

Defeat at Ai

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the spiritual implications of Israel's defeat at Ai, emphasizing the importance of faith and the dangers of self-sufficiency in the Christian journey.

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10

Topics: "Reliance on God", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the spiritual implications of Israel's defeat at Ai in Joshua 7, emphasizing that this event signifies a regression in the spiritual journey of God's people. He highlights the importance of understanding our spiritual positions--being called out of Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, and entering the promised land--as they relate to God's dealings with us. The sermon stresses that spiritual warfare is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces, and that self-sufficiency can lead to defeat, as exemplified by Achan's sin. Sparks urges believers to recognize the need for reliance on God's strength and the importance of giving Him all the glory, warning against the dangers of pride and self-reliance. Ultimately, the lessons from Ai are crucial for understanding our spiritual growth and the nature of our battles.

Transcript

We are going at this time to be in the seventh chapter of the Book of Joshua, which chapter, as you will know, contains the story of Israel's defeat at Ai, but before we go on with that I want to refresh your memories with words from the Letter to the Ephesians:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (6:10-12).

We leave that there for a few minutes while we move toward this message in Joshua 7. I confess to you that I find this message perhaps the most difficult to explain. The story of Ai is quite a simple one, but to explain its spiritual meaning is not at all easy. All I can do is to set forth the principles that are here and leave the Lord to make you understand.

As we are coming to the close of these meditations, I think it is important that we should understand why they are written. They are not just for general Christian purposes, nor just to give Bible teaching. The

special purpose of these messages is to help Christians in relation to the full purpose of their calling. I underline and emphasize that word 'full'. The Lord's people are called in relation to the fullness of His purpose. We have been emphasizing the changes which take place in the position of the Lord's people and, not only in the position, but the changes in the Lord's people themselves. In the Old Testament we see this illustrated in the three different positions of the people of God.

Firstly, Israel's position in Egypt. The Lord has a people in this world. It is said in the New Testament that He visited the nations "to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). So in the nations there is a people known to God whom He is going to take out of the nations, just as He took Israel out from among the nations. The Lord has been doing this for the last two thousand years, and He is still doing it today. It may not be very long before He has completed that people. That is the first position.

The second position is that represented by Israel in the wilderness. There, by the power of God and the virtue of the blood of the lamb, they were taken out to be God's people. Their position was that of people redeemed unto God and separated from the world. That was a Divine step forward in the life of the people of God.

The third position is that represented by the people in the land of promise - and let me say at once that that does not represent our going to heaven after this life. So many of our hymns speak about Jordan as being between this life and the next. Of course, you will go on singing those hymns, all about when the time comes to pass over Jordan, but that is not the teaching of the Bible. Jordan is in the life of the Lord's people now, and the promised land is our life now with the Lord Jesus in heavenly places. It is the difference between the Letter to the Romans and the Letter to the Ephesians - but we are going to speak about that later on.

Well, here are three positions of the Lord's people, and they represent three different levels of spiritual life. The lowest level is in the world; the next level upward is in the wilderness; and the top level is in the land. The spiritual history of the Lord's people is one of going up.

Now note this other thing: the Lord deals with His people according to the position in which they are. If you are in Egypt, that is, in the world, all His dealings with you will be to get you out of Egypt. If your position is in the wilderness, that is, if you have come out to be the Lord's people, the precious Blood of the Lamb of the Passover having redeemed you from the world, the Lord will be dealing with you according to that position. There we have the whole history of the Lord's dealings with His people in the wilderness. He adjusted His dealings with them according to the position in which they were, but all His dealings with them were always with something in view. Of course, what I have just said wants a lot of time spent on it - all the way in which the Lord dealt with His people in that place between the world and the fullness of His purpose.

What I am saying is this: God deals with us according to the position in which we are spiritually, and I want you to notice that the more the people of God come toward His full purpose, the more exact He is. That is the message of Ai, but I must go back for the sake of the young Christians.

If we are only newly out of the world and have become the Lord's, He will deal with us according to that position. In a sense, He will come down to our position. He will be dealing with us as with children, and not as with full-grown men; and yet, a father always deals with his children with the idea of making them full-grown men or women. As we go on with the Lord, He will be dealing with us in different ways. He will be changing His ways with us. We shall find that things which we were once able to do, we are no longer

able to do. That is, the Lord once allowed us to do some things, but now He is not allowing us to do them. The situation is changing, and the methods of God with us are changing. We shall find, as we go on with the Lord, that He is disciplining us, and the discipline will be the greater difficulties which arise in the way.

When we first come to the Lord what a good time we have! Everything seems so wonderful and so good; but as we go on with the Lord, it is not that He becomes different. We had such a happy time in those early days, but now Father says: 'The time has come for you to go to school.' Perhaps we say: 'Oh, can I not stay at home from school?', and we get afraid of the prospect of school life. We know that we are going to have a Schoolmaster who will say: 'You have got to learn this lesson!' Our position is changed, and our experience is changed.

Now I wonder what you are going to say to this next thing! As you look back upon your school life, are you prepared to say: 'Well, this idea of education was a bad invention! The person who first thought of this school business ought to be put in prison!' Some of you may feel like that, but would it be a good thing for everyone in this world to be just an ignorant child? No, there is a real value about education. It may represent many difficulties, but on the whole we are glad we went to school. We had to find that our changed position needed a changed dealing with us, and in the end it works out for good.

When we come over Jordan into the land we find that we have come into an altogether new position, and it is a position where we have very largely graduated from school. That does not mean that we have ceased to learn. We have not finished schooling because we have graduated from school. All that has been only now serves the purpose of a new kind of education.

All that leads us up to Ai, and as we go on you will see the meaning of what I have been saying. I used to think that the story of Ai was of something not quite so big as anything else. Of course, the conquest of Jericho was a big thing, and from there you go on to Ai, which is not so big. You just read the story, and then you go on further. However, the more I have thought about Ai the more I have seen what a tremendous thing it is. You see, Ai stands for this: whether all that God means in the new position is going to be or not going to be. Ai therefore relates to the whole of this new position.

Everyone knows the difference between the Letters to the Romans and Corinthians and the Letter to the Ephesians! Romans and Corinthians have to do with beginnings and foundations, and with formation. They see the Lord's people in the position that Israel occupied in the wilderness, where they were being formed for the future. When you come to the Letter to the Ephesians, while you carry over the lessons of the past, you are in an altogether different realm. If you sit down and read the Letter to the Romans, then the Letter to the Corinthians, and then the Letter to the Ephesians, you would feel, as you read Ephesians, that you are breathing an altogether different atmosphere. Romans and Corinthians are like being down here on the earth, and Ephesians is like being in the heavenlies. Indeed, that is the word of Ephesians. This is a new position for the people of God. Here they are represented as having passed over Jordan. In Ephesians the people are represented as 'seated together with Christ in the heavenlies.' That is a spiritual and not a literal position. They are represented as walking here in a heavenly life, and most of all they are represented as being engaged in spiritual warfare. In Corinthians the people were wrestling with flesh and blood, and that is why the divisions at Corinth are referred to. One party was in opposition to the other party, and there was conflict between the different groups of the Lord's people. They were going to law against one another, and they were doing many other things that men on this earth and in this world do. That was an earthly Christianity, but when you get into the Letter to the Ephesians you have left all that, and Paul says: 'Here our wrestling is not with flesh and blood. It is not with men and women, nor in sects

and denominations, nor with the divisions and parties of the Lord's people. When we get into this position our wrestling is with principalities and powers, and with the world-rulers of this darkness' - and if you have the idea that that refers to Caesar, or the Caesars, the Apostle will correct you by saying: 'with hosts of wicked spirits.' That is the kind of warfare that we have when we move into this new position with the Lord. In the highest position of the spiritual life we come more intimately into touch with the evil spiritual forces.

Now, if that sounds very terrible, do not worry about it. There is no need for fear, because Jericho lies behind, and Jericho, as we have seen, is the type of the complete spiritual victory of the Lord Jesus over all the powers in the land. So complete was His victory that the people had to do nothing about it; all they needed was to have faith. And so it says: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down" (Hebrews 11:30). The mighty ark of the testimony of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ was triumphant at Jericho, and He who was represented by the ark triumphed over the whole range of Satan's power in His Cross. So we need not have any fear as to whether the enemy is going to triumph in the end, but we must realise that we are in a warfare, that we must be girded with 'the whole armour of God', and that we must be very watchful. This new realm, then, is one in which we enter a special kind of spiritual conflict.

Now let us come to Ai for our lessons. After the great victory at Jericho the people were completely defeated at Ai. I wish that all the details in the seventh chapter of Joshua were fresh in your minds! If you are not familiar with them, I advise you to read the chapter again, and then what I am saying will come back to you.

This that happened at Ai represented a retrogressive movement on the part of Israel. It is true that what happened was caused by one man only, and that man was Achan, but the Lord did not say: 'Achan has sinned.' He said: "Israel hath sinned" (verse 11). Achan's lesson was to be learned by all Israel - and all the people of God have to learn this lesson through Achan. Perhaps you say: 'Well, it is hardly fair that if one man sins all the people have to suffer', but that is not the situation. We shall see in a minute that all the people were involved in this. We have said that this was a movement of retrogression, going back, and it went back a very long way. It went back over the Jordan again, right back through the wilderness, right back through the four hundred years in Egypt - and right back to Adam.

Let us look at this seventh chapter of Joshua, and we hear Achan making his confession: "And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Of a truth I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: when I saw among the spoil a goodly Babylonish mantle, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them" (verses 20, 21). Can you hear something coming from the garden of Eden? 'I saw... I coveted... I took.' The Lord had said to Adam: "Thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Adam did eat, and said, in effect: 'I saw... I coveted... I took.' That is going back a long way! But where do you put the emphasis? 'I!' 'I saw... I coveted... I took.' The self-life has taken command, and where did that come from? Before ever Adam sinned another one had sinned, and that other one said: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; ...I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13,14). That was the very spirit and motive of Satan.

Well, poor Achan had become a victim of Satan, and will God allow that? You see, the very Jordan itself meant that these people were entirely separated from the self-life. The ark in the middle of Jordan represented a division between the self-life of the people and the Lord's life in them.

I have not the time to speak about the details - that is, as to the Babylonish garment and the silver. They represent a link with Satan's kingdom. But I would remind you of the gold: the Lord claimed it all. Just look at Joshua 6:18: "And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the devoted thing, lest when ye have devoted it, ye take of the devoted thing; so should ye make the camp of Israel accursed, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are holy unto the Lord." The gold represented the glory of God, and Achan, in type, took the glory from God to himself.

This is a very great lesson for the people of God. All the glory has to be the Lord's glory. Later on we shall be glorified together with Him, but now we are to suffer with Him, and the suffering is having no glory here in this world. But Achan took the glory to himself, and God says: "My glory will I not give to another" (Isaiah 42:8). In this realm of spiritual warfare Satan tries to take the glory to himself, so are you surprised that there is so much spiritual defeat amongst the Lord's people? They are always trying to give glory to man in their Christian work. If they are going to have some special meetings they will advertise the chairman as being some very great man - a General or a Field Marshal, or a 'Sir' or a 'Lord'. Organized Christianity rests upon this principle of giving glory to man, so you are not surprised that the Lord is so limited, and, as with Achan, death comes upon so much of our Christianity.

Go back to the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses says to the people: "Beware... lest when thou hast eaten and art full... and when thy herds and thy flocks multiply... thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth" (8:11-13,17). When the spies which Joshua sent from Jericho to Ai came back, they said: 'The men of Ai are but few. It is not necessary for all our men of war to go up against them. Just let two or three thousand go up and smite them.'

Do you see what has happened? 'We can do it!' Here is self-sufficiency! And the men of Ai came out against them and there was a great slaughter amongst Israel that day. The whole thing was arrested. It was a retrogressive movement, back to self-sufficiency.

We cannot treat this enemy with contempt. A very few evil spirits will be more than enough for our strength, and that is why I underlined those first words in Ephesians 6:10: "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might." We shall be easily defeated in this heavenly warfare unless our faith is in the Lord.

I have not mentioned the place of the ark in Ai, but it was the ark that decided this whole issue. Do you not agree with me that Ai is a very big issue? All the past leads up to Ai, and all the future depends upon Ai - that is, upon whether we learn the lessons of Ai.

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