had brought collective guilt; and not only was Achan put to death, but so were his family and thirty-six soldiers.

All Israel acted quickly to execute God's judgment upon the violator of the covenant and his household. Surely, his family knew of the trespass, for they lived in the same tent under which the stolen items had been buried; yet they remained silent. As the head and example for his family, Achan involved his whole household in his guilt and punishment. They were stoned and then burned to purge the camp. A pile of stone was laid upon them that would serve as a warning to others of the consequences of breaking God's covenant. In this valley of Achor (meaning "trouble"; 6:18; 7:25; 1 Chron.2:7), at the point of shame and defeat, Israel was obedient to God in putting the evil away from them; therefore, God opened the door of hope (see Hos.2:15), and this opened the way for the return of God's blessing and their continued success in possessing the land.

Prayer

Lord, we know that there are times when we need to get off our knees deliberate and drastic action to get rid of sin in our lives. Help us to flee even the appearance of evil, O holy God.