

THE SOLE OF YOUR FOOT, NOT OF YOUR SHOE

“Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister saying, Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses” [Josh. 1:1-3]

“And the captain of the Lord’s host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so” [Josh. 5:15].

*In one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays, **Merchant of Venice**, a Jewish banker, Shylock, lent money to a rich young merchant on the condition that, if he could not pay back at the stipulated time, Shylock could cut off a ‘pound of flesh’ from any part of the merchant’s body. Unfortunately, there was a storm and the merchant’s ships were delayed and he could not repay the loan on schedule. The matter came before the courts and Shylock, who was quite envious of the young man’s success, insisted on his pound of flesh close to the merchant’s heart. They begged him to no avail. Finally, the merchant’s lawyer (actually his wife disguised as a man because in those days women were barred from practice!) received an inspiration. She agreed that Shylock was entitled to his ‘pound of flesh,’ no more, no less! If he shed the merchant’s blood, trouble! Shylock found himself in a tight corner and asked for his money (the ships had safely anchored during the trial). It was too late. Instead, Shylock was put on trial for attempted murder!*

*In **Joshua 1:3** God promised Joshua and the people he was leading into the Promised Land, “**every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you.**” Is “the sole of your foot” analogous to Shylock’s “pound of flesh” or is there much more to it? Is God referring to a bare foot or a foot with a shoe on it? Twice in the Bible, there is a record of Moses [**Ex. 3:5**] and Joshua [**Josh. 5:14-15**] being commanded to remove their shoes from off their feet because they were standing on holy ground. Even where the children of Israel wore shoes during their 40-year ordeal in the wilderness, it was recorded as a miracle in that the shoes grew along with their feet (for the young ones) and never waxed old (on all of them) [**Deut. 29:5**].*

*One thing is sure: **shoes are not part of the body but the foot is!** Therefore, a bare foot is different from a covered one. What is the spiritual significance of this difference? That is what we hope to explore in today’s lesson.*

1. The shoe on the foot

For the purpose of today's lesson, we shall call any footwear a shoe. Of course, we know that there is a wide variety of footwear, such as sandals, slippers, and even socks. They are worn on the feet [1 Kgs 2:5] and may be used for a variety of reasons, such as the following:

(a) As protection

Shoes help to protect the foot against the heat (such as hot sands on the beach or in the desert), thorns in the forests, hard surfaces, etc. The children of Israel experienced every kind of natural hardship on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Lord gave them shoes that were "not waxen old upon thy foot" [Deut. 29:5], and their shoes were like "iron and brass, and as thy days, so shall thy strength be" [Deut. 33:25]. They were in the wilderness for 40 years!

Much as shoes can protect the feet from hazards, they can also mask reality. For example, a leader who wears shoes cannot fully appreciate what his/her bare-footed subjects are suffering. To demonstrate to the people of Israel the futility of their reliance on the military might of Egypt and Ethiopia against Assyrian invasion, God asked Isaiah to "go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so walking naked and barefoot. And the Lord said, like as My servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian prisoners, and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot" [Is. 20:2-4].

(b) As adornment or for special occasions

Shoes complete the adornment of the body for daily chores or for dress occasions. Some of us, especially the women, have shoes to match every occasion, if not every dress! Solomon told his loved one, "how beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter!" [Song of Solomon 7:1]. When the Prodigal Son returned home, his father instructed his servants to "bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet" [Lk 15:22].

Adorning of the feet, like that of the rest of the body, amounts to what Peter has called "outward adorning" whereas God prefers "the hidden man of the heart" and the "ornament of a meek and humble spirit which is in the sight of God of great price" [1 Pet. 3:3-4].

(c) Figurative of preparation for service

Shoes are a very important part of the kitting of soldiers for battle. In the famous illustration of believers putting on the armour of God, Paul enjoins that we should have the "feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace" [Eph. 6:15].

Isaiah says, “how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!” [Is. 52:7]. As part of God’s instructions to Moses on the Passover, He said, “and thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste; it is the Lord’s Passover” [Ex. 12:11]. Most of the journeys by Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry, and those by His disciples and early missionaries were by foot. Shoes were most useful for those journeys. We earlier referred to the Israelites’ journey for 40 years through the wilderness, wearing the same shoes that they had worn when they left Egypt [Deut. 29:5].

However, some of us let shoes carry our feet to a different kind of service, namely, “to run to evil and make haste to shed blood” [Prov. 1:16; Is. 59:7], or “be swift in running to mischief” [Prov. 6:18].

2. Occasion when shoes may not be worn

By the demands of modern living, shoes are indispensable, unless we have no feet. However, shoes do get dirty and old. For example, when the Gibeonites came to deceive Joshua that they had come from afar, they wore “old shoes (which) clouted upon their feet” and they said, “our shoes are old by reason of the very long journey” [Josh. 9:5,13]. In such cases, we can clean them or buy new ones. Nonetheless, shoes may be removed from the feet under the following circumstances:

a) For traditional or significant purpose

There may be occasions when we may pull off a good shoe for a significant purpose. For example, among the Jews under the Law of Moses, a man who was qualified to marry the widow of a dead brother or kinsman could renounce his claim by pulling his shoe and giving it to the next of kin who was ready to redeem it. When a near kinsman of Elimelech refused to marry Ruth, Naomi’s daughter-in-law, he pulled off his shoe and gave it to Boaz who was willing to marry her [Ruth 4:1-10].

We may lose another person’s shoe as an act of homage. For example, in comparing himself with Jesus, John the Baptist said, “I indeed baptize you with water, but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” [Lk 3: 16].

b) In an emergency

When there is a fire alarm or any other threat to life and property, we may not have the time to wear shoes before we jump to safety. When David was running for safety from Absalom, his favourite son who had rebelled against him, “David went up by the ascent of mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot” [2 Sam. 15:30].

c) When God demands it

When God specifically requires it, we have no choice but to obey. We have mentioned the case where Isaiah was required to go barefoot for three years when God wanted to demonstrate to the people of Israel that the military might of Egypt and Ethiopia would not be able to deliver them from the king of Assyria [**Is. 5:27**]. However, there are two situations that we need to discuss in more detail, the cases of Moses and Joshua.

3. **“Put off thy shoes from off thy feet”**

(a) *Moses in the burning bush*

Moses was tending his father-in-law, Jethro’s flock when he saw a flame of fire on mount Horeb. What attracted his attention was that “the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” [**Ex. 3:2**]. As he moved nearer to see “this great sight,” God called his name twice and Moses replied, “here am I” [**v. 4**]. Then, as he moved closer to the fire, God said, “draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” [**v. 5**].

The next time that Moses returned to this mount in the Sinai, he had led the people of Israel out of Egypt and brought them to the foot of the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Even for the people who would not come up to the “holy ground,” God sent the following message through Moses, “go unto the people, and sanctify [set apart] them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, and be ready against the third day; for the third day, the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai” [**Ex. 19:10-11**].

On the third day, the presence of God was felt through the ‘thunders and lightnings,’ and “mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire.. and the whole mount quaked greatly” [**vv 16-18**]. The people out of curiosity surged forward to behold this rare event, but God warned Moses, “go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish” [**v. 21**]. As the Lord thundered out the Ten Commandments to Moses, the people who were at the foot of the mountain were so scared that they begged Moses, “speak thou with us, and we will hear but let not God speak with us, lest we die” [**Ex. 20:19**]. In deed, the presence of the Lord is awesome. Bodily adornment must give way to the “hidden man of the heart” [**1 Pet. 3:3-4**], circumcision of the flesh, to that of the heart [**Rom. 2:28-29**], and a spiritual being does not need shoes!

(b) *Joshua prepares for the battle of Jericho*

In confirming Joshua’s leadership after the death of Moses, God promised him that He was going to be with him and that he should “be strong and of a good

courage,” and that “every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that I have already given unto you” [Josh. 1:1-6]. However, he should never allow the “book of the law’ to depart from his mouth or his heart if he wanted his victory and success to be fully and continuously assured.

The capture of Jericho, a highly fortified city, was going to be a major test of God’s promise. After Joshua and the people that he was leading had crossed the Jordan River and come close to the city of Jericho, two significant things happened:

- i. All the people who had survived the wilderness experience were circumcised, and God told Joshua, “this day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you” [Josh. 5:2-9].
- ii. Manna from heaven ceased to fall the day after they had eaten of the corn of the Promised Land [v.12].

Then, just as they were close to Jericho, Joshua saw a huge man carrying a drawn sword. He identified himself as the “captain of the host of the Lord,” that is, a chief of the angels of God. As Joshua fell on his face to pay him homage, “the captain of the Lord’s host said unto Joshua, loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so” [Josh. 5; 13-15]. Thereafter, Joshua received God’s instruction on how to take the city: the people were to march round the city once everyday for six days; on the seventh day, they were to go round Jericho seven times. Thereafter, they were to shout and the city would fall [Josh. 6:1-5]. I doubt if that task was done on padded shoes!

In the book, *Angels on Assignment*,¹ Charles Hunter has recounted his encounter some years ago with the captain of the host of the Lord who led the angels in that battle. This chief angel told him that, as Joshua and his men marched round the thick wall, the angels stood on top. Some angels were sent to protect the harlot, Rahab, and her family, as promised her by the two Israelite spies that she had earlier helped [Josh. 2:12-21]. On the seventh day, as soon as the trumpets sounded, the captain of the host commanded the angels to press down on the wall, which sank until it was level with the ground. Here is the bible’s description of it, “it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him” [Josh. 6:20]. That confirms what Charles Hunter was told. It also suggests that the battle of Jericho was fought on bare feet!

4. Lessons: Believers are always on Holy Ground!

Those two cases suggest that true believers are always on holy ground. Therefore, they should walk with the soles of their feet, not of their shoes. That becomes clearer from the following Biblical truths:

¹ Charles Hunter, Frances Hunter & Roland Buck. The 200pp paperback edition [February 2000] is available online from www.amazon.com at US\$9.59 per copy

a) *The church as the temple of God*

After Solomon had dedicated the temple that he had built in Jerusalem, God appeared to him at night and told him (among other things), “now have I chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there *for ever*; and My eyes and Mine heart shall be there *perpetually*” [2 Chron. 7:16]. Surely, “the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him” [Habakkuk 2:20]. The Psalmist adds, “blessed are they that dwell in Thy house: they will be still praising Thee” [Ps. 84:4].

When children go to school for the first time, they may be illiterate or ignorant. Over time, however, the knowledge that is resident in the school (teachers, libraries, classrooms, etc.) begins to take residence in the children’s heads. Now, they can carry it in their bodies anywhere they go and use the book learning when the need arises. Similarly, as we go to the temple of God to pray, learn and hear His word, etc., we gradually become the temples of the living God, “as God hath saith, I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” [2 Cor. 6:16].

The body of believers then becomes the church, which is the body of Christ [1 Cor. 12:27]. In that case, we become different parts of the same body, and “if the foot shall say, because I am not the hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body?” [vv. 14-15]. Certainly, the foot of the body of Christ does not need a shoe!

b) *The Great Commission*

“The righteous (i.e., the people of faith) shall inherit the land and dwell therein forever” [Ps. 37:29]. Jesus has, therefore, commissioned us to go to all the nations of the world and make believers of their peoples [Matt. 28:19]. To underline the urgency and hardness of the task, He enjoined His disciples to “provide neither gold nor silver nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats nor shoes” [Matt. 10:9-10]. It won’t be a Vanity Fair!

5. Conclusion

God means it literally when He says “the sole of your foot.” The cross of Christ was bare wood. He did not wear shoes on the road to Calvary. Therefore, if we are to carry the cross and follow Him, we must be ready to walk barefoot. This is characterised by persecution, suffering and self-denial, everyday, everywhere for the rest of our lives [2 Cor. 11:16-33]. We shall walk barefoot because “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh; for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” [2 Cor. 10:3-4]. The walk will not be user-friendly but God-fearing.