**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOSHUA-009. ACHAN'S SIN, ISRAEL'S DEFEAT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel. 2. And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth-aven, on the east side of Beth-ei, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. 3. And they returned to Joshua, and 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. 4. So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. 5. And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the Irate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down; wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. 6. And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. 7. And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast Thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! 8. O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! 9. For the Canaanites, and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt Thou do unto Thy great name? 10. And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? 11. Israel hath sinned, and they have also trangressed 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. 12. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed; neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you."*

*Joshua 7:1-12*

This passage naturally parts itself into--1. The hidden sin (v. 1); 2. The repulse by which it is punished (vs. 2-5); 3. The prayer of remonstrance (vs. 6-9); and 4. The answer revealing the cause (vs. 10-12). We may briefly note the salient points in these four divisions, and then consider the general lessons of the whole.

**I.** Observe, then, that the sin is laid at the doors of the whole nation, while yet it was the secret act of one man. That Is a strange for in verse 1--the people did it; for Achan did it. Observe, too, with what bitter particularity his descent is counted back through three generations, as if to diffuse the shame and guilt over a wide area, and to blacken the ancestors of the culprit. Note also the description of the sin. Its details are not given, but its inmost nature is. The specification of the Babylonish garment, the shekels of silver, and the wedge of gold, is reserved for the sinner's own confession; but the blackness of the deed is set forth in its principle in verse 1. It was a breach of trust, for so the phrase committed a trespass might be rendered. The expression is frequent in the Pentateuch to describe Israel's treacherous departure from God, and has this full meaning here. The sphere in which Achan's treason was evidenced was in the devoted thing. The spoil of Jericho was set aside for Jehovah, and to appropriate any part of it was sacrilege. His sin, then, was double, being at once covetousness and robbing God. Achan, at the beginning of Israel's warfare for Canaan, and Ananias, at the beginning of the Church's conquest of the world, are brothers alike in guilt and in doom. Note the wide sweep of the anger of the Lord, involving in its range not only the one transgressor, but the whole people.

**II.** All unconscious of the sin, and flushed with victory, Joshua let no grass grow under his feet, but was prepared to push his advantage to the utmost with soldierly promptitude. The commander's faith and courage were contagious, and the spies came back from their perilous reconnaissance of Ai with the advice that a small detachment was enough for its reduction. They had not spied the mound in the middle of Achan's tent, or their note would have been changed. Three thousand, or three hundred, would have been enough, if God had been with them. The whole army would not have been enough since He was not. The site of Ai seems to have been satisfactorily identified on a small plateau among the intricate network of wild wadys and bare hills that rise behind Jericho. The valley to the north, the place where the ambush lay at the successful assault, and a great mound, still bearing the name Et Tel (the heap), are all there. The attacking force does not seem to have been commanded by Joshua. The ark stayed at Gilgal, The contempt for the resistance likely to be met makes the panic which ensued the more remarkable. What turned the hearts of the confident assailants to water? There was no serious fighting, or the slaughter would have been more than thirty-six. There went up ... about three thousand and they--did what? fought and conquered? Alas, no, but they fled before the men of Ai, rushing in wild terror down the steep pass which they had so confidently breasted in the morning, till the pursuers caught them up at some quarries, where, perhaps, the ground was difficult, and there slew the few who fell, while the remainder got away by swiftness of foot, and brought back their terror and their shame to the camp. As the disordered fugitives poured in, they infected the whole with their panic. Such unwieldy undisciplined hosts are peculiarly liable to such contagious terror, and we find many instances in Scripture and elsewhere of the utter disorganisation which ensues. The whole conquest hung in the balance. A little more and the army would be a mob; and the mob would break into twos and threes, which would get short shrift from the Amorites.

**Ill.** Mark, then, Joshua's action in the crisis. He does not try to encourage the people, but turns from them to God. The spectacle of the leader and the elders prone before the ark, with rent garments and dust-bestrewn hair, in sign of mourning, would not be likely to hearten the alarmed people; but the defeat had clearly shown that something had disturbed the relation to God, and the first necessity was to know what it was. Joshua's prayer is perplexed, and not free from a wistful, backward look, nor from regard to his own reputation; but the soul of it is an earnest desire to know the wherefore of this disaster. It traces the defeat to God, and means really, Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me. No doubt it runs perilously near to repeating the old complaints at Kadesh and elsewhere, which are almost verbally reproduced in its first words. But the same things said by different people are not the same; and Joshua's question is the voice of a faith struggling to find footing, and his backward look is not because he doubts God's power to help, or hankers after Egypt, but because he sees that, for some unknown reason, they have lost the divine protection. His reference to himself betrays the crushing weight of responsibility which he felt, and comes not from carefulness for his own good fame so much as from his dread of being unable to vindicate himself, if the people should turn on him as the author of their misfortunes. His fear of the news of the check at Ai emboldening not only the neighbouring Amorites (highlanders) of the western Palestine, but the remoter Canaanites (lowlanders) of the coast, to make a combined attack, and sweep Israel out of existence, was a perfectly reasonable forecast of what would follow. The naive simplicity of the appeal to God, What wilt Thou do for Thy great name? becomes the soldier, whose words went the shortest way to their aim, as his spear did. We cannot fancy this prayer coming from Moses; but, for all that, it has the ring of faith in it, and beneath its blunt, simple words throbs a true heart.

**IV.** The answer sounds strange at first. God almost rebukes him for praying. He gives Joshua back his own wherefore in the question that sounds so harsh, Wherefore art thou thus fallen upon thy face? but the harshness is only apparent, and serves to point the lesson that follows, that the cause of the disaster is with Israel, not with God, and that therefore the remedy is not in prayer, but in active steps to cast out the unclean thing. The prayer had asked two things,--the disclosure of the cause of God's having left them, and His return. The answer lays bare the cause, and therein shows the conditions of His return. Note the indignant accumulation of verbs in verse 11, describing the sin in all its aspects. The first three of the six point out its heinousness in reference to God, as sin, as a breach of covenant, and as an appropriation of what was specially His. The second three describe it in terms of ordinary morality, as theft, lying, and concealment; so many black sides has one sin when God's eye scrutinises it. Note, too, the attribution of the sin to the whole people, the emphatic reduplication of the shameful picture of their defeat, the singular transference to them of the properties of the devoted thing which Achan has taken, and the plain, stringent conditions of God's return. Joshua's prayer is answered. He knows now why little Ai has beaten them back. He asked, What shall I say? He has got something of grave import to say. So far this passage carries us, leaving the pitiful last hour of the wretched troubler of Israel untouched. What lessons are taught here?

First, God's soldiers must be pure. The conditions of God's help are the same to-day as when that panic-stricken crowd ignominiously fled down the rocky pass, foiled before an insignificant fortress, because sin clave to them, and God was gone from them. The age of miracles may have ceased, but the law of the divine intervention which governed the miracles has not ceased. It is true to-day, and will always be true, that the victories of the Church are won by its holiness far more than by any gifts or powers of mind, culture, wealth, eloquence, or the like. Its conquests are the conquests of an indwelling God, and He cannot share His temples with idols. When God is with us, Jericho is not too strong to be captured; when He is driven from us by our own sin, Ai is not too weak to defeat us. A shattered wall keeps us out, if we fight in our own strength. Fortifications that reach to heaven fall flat before us when God is at our side. If Christian effort seems ever fruitless, the first thing to do is to look for the Babylonish garment and the glittering shekels hidden in our tents. Nine times out of ten we shall find the cause in our own spiritual deficiencies. Our success depends on God's presence, and God's presence depends on our keeping His dwelling-place holy. When the Church is fair as the moon, reflecting in silvery whiteness the ardours of the sun which gives her all her light, and without such spots as dim the moon's brightness, she will be terrible as an army with banners. This page of Old Testament history has a living application to the many efforts and few victories of the churches of to-day, which seem scarce able to hold their own amid the natural increase of population in so-called Christian lands, and are so often apparently repulsed when they go up to attack the outlying heathenism.

His strength was as the strength of ten,

Because his heart was pure,

is true of the Christian soldier.

Again, we learn the power of one man to infect a whole community and to inflict disaster on it. One sick sheep taints a flock. The effects of the individual's sin are not confined to the doer. We have got a fine new modern word to express this solemn law, and we talk now of solidarity, which sounds very learned and advanced. But it means just what we see in this story; Achan was the sinner, all Israel suffered. We are knit together by a mystical but real bond, so that no man, be he good or bad, liveth to himself, and no man's sin terminates in himself. We see the working of that unity in families, communities, churches, nations. Men are not merely aggregated together like a pile of cannon balls, but are knit together like the myriad lives in a coral rock. Put a drop of poison anywhere, and it runs by a thousand branching veins through the mass, and tints and taints it all. No man can tell how far the blight of his secret sins may reach, nor how wide the blessing of his modest goodness may extend. We should seek to cultivate the sense of being members of a great whole, and to ponder our individual responsibility for the moral and religious health of the church, the city, the nation. We are not without danger from an exaggerated individualism, and we need to realise more constantly and strongly that we are but threads in a great network, endowed with mysterious vitality and power of transmitting electric impulses, both of good and evil.

Again, we have one more illustration in this story of the well-worn lesson,--never too threadbare to be repeated, until it is habitually realised,--that God's eye sees the hidden sins. Nobody saw Achan carry the spoil to his tent, or dig the hole to hide it. His friends walked across the floor without suspicion of what was beneath. No doubt, he held his place in his tribe as an honourable man, and his conscience traced no connection between that recently disturbed patch on the floor and the helter-skelter flight from Ai; but when the lot began to be cast, he would have his own thought, and when the tribe of Judah was taken, some creeping fear would begin to coil round his heart, which tightened its folds, and hissed more loudly, as each step in the lot brought discovery nearer home; and when, at last, his own name fell from the vase, how terribly the thought would glare in on him,--And God knew it all the while, and I fancied I had covered it all up so safely. It is an awful thing to hear the bloodhounds following up the scent which leads them straight to our lurking-place. God's judgments may be long in being put on our tracks, but, once loose, they are sure of scent, and cannot be baffled. It is an old, old thought, Thou God seest me; but kept well in mind, it would save from many a sin, and make sunshine in many a shady place.

Again, we have in Achan a lesson which the professing Christians of great commercial nations, like England, sorely need. I have already pointed out the singular parallel between him and Ananias and Sapphira. Covetousness was the sin of all three. It is the sin of the Church to-day. The whole atmosphere in which some of us live is charged with the subtle poison of it. Men are estimated by their wealth. The great aim of life is to get money, or to keep it, or to gain influence and notoriety by spending it. Did anybody ever hear of church discipline being exercised on men who committed Achan's sin? He was stoned to death, but we set our Achans in high places in the Church. Perhaps if we went and fell on our faces before the ark when we are beaten, we should be directed to some tent where a very influential member of Israel lived, and should find that to put an end to his ecclesiastical life had a wonderful effect in bringing back courage to the army, and leading to more unmingled dependence on God. Covetousness was stoned to death in Israel, and struck with sudden destruction in the Apostolic Church. It has been reserved for the modern Church to tolerate and almost to canonise it; and yet we wonder how it comes that we are so often foiled before some little Ai, and so seldom see any walls falling by our assault. Let us listen to that stern sentence, I will not be with you any more, except ye destroy the devoted thing from among you.