

## MAN'S MAJOR PROBLEM

"Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against tomorrow: for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you" (Joshua 7:13).

The defeat of the Israelites at Ai is not the story of the superior strength of the enemy. It is the story of Israel's inner collapse. On that occasion Israel's trouble was not the Canaanites. Israel's trouble was Israel. Something had happened inside Israel which sapped her strength and took away her fighting morale. This was the truth which God revealed to Joshua, and which he in turn announced to the nation. When Joshua was wondering how disaster could possibly have befallen the forces of Israel, God said: "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed 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" (Joshua 7:11).

Here is what had happened:

Through Joshua God ordered the legions of Israel to destroy utterly all the inhabitants of the accursed city, one family along excepted, to prove that in the midst of wrath God will remember mercy to His faithful servants. Only Rahab, the one who had concealed the spies of Israel, and her household were to be permitted to survive the catastrophe. God told them to destroy utterly every living creature, to refrain from taking any spoil in the accursed city, to destroy everything, and to bring to the treasury of the Lord all the silver and the gold, and the vessels of brass and iron. One reason why God did this was because He knew that nothing demoralizes an army like sacking a fallen city. So far as we know, there was no thought on the part of anybody of disobeying God's command when it was issued. When God's order was executed the walls of Jericho fell to the earth with a mighty crash and a terrible scene of carnage followed.

### 1. The fascination.

"I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight." When Achan saw these things -- the silver, the gold and the garment -- they were extremely fascinating to him. He was fascinated with their desirability, their variety, and their abundance. When Achan's eyes lingered on that beautiful and splendid garment, which likely was a royal robe that had been worn by a prince or a king, he was greatly impressed and fascinated by it. Contemplating the fact that it might soon be committed to the flames, his first thought was along the line of what a pity that so valuable a thing should be destroyed and not be a benefit to somebody.

### 2. The feeling.

Having gazed upon these things, Achan said, "Then I coveted them." He paused to gaze upon the beauty of that Babylonian garment. Had he turned his eyes away from that forbidden splendor, he would have avoided the temptation to desire to possess it. According to the ideas of some today, Achan was right in his desire to possess it, even though God had forbidden him to have it, inasmuch as he did not wrong or injure anybody by taking and appropriating it since its owner was dead. They would contend that he did not defraud God, since this garment was something that was to be burned instead of being dedicated to Him.

It is interesting to note the similarity between the sin of Eve and that of Achan. At the beginning Eve's trouble was in her eyes. She said, "When I saw the tree." When she saw the tree, Eve's fancy, aided by the suggestions and lies of Satan, clothed it with strange attractiveness and irresistible charms. In telling how she was carried away by it, Eve said it was invigorating -- "good for food"; attractive -- "pleasant to the eyes"; and instructive -- "to make one wise." As in the case of Eve and of Achan, in his first approaches Satan always comes under the guise of something fascinating, like pleasure or profit.

### 3. The felony.

Achan tampered with that which was unlawful and remarked, "I saw." He deliberately entertained unlawful desires, and then confessed, "I coveted." When his desire arose to the point of influencing the will, Achan seized the articles which he had been forbidden to take. He described his satisfaction of his unlawful desires by saying, "I took." There were three steps in his felony: first, the look -- "I saw"; second, the lust -- "I coveted"; and third, the larceny -- "I took." It was an unlawful thing for him to continue looking; it was a greater evil for him to desire to take; then, mastered by the desire to possess, he committed a still greater sin when he stretched forth his hand and took that which he had been forbidden to take. His crime was that of theft for he took that which was not his own. He took something which he did not have any right to possess. His act was deliberate and inexcusable.

### 4. The fear.

Upon leaving the silent and ruined city of Jericho, Achan returned to the camp of Israel. Fearing that somebody might discover his crime, he entered his tent and hid the silver, the wedge of gold, and the Babylonian garment which he had stolen, thinking that no eye had yet seen what he had done. In that thought Achan was sadly mistaken, for God had seen and known it all -- his glance, his greed, and his gathering. Nothing that anybody does ever escapes the all-seeing eye of God.

### 5. The fate.

Early the next morning three thousand picked soldiers, chosen from all the tribes, obeyed the voice of the trumpets, fell in line and marched out against the stronghold of Ai, which was the next fortress in the path of Israel. After the easy victory over mighty Jericho, the capture of Ai was a foregone conclusion.

In taking Jericho they had depended entirely on God and as a result they had enjoyed a tremendous victory. When they approached the lesser Ai they had come to have a lot of confidence in their own strength. Leaving God out of their calculations, and with Ai only a very small city in comparison with Jericho, they concluded that it would be quite unnecessary for the whole Army to attack it. Since it was such an insignificant city, they decided to send only three thousand men to take Ai.

That decision was based on the assumption that they had captured and destroyed Jericho. Actually, all that they had done was to walk around the walls and shout. It was God Who had taken the city. The silence which reigned over the ruins of the city of Jericho was not a testimony to the strength of the people of God, but was due to the power of God Himself. There is no experience in Christian living so full of danger as that of victory. We so easily imagine that because we have achieved victory once that God has imparted to us some new strength which will see us through all of our earthly journey.

When Joshua heard of the humiliating defeat of the Israelites of Ai he "rent his clothes." At that time he knew nothing of the sin of Achan, for that crime had been concealed stealthily, but the tragedy of a defeated nation smote his heart. Joshua fell on his face before God, filled with dismay.

Joshua had counted on an unbroken series of victories in the land. He felt sure that they would not suffer another defeat. Now that they had been defeated at Ai, it seemed to Joshua that either God had deserted them or He was unable to cope with the powerful enemy in the land of Canaan.

To Joshua it appeared that Israel was in desperate peril. Since she had only established a bridgehead in the land, Joshua wondered if his people might not be flung right back into the Jordan River. Even worse, thought he, what discredit would attach to the name of the Lord if that should happen! Joshua cried, "O Lord, what wilt thou do unto thy great name?" His chief concern was not that Israel had been defeated, but that the name of Jehovah had been dishonored.

The Israelites suffered humiliating defeat at Ai, and it seemed to Joshua that either God had deserted them or He was unable to cope with the powerful enemy. Joshua's chief concern was not that Israel had been defeated, but that the name of Jehovah had been dishonored.

Achan said: "When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it" (Joshua 7:21).

Until this sin was confessed and punished, Jehovah's blessing the nation was an impossibility. In Joshua 7:13 we read: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you."

Not until Joshua spoke pointedly to Achan and commanded him to confess his sin unto God was he willing to admit his wrong. In brief Achan confessed "I saw. I coveted. I took."

Now this was not the last time a nation defeated herself. When Generals Petain and Giraud explained the collapse of France in World War II, they did not point to the superior military power of Germany, even though that was a reality, but they pointed to the interior breakdown of France. They said that France had defeated herself through indolence, indifference, and intemperance. She worshiped pleasure, and scorned sacrifice.

In a feature article in Life magazine, General Giraud contended that indolence was responsible for France's humiliating debacle. He said: "Shortage of equipment, unfilled orders, airplanes that never materialized, obsolete tanks, munitions that never arrived -- all this was the result of work inadequate in quantity and quality. The ruin which the Popular Front caused France is immeasurable, but its greatest responsibility was to reach the people of France laziness, under the grandiose name of Leisure."

And the following United Press dispatch from Vichy, France, issued in that fateful August, tells how alcoholism contributed to the nation's collapse: "The council of ministers tonight approved a decree establishing partial prohibition throughout France

to end what was called 'a disastrous era of alcoholism among French soldiers' that left them unfit to face the German blitzkrieg. For eight months during the 'phony war' when there was virtually no action on the western front, the French troops drank tremendous quantities of alcohol, spokesman said, and military authorities blame the widespread intoxication for much of the moral collapse of the soldiers. The drinking produced nervous disorders and shell shock when the French soldiers finally came up against the Nazi mechanized forces."

I need to stop right here and point out an important lesson for America. We cannot be inwardly weak and outwardly strong at the same time. We have only ourselves to fear. If our nation is ever destroyed, it will not be due to outward circumstances or enemies, but to inward anemia. As Dr. John A. Hutton reminded his fellow Britishers in the dark days of 1941, "No nation dies that is fit to live."

But I go on to make this matter more personal. What was true of Israel as a nation is true of you and me as individuals. Man's chief problem is himself. We go down in defeat, not because circumstances and outward pressures are too much for us, but because we, as individuals, are not right within. If you will forgive the play on words, it is not Ai; it is just I. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said:

"Not in the clamor of the crowded street,  
Not in the shouts and plaudits of the throng,  
But in ourselves, are triumph and defeat."

We are always quick to blame somebody else. We always have a convenient explanation -- a flock of scapegoats at hand. For our failures we blame heredity, environment, circumstances, handicaps, social pressure, or fate. Like some golfers, we blame everything but ourselves. It is the clubs, the turf, the greens, or that pesky tree. Instead of saying, I am a poor golfer, one says that the course is rotten.

But a man's major problem is himself. The wisest of men have always recognized this truth. Shakespeare, who was truly a great student of life, had Cassius to say: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

When a person is wrong on the inside, nothing much is right on the outside. Haven't you noticed that? These critical, fault-finding, cantankerous people who are always striking out at somebody or something are only advertising an inward disharmony. During the Civil War a young man visiting a hospital in Washington, where his brother lay wounded, came out of his brother's room in a hurry and ran straight into President Lincoln. Not recognizing the President, he said bitterly, "Can't you get out of the way of a young gentleman?" Quietly, and without disclosing his identity, Mr. Lincoln replied: "Young man, what's troubling you on the inside?"

Many of the things we find wrong with other people and with circumstances are nothing more than the projections of our own inner problems and stresses. We cannot adjust ourselves to people and to environment because we cannot live peaceably with ourselves. Many years ago Emerson put into his daily journal the following note: "Henry Thoreau made last night the fine remark that as long as a man stands in his own way, everything seems to be in his way -- government, society, and even the sun, moon, and stars."

If you only had the courage to face yourself, to seek the root of your trouble on the inside, where it is, instead of forever looking around for someone else to blame, you might get somewhere. This, of course, requires courage, and is bound to hurt your ego, but if you go on as you are going now, unwilling to put yourself on the carpet, you will go on being miserable and defeated, and preventing the happiness of others.

There is no point in blaming something or somebody else when all the while you are to blame. Such procedure is futile. Consider the possibility, and probability, that you are the real culprit. Many would take a long step toward personal recovery if they only had the courage to look into a mirror and say, "Thou art the man!" But so many have never even surmised that the trouble lies within. They are like the farmer in Maine, who was laboriously driving his team of horses along a dusty road. He asked a man by the roadside, "How much longer does this hill last?" "Hill!" was the answer, "Hill nothing! Your hind wheels are off."

It may be that your real problem is not that handicap, or that job, or that social practice, or that marriage partner. Maybe your real problem is you. Dr. Paul Scherer said: "The decisive element in a given situation is never anything inside the facts: it is always something inside the people who handle the facts." Improving your environment or situation will not make but little difference, if any, if you cannot improve yourself. Running from job to job, and from wife to wife, and from preacher to preacher, will not help when the major problem in any situation is in yourself. What possible good will it do to run away from certain people and certain situations and certain obligations when all the while the real cause of your unhappiness is within? The net result of that kind of treatment is a new weariness and a deeper despair. D. H. Lawrence said of one of his characters, "Poor Richard Lovatt wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself, and calling it Australia."

One reason why Christianity has been such a course of healing across the centuries is because it drums into men's ears the truth that they are their chief problem. Its supreme interest, therefore, is the state of a man's inner life. Christianity does not deal with outside situations, but goes straight to the inner life, and deals with the real problem. Dr. J. A. Hadfield, the famous psychologist, said: "Our primary task is not to fit a man to face his environment, but to fit him to face himself. A man cannot meet the onslaughts of the outside world successfully unless he has first established harmony within his own soul. Only when he has settled the conflicts within himself is he ready to face his environment."

Christianity helps defeated people in three ways. First, it absolves the sense of guilt that makes for inner disharmony and unhappiness. Some are nervous and tense and upset because they are sheltering some secret sin. They are disagreeable and contentious because of hidden guilt. No rearrangement of outward circumstances can help a man with a guilty conscience. Until that guilt has been confessed and pardoned, he will remain irritable and "out of sorts" with everybody and everything. Do not expect peace of mind until your sins have been forgiven.

Second, Christianity turns a man around and sends him in the right direction. Maybe your trouble is that you are moving against the universe, instead of with it. Instead of shouting at life to turn around, maybe you need to face the other way. Billy Sunday once gave his hearers this excellent advice: "If people rub you the wrong way, turn the cat around."

Third, Christianity builds up in Christians a moral and spiritual resistance against wrong. God has not promised to relieve the social pressure, but He does promise an inner moral courage to match the pressure. Fish can live at great depths in the ocean in spite of the terrific pressure against their little bodies. Why? Because they are inwardly adjusted to it. Nature has provided them with an inner resistance so that they do not even feel the weight of the ocean. Now God stands ready to do

that for the Christians who must live where great pressure is brought to bear upon them to do wrong. Christ can cleanse, inspire, and fortify Christians so that they can stand up against any combination of circumstances.

As a minister of Christ, I cannot offer you an easy life, or a set of ideal circumstances in which to live and do your work. But I can offer you the redeeming and fortifying presence of Christ, which is something that is far better.