

CHAPTER 8

The embarrassment which Achan's sin gave to the affairs of Israel being over, we have them here in a very good posture again, the affairs both of war and religion. Here is,

I. The glorious progress of their arms in the taking of Ai, before which they had lately suffered disgrace.

- 1.** God encourages Joshua to attack it, with the assurance of success, and directs him what method to take (v. 1, 2).
- 2.** Joshua gives orders accordingly to the men of war (v. 3-8).
- 3.** The stratagem is managed as it was projected, and succeeds as it was desired (v. 9-22).
- 4.** Joshua becomes master of this city, puts all the inhabitants to the sword, burns it, hangs the king, but gives the plunder to the soldiers (v. 23-29).

II. The great solemnity of writing and reading the law before a general assembly of all Israel, drawn up for that purpose upon the two mountains of Gerizim and Ebal, according to an order which Moses had received from the Lord, and delivered to them (v. 30-35). Thus did they take their work before them, and make the business of their religion to keep pace with their secular business.

~~OF~~ JOSHUA 8:1-2

THE DESTRUCTION OF AI

Israel were very happy in having such a commander as Joshua, but Joshua was more happy in having such a director as God himself; when any difficulty occurred, he needed not to call a council of war who had *God so nigh unto him*, not only to answer, but even to anticipate, his enquiries. It should seem, Joshua was now at a stand, had scarcely recovered the discomposure he was put into by the trouble Achan gave them, and could not think, without fear and trembling, of pushing forward, lest there should be in the camp another Achan; then God spoke to him, either by vision, as before (Joshua 5), or by the breastplate of judgment. Note, When we have faithfully put away sin, that accursed thing, which *separates between us*

and God, then, and not till then, we may expect to hear from God to our comfort; and God's directing us how to go on in our Christian work and warfare is a good evidence of his being reconciled to us. Observe here,

I. The encouragement God gives to Joshua to proceed: *Fear not, neither be thou dismayed*, v. 1. This intimates that the sin of Achan, and the consequences of it, had been a very great discouragement to Joshua, and made his heart almost ready to fail. Corruptions within the church weaken the hands, and damp the spirits, of her guides and helpers, more than oppositions from without; treacherous Israelites are to be dreaded more than malicious Canaanites. But God bids Joshua not be dismayed; the same power that keeps Israel from being ruined by their enemies shall keep them from ruining themselves. To animate him,

1. He assures him of success against Ai, tells him it is all his own; but he must take it as god's gift: *I have given it into thy hands*, which secured him both title and possession, and obliged him to give God the glory of both, ^{<194B>}Psalm 44:3.

2. He allows the people to take the spoil to themselves. Here the spoil was not consecrated to God as that of Jericho, and therefore there was no danger of the people's committing such a trespass as they had committed there. Observe, How Achan who caught at forbidden spoil lost that, and life, and all, but the rest of the people who had conscientiously refrained from the accursed thing were quickly recompensed for their obedience with the spoil of Ai. the way to have the comfort of what God allows us is to forbear what he forbids us. No man shall lose by his self-denial; let God have his dues first, and then all will be clean to us and sure, ^{<1173>}1 Kings 17:13. God did not bring them to these *goodly cities*, and *houses filled with all good things*, to tantalize them with the sight of that which they might not touch; but, having received the first-fruits from Jericho, the spoil of Ai, and of all the cities which thenceforward came into their hands, they might take for a prey to themselves.

II. The direction he gives him in attacking Ai. It must not be such a work of time as the taking of Jericho was; this would have prolonged the war too much. Those that had patiently waited seven days for Jericho shall have Ai given them in one day. Nor was it, as that, to be taken by miracle, and purely by the act of God, but now their own conduct and courage must be

exercised; having seen God work for them, they must now bestir themselves. God directs him,

1. to take all the people, that they might all be spectators of the action and sharers in the spoil. Hereby God gave him a tacit rebuke for sending so small a detachment against Ai in the former attempt upon it, ~~(H74)~~Joshua 7:4.

2. To lay an ambush behind the city; this was a method which perhaps Joshua would not have thought of at this time, if God had not directed him to it; and though now we are not to expect direction, as here, by visions, voices, or oracles, yet, whenever those who are entrusted with public councils take prudent measures for the public good, it must be acknowledged that god puts it into their hears; he that teaches the husbandman discretion no doubt teaches statesman and general.

~~(H88)~~JOSHUA 8:3-22

THE DESTRUCTION OF AI

We have here an account of the taking of Ai by stratagem. The stratagem here used, we are sure, was lawful and good; God himself appointed it, and we have no reason to think but that the like is lawful and good in other wars. Here was no league broken, no treaty of peace, that the advantage was gained; no, these are sacred things, and not to be jested with, nor used to serve a turn; truth, when once it is plighted, becomes a debt even to the enemy. But in this stratagem here was no untruth told; nothing was concealed but their own counsels, which no enemy ever pretended a right to be entrusted with; nothing was dissembled, nothing counterfeited but a retreat, which was no natural or necessary indication at all of their inability to maintain their onset, or of any design not to renew it. The enemy ought to have been upon their guard, and to have kept within the defence of their own walls. Common prudence, had they been governed by it, would have directed them not to venture on the pursuit of an army which they saw was so far superior to them in numbers, and leave their city unguarded; but (*si populus vult decipi, decipiatur* — *if the people will be deceived, let them*) if the Canaanites will be so easily imposed upon, and in pursuit of God's Israel will break through all the laws of policy and good management, the Israelites are not at all to be blamed for taking advantage of their fury and thoughtlessness; nor is it any way inconsistent with the character God is

pleased to give of them, that they are *children that will not lie*. Now in the account here given of this matter,

I. There is some difficulty in adjusting the numbers that were employed to effect it. Mention is made (v. 3) of 30,000 that were *chosen and sent away by night*, to whom the charge was given to surprise the city as soon as ever they perceived it was evacuated, v. 4, 7, 8. And yet afterwards (v. 12) it is said, Joshua *took 5000 men and set them to lie in ambush* behind the city, and that *ambush entered the city, and set it on fire*, v. 19. Now,

1. Some think there were two parties sent out to lie in ambush, 30,000 first, and afterwards 5000 to guard the roads, and to intercept those that were first sent out; and that Joshua made his open attack upon the city with all the thousands of Israel. So the learned bishop Patrick, insisting upon God's command (v. 1) to take *all the people of war with him*. But,

2. Others think that all the people were taken only to encamp before the city, and that out of them Joshua chose out 30,000 men to be employed in the action, out of which he sent out 5000 to lie in ambush, which were as many as could be supposed to march *incognito* — *without being discovered* (more would have been seen, and thus the design would have been broken) and that then with the other 25,000 he made the open attack, as Masius thinks, or with the 30,000, which, as Calvin thinks, he kept entire for that purpose, having, besides them, sent out 5000 for an ambuscade. And those 5000 (they think) must be meant by those (v. 3) whom he *sent away by night*, with orders to lie in wait behind the city, though the particular number is not specified till v. 12. If we admit such a seeming disturbance in the order of the narrative (of which, perhaps, similar instances might be cited from the other scripture histories), it seems most probable that there was but one ambushment, which consisted only of 5000, enough for such a purpose.

II. Yet the principal parts of the story are plain enough, that a detachment being secretly marched behind the city, on the other side to that on which the main body of the army lay (the situation of the country, it is probable, favouring their concealment), Joshua, and the forces with him, faced the city; the garrison made a vigorous sally out upon them, whereupon they withdrew, gave ground, and retreated in some seeming disorder towards the wilderness, which being perceived by the men of Ai, they drew out all the force they had to pursue them. This gave a fair opportunity for those

that lay in ambush to make themselves masters of the city, whereof when they had given notice by a smoke to Joshua, he, with all his force, returned upon the pursuers, who now, when it was too late, were aware of the snare they were drawn into, and, their retreat being intercepted, they were every man of them cut off. The like artifice we find used, ^{<02180>}Judges 20:30, etc. Now in this story we may observe,

1. What a brave commander Joshua was. See,

(1.) His conduct and prudence. God gave him the hint (v. 2) that he should lay an ambush behind the city, but left him to himself to order the particulars, which he did admirably well. Doubtless *wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten mighty men*, ^{<2179>}Ecclesiastes 7:19.

(2.) His care and industry (v. 10): *He rose up early in the morning*, that he might lose no time, and to show how intent his mind was upon his business. Those that would maintain their spiritual conflicts must not love their ease.

(3.) His courage and resolution; though an army of Israelites had been repulsed before Ai, yet he resolves to lead them on in person the second time, v. 5. Being himself also an elder, he took the elders of Israel with him to make this attack upon the city (v. 10), as if he were going rather to sit in judgment upon them as criminals than to fight them as enemies.

(4.) His caution and consideration (v. 13): He *went that night into the midst of the valley*, to make the necessary dispositions for an attack, and to see that every thing was in good order. It is the pious conjecture of the learned bishop Patrick that he went into the valley alone, to pray to God for a blessing upon his enterprise, and he did not seek in vain.

(5.) His constancy and perseverance; when he had stretched out his spear towards the city (v. 18, a spear almost as fatal and formidable to the enemies of Israel as the rod of Moses was) he never drew back his hand till the work was done. His hands in fighting, like Moses's in interceding, were steady till the going down of the sun. Those that have stretched out their hands against their spiritual enemies must never draw them back. *Lastly*, What Joshua did in the stratagem is applicable to our Lord Jesus, of whom he was a type. Joshua conquered by yielding, as if he had himself been conquered; so our Lord Jesus, when he bowed his head and gave up the ghost, seemed as if death and triumphed over him, and as if he and all his

interests had been routed and ruined; but in his resurrection he rallied again and gave the powers of darkness a total defeat; he broke the serpent's head, by suffering him to bruise his heel. A glorious stratagem!

2. What an obedient people Israel was. What *Joshua commanded them to do, according to the commandment of the Lord* (v. 8), they did it without murmuring or disputing. Those that were sent to lie in ambush between Beth-el and Ai (two cities confederate against them) were in a post of danger, and had they been discovered might all have been cut off, and yet they ventured; and, when the body of the army retreated and fled, it was both disgraceful and perilous, and yet, in obedience to Joshua, they did it.

3. What an infatuated enemy the king of Ai was,

(1.) That he did not by his scouts discover those that lay in ambush behind the city, v. 14. Some observe it as a remarkable instance of the power of God in making men blind to their own interest, and the things that belong to their peace, that *he wist not that there were liars in wait against him*. Those are most in danger who are least aware that they are so.

(2.) That when Israel seemed to fly he drew out all his forces to pursue them, and left none to guard his city and to secure his retreat, v. 17. Thus the church's enemies often run themselves into destruction by their own fury and the violence of their rage against the Israel of God. Pharaoh plunged himself into the Red Sea by the eagerness with which he pursued Israel.

(3.) That from the killing of thirty-six men out of 3000, when Israel made the former attack upon his city, he should infer the total routing of so great an army as now he had to deal with (v. 6): *They flee before us as at the first*. See how the prosperity of fools destroys them and hardens them to their ruin. God had made use of the men of Ai as a scourge to chastise his people for meddling with the accursed thing, and this had puffed them up with a conceit that they must have the honour of delivering their country from these formidable invaders; but they were soon made to see their mistake, and that when the Israelites had reconciled themselves to their God they could have no power against them. God had made use of them only for the rebuking of Israel, with a purpose, when the correction was over, to throw the rod itself into the fire; *howbeit, they meant not so, but it was in their heart to destroy and cut off*, ²³⁰¹⁵ Isaiah 10:5-7.

4. What a complete victory Israel obtained over them by the favour and blessing of God. Each did his part: the divided forces of Israel, by signals agreed on, understood one another, and every thing succeeded according to the project; so that the men of Ai, even when they were most confident of victory, found themselves surrounded, so that they had neither spirit to resist nor room to fly, but were under a fatal necessity of yielding their lives to the destroyers. And now it is hard to say whether the shouts of the men of Israel, or the shrieks of the men of Ai, were the louder, but easy to imagine what terror and confusion they were filled with, when their highest assurances sunk so suddenly into the heaviest despair. Note, The triumphing of the wicked is short, ^{<8016>}Job 20:5. They are *exalted for a little while*, that their fall and ruin may be the sorer, ^{<8214>}Job 24:24. See how easily, how quickly, the scale turns against those that have not God on their side.

^{<1182>}JOSHUA 8:23-29

THE DESTRUCTION OF AI

We have here an account of the improvement which the Israelites made of their victory over Ai.

1. They put all to the sword, not only in the field, but in the city, man, woman, and child, none of them remained, v. 24. God, the righteous Judge, had passed this sentence upon them for their wickedness, so that the Israelites were only the ministers of his justice and the executioners of his doom. Once in this story, and but once, mention is made of the men of Beth-el, as confederates with the men of Ai, v. 17. Though they had a king of their own, and were not subjects to the king of Ai (for the king of Beth-el is reckoned among the thirty-one kings that Joshua destroyed, ^{<16216>}Joshua 12:16), yet Ai being a stronger place they threw themselves into that, for their own safety, and the strengthening of their neighbours' hands, and so (we may presume) were all cut off with them; thus that by which they hoped to prevent their own ruin hastened it. The whole number of the slain, it seems, was but 12,000, and inconsiderable body to make head against all the thousands of Israel; but those whom God will destroy he infatuates. Here it is said (v. 26) that *Joshua drew not his hand back wherewith he stretched out the spear* (v. 18) till the slaughter was

completed. Some think the spear he stretched out was not to slay the enemies, but to animate and encourage his own soldiers, some flag or ensign being hung out at the end of this spear; and they observe it as an instance of his self-denial that though the fire of courage wherewith his breast was filled would have pushed him forward, sword in hand, into the hottest of the action, yet, in obedience to God, he kept the inferior post of a standard-bearer, and did not quit it till the work was done. By the spear stretched out, he directed the people to expect their help from God, and to him to give the praise.

2. They plundered the city and took all the spoil to themselves, v. 27. Thus the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just; the spoil they brought out of Egypt, by borrowing of their neighbours, was much of it expended upon the tabernacle they had reared in the wilderness, for which they are now reimbursed with interest. The spoil here taken, it is probable, was all brought together, and distributed by Joshua in due proportions, as that of the Midianites was, ^{<46126>}Numbers 31:26, etc. It was not seized with irregularity or violence, for God is the God of order and equity, and not of confusion.

3. They laid the city in ashes, and left it to remain so, v. 28. Israel must yet dwell in tents, and therefore this city, as well as Jericho, must be burnt. And, though there was no curse entailed upon him that should rebuild it, yet, it seems, it was not rebuilt unless it be the same with Aijah, which we read of, long after, ^{<46131>}Nehemiah 11:31. Some think it was not rebuilt because Israel had received a defeat before it, the remembrance of which should be buried in the ruins of the city.

4. The king of Ai was taken prisoner and cut off, not by the sword of war as a soldier, but by the sword of justice as a malefactor. Joshua ordered him to be hanged, and his dead body thrown at the gate of his own city, *under a heap of stone*, v. 23, 29. Some particular reason, no doubt, there was for this severity against the king of Ai; it is likely he had been notoriously wicked and vile, and a blasphemer of the God of Israel, perhaps upon occasion of the repulse he had given to the forces of Israel in their first onset. Some observe that his dead body was thrown at the gate where he had been wont to sit in judgment that so much the greater contempt might thereby be poured upon the dignity he had been proud of, and he might be punished for the unrighteous decrees he had made in the

very place where he had made them. Thus the Lord is known by the judgments which he executes.

⌘ JOSHUA 8:30-35

SACRIFICE OFFERED ON MOUNT EBAL

This religious solemnity of which we have here an account comes in somewhat surprisingly in the midst of the history of the wars of Canaan. After the taking of Jericho and Ai, we should have expected that the next news would be of their taking possession of the country, the pushing on of their victories in other cities, and the carrying of the war into the bowels of the nation, now that they had made themselves masters of these frontier towns. But here a scene opens of quite another nature; the camp of Israel is drawn out into the field, not to engage the enemy, but to offer sacrifice, to hear the law read, and to say *Amen* to the blessings and the curses. Some think this was not done till after some of the following victories were obtained which were read of, Joshua 10 and 11. But it should seem by the maps that Shechem (near to which these two mountains Gerizim and Ebal were) was not so far off from Ai but that when they had taken that they might penetrate into the country as far as those two mountains, and therefore I would not willingly admit a transposition of the story; and the rather because, as it comes in here, it is a remarkable instance,

1. Of the zeal of Israel for the service of God and for his honour. Though never was war more honourable, more pleasant, or more gainful, nor ever was war more sure of victory, or more necessary to a settlement (for they had neither houses nor lands of their own till they had won them by the sword, no, not Joshua himself), yet all the business of the war shall stand still, while they make a long march to the place appointed, and there attend this solemnity. God appointed them to do this when they should have got over Jordan, and they did it as soon as possibly they could, though they might have had a colourable pretence to put it off. Note, We must not think to defer our covenanting with God till we are settled in the world, or must any business put us by from minding and pursuing the one thing needful. The way to prosper is to begin with God, ⌘ Matthew 6:33.

2. It is an instance of the care of God concerning his faithful servants and worshippers. Though they were in an enemy's country, as yet unconquered,

yet in the service of God they were safe, as Jacob when in this very country he was going to Beth-el to pay his vows: *the terror of God was upon the cities round about*, ^{<0138>}Genesis 35:5. Note, When we are in the way of duty God takes us under his special protection.

Twice Moses had given express orders for this solemnity; once ^{<0112>}Deuteronomy 11:29, 30, where he seems to have pointed to the very place where it was to be performed; and again ^{<0120>}Deuteronomy 27:2, etc. It was a federal transaction: the covenant was now renewed between God and Israel upon their taking possession of the land of promise, that they might be encouraged in the conquest of it, and might know upon what terms they held it, and come under fresh obligations to obedience. In token of the covenant,

I. They built an altar, and offered sacrifice to God (v. 30, 31), in token of their dedication of themselves to God, as living sacrifices to his honour, in and by a Mediator, who is the altar that sanctifies this gift. This altar was erected on Mount *Ebal*, the mount on which the curse was put (^{<0112>}Deuteronomy 11:29), to signify that there, where by the law we had reason to expect a curse, by Christ's sacrifice of himself for us and his mediation we have peace with God; he has redeemed us from the curse of the law by being made a *curse for us*, ^{<0113>}Galatians 3:13. Even where it was said, by the curse, *You are not my people*, there it is said, through Christ the altar, *You are the children of the living God*, ^{<0110>}Hosea 1:10. The curses pronounced on Mount Ebal would immediately have been executed if atonement had not been made by sacrifice. By the sacrifices offered on this altar they did likewise give God the glory of the victories they had already obtained, as ^{<0175>}Exodus 17:15. Now that they had had the comfort of them, in the spoils of Ai, it was fit that God should have the praise of them. And they also implored his favour for their future success; for supplications as well as thanksgivings were intended in their peace-offerings. The way to prosper in all that we put our hand to is to take God along with us, and in all our ways to acknowledge him by prayer, praise, and dependence. The altar they built was of rough unhewn stone, according to the law (^{<0225>}Exodus 20:25), for that which is most plain and natural, and least artful and affected, in the worship of God, he is best pleased with. Man's device can add no beauty to God's institutions.

II. They received the law from God; and this those must do that would find favour with him, and expect to have their offerings accepted; for, if we

turn away our ear from hearing the law, our prayers will be an abomination. When God took Israel into covenant he gave them his law, and they, in token of their consent to the covenant, subjected themselves to the law. Now here,

1. The law of the ten commandments was written upon stones in the presence of all Israel, as an abridgment of the whole, v. 32. This copy was not graven in the stone, as that which was reserved in the ark: That was to be done only by the finger of God; it is his prerogative to write the law in the heart. But the stones were plastered, and it was written upon the plaster, ^{<REV04>}Deuteronomy 27:4, 8. It was written, that all might see what it was that they consented to, and that it might be a standing remaining testimony to posterity of God's goodness in giving them such good laws, and a testimony against them if they were disobedient to them. It is a great mercy to any people to have the law of God in writing, and it is fit that the written law should be exposed to common view in a known tongue, that it may be seen and read of all men.

2. The blessings and the curses, the sanctions of the law, were publicly read, and the people (we may suppose), according to Moses's appointment, said *Amen* to them, v. 33, 34.

(1.) The auditory was very large.

[1.] The greatest prince was not excused. The elders, officers, and judges, are not above the cognizance of the law, but will come under the blessing or the curse, according as they are or are not obedient to it, and therefore they must be present to consent to the covenant and to go before the people therein.

[2.] The poorest stranger was not excluded. Here was a general naturalization of them: as well the stranger as he that was born among them was taken into covenant. This was an encouragement to proselytes, and a happy presage of the kindnesses intended for the poor Gentiles in the latter days.

(2.) The tribes were posted, as Moses directed, six towards Gerizim and six towards Ebal. And the ark in the midst of the valley was between them, for it was the *ark of the covenant*; and in it were shut up the close rolls of that law which was copied out and shown openly upon the stones. The covenant was commanded, and the command covenanted. the priests that

attended the ark, or some of the Levites that attended them, after the people had all taken their places, and silence was proclaimed, pronounced distinctly the blessings and the curses, as Moses had drawn them up, to which the tribes said *Amen*; and yet it is here only said that they should *bless the people*, for the blessing was that which was first and chiefly intended, and which God designed in giving the law. If they fell under the curse, that was their own fault. And it was really a blessing to the people that they had this matter laid so plainly before them, *life and death, good and evil; he had not dealt so with other nations*.

3. The law itself also containing the precepts and prohibitions was read (v. 35), it should seem by Joshua himself, who did not think it below him to be a reader in the congregation of the Lord. In conformity to this example, the solemn reading of the law, which was appointed once in seven years (~~Exod~~ Deuteronomy 31:10, 11), was performed by their king or chief magistrate. It is here intimated what a general publication of the law this was.

(1.) Every word was read; even the minutest precepts were not omitted, nor the most copious abridged; not one iota or tittle of the law shall pass away, and therefore none was, in reading, skipped over, under pretence of want of time, or that any part was needless or not proper to be read. It was not many weeks since Moses had preached the whole book of *Deuteronomy* to them, yet Joshua must now read it all over again; it is good to hear twice what God has spoken once (~~Exod~~ Psalm 62:11) and to review what had been delivered to us, or to have it repeated, that we may not let it slip.

(2.) Every Israelite was present, even *the women and the little ones* that all might know and do their duty. Note, Masters of families should bring their wives and children with them to the solemn assemblies for religious worship. All that are capable of learning must come to be *taught out of the law*. The strangers also attended with them; for wherever we are, though but as strangers, we should improve every opportunity of acquainting ourselves with God and his holy will.