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UNANTICIPATED DEFEAT AS A WAKE-UP CALL

Today's text: Joshua, Chs. 7-8; 1 Cor. 10: 1-12

Extracts:

1. **“And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bethaven, on the east side of Bethel, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. 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. So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men; and they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men; they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water” [Josh. 7: 2-5].**
2. **“Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” [1 Cor. 10: 11-12].**

Before the 2002 FIFA World Cup, jointly hosted by Japan and South Korea, France was the hot favourite to retain the world football (soccer) trophy, which it had won when it hosted the tournament in 1998. France was also the reigning European Cup champion, having won the 2000 tournament. Also, some of the current best players in the world were on the French team that had consistently been rated the Number One team in the world in the last few years. The question was never if France would reach the final but which team it was going to beat to retain the cup. However, at the opening game against a little known African team, Senegal, France was beaten 1-0! The French team crashed out of the preliminary stage without scoring a single goal! It was big news because it was an unanticipated defeat.

How often have you found yourself in such a situation? A sure appointment or promotion fizzles out in the last minute. A blissful courtship unexpectedly breaks up when everybody is expecting wedding bells. Your result is a failing grade in the final stage of school or certification examination when you are already preparing for the graduation ceremony. The property deal for your church expansion does not materialize even when prophecy has assured you of God's promise of success. The blow can be quite devastating. Why does this kind of thing happen and how can we deal with it? In today's lesson, we shall use the story of Joshua's unexpected defeat at Ai to study the subject.

1. After Jericho, Ai was supposed to be a walkover!

Joshua's victory in Jericho was still the front-page news in the local and international news media of those days. How could those impregnable walls have collapsed without superior weapons of war? Every nation and city became afraid and very scared. The question on every lip was "when will they come here?" To fight against them was out of the question!

The next place to take was Ai, a tiny city close to Jericho. As in the past, Joshua sent spies to go and study Ai for purposes of planning his military strategy. They came back to report as follows:

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 [Josh. 7:3].

Certainly, Ai was going to be a walkover and nothing to worry about. However, when Joshua's men attacked, they were routed by the 'tiny' men of Ai who killed 36 of Joshua's men and sent the rest retreating in fear and shame [vv. 5-6]. Do you know the impact of such defeat on the morale of Joshua's troops and the faith of the people of Israel? Can you imagine the screaming headlines in the local and international news media when they reported this event? That was why Joshua fell on his face and asked God, "O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies!" [v. 8]

In a similar setting, we would not act differently. Think of a barren woman who had been married for ten years without a child. Then, one day, a prophet tells her that God has heard her prayer and that she is going to have a baby boy who will grow up to become a famous man of God. The boy is in deed born and the woman rejoices. Then, just a few years later, she hears a loud cry outside that her child of promise and her drunken husband have been killed in a car accident. Certainly, the first thought that would strike her heart would be, "What of God's promise for my son?" Compare that with what the Shunammite woman asked the prophet Elisha after her son had died of sunstroke [2 Kgs 4: 8-37].

She and her family had always provided accommodation and provisions for Elisha and his servant, Gehazi, each time they passed through Shunem. In appreciation, Elisha prophesied, "About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son." In deed, she conceived and bore a son within the time spoken of by the man of God [vv. 15-16]. After the child had grown, he went to work in his father's farm where he suffered sunstroke. The servants rushed him into the house where he died in the arms of his mother. She did not cry. She simply laid the dead child on the prophet's bed upstairs and went looking for him.

When she had met Elisha, she asked bluntly, “Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, do not deceive me?” [vv. 18-28] In other words, she was asking the man of God, “Did you lie to me about God’s promise?” So, in most cases, such an unexpected defeat can have a devastating effect on our faith in God. We become afraid of everything. For the people of Israel, “the hearts of the people melted and became as water” [Josh. 7:5]!

2. What are the causes of unanticipated defeat?

If something is not supposed to happen and yet it happens, then, something must be responsible for it. Among others, here are some obvious causes:

a) *Overconfidence*

One of our major weaknesses is that we tend to underrate our enemies or opponents when we are winning. We begin to behave like the ostrich, which buries its head in the sand and boasts, “nobody can see me now!” After their great victory in Jericho, the children of Israel underrated the people of Ai. The spies came back to report that they did not need a large army to win. They recommended sending two to three thousand men! They were roundly defeated [Josh. 7: 4]. To make this more vivid, compare that number with the number that they later sent after God had shown them what to do. God told Joshua to “take all the people of war with thee.” Joshua took 30,000! At the end of the second battle, the army of Israel killed 12,000 of the army of Ai [Josh. 8: 1-3, 25]. Therefore, Joshua had underrated the strength of Ai by sending 3,000 men against 12,000.

Another way that we exhibit overconfidence is pride, which prevents us from seeing the strengths in others that we can depend upon or learn from. The Pharisees “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” In a parable, Jesus demonstrated their arrogance by showing how the Pharisees pray to God: “God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” [Lk 18: 9-13]. That kind of attitude leads to unanticipated defeat because “everyone that exalted himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” [v. 14].

Compare that with what David did when he went looking for the Amalekites who had raided his camp in Ziklag in his absence and taken away his wives and children and those of his men. God had assured him that he would recover everything but did not tell him how to go about it. On the way, they came across a dying Egyptian who had been abandoned in the field. Most of us would be too much in a hurry to notice such a lowly person. However, humble David came down from his high horse

and nursed the Egyptian to full health with food, drink and care. In the end, it was that young man who showed David and his men where to find the Amalekites [**1 Sam. 30: 1-15**].

b) *Presumption*

Presumption means speaking or acting without divine authority or warrant. When you take steps which God has not ordered, pretending that you are acting in faith, you could be predisposing yourself for unanticipated defeat. We saw that in the earlier battle against Jericho, it was God who prescribed even how the battle should be fought and won [**Josh. 6:1-5**]. In the case of Ai, however, Joshua acted on the recommendation of the spies without returning to God for a fresh mandate [**Josh. 7: 2-4**]. Compare that with what happened later when they were preparing for the second battle. Apart from telling them the number of men to take, God also told Joshua how to ambush the men of Ai, what to kill and what to spare [**Josh. 8: 1-3**]. Presumption led to defeat, faith led to victory.

What this suggests is that we must *continually* (i.e., repeatedly) go back to God to renew His mandate. A good case in point was a request to David by the people of Keilah to help them to fight against the Philistines [**1 Sam. 23: 1-12**]. On receiving the message, David asked God before discussing the matter with his men. God told him to go. When he then consulted his men, they expressed fear, since they were running away from Saul and it was not safe for David to come into the open. David went back to the Lord who reconfirmed to go. David went and won. Then, somebody sneaked away to tell Saul that his enemy was in Keilah, a walled city. If David were like us, he would not go back to God for more guidance. Instead, he would hold on to the promise that “no weapons fashioned against me shall prosper!” David asked God what to do next and He told him to run! We should walk by faith, not by presumption.

c) *Complacency*

Some how, after a major victory, we all tend to have both physical and mental fatigue. We want to take some rest to celebrate past or recent triumphs, and what a dangerous thing to do! Joshua asked God after the defeat in Ai, “would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan!” [**Josh. 7:11**]. Actually, their behaviour suggested contentment and dwelling in the euphoria of Jericho!

David had lived in the wilderness from his teenage years until he was crowned king of Israel at the age of 30 [**2 Sam. 5:19**]. In the excitement of his new position, he was found in Jerusalem at the time that kings went out to battle. In fact, he began to sleep during the day! It was when he woke up at evening time from one of such siestas and strolling on the roof

of his palace that he saw Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, washing herself. That was how the man after God's own heart fell to the temptation of adultery and murder, an unanticipated defeat in deed! [2 Sam. 11: 1-18] That is why we are warned: "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" [1 Cor. 10: 12].

d) *Sin*

Sin is a major cause of unanticipated defeat. As we saw in an earlier lesson, obedience is the fine print of blessings [Vol. 3, No. 35: 15 December 2002]. For *every promise* that God makes to us, there is a price that we must pay, the price of obedience. When God promised Joshua and the people of Israel, "every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that I have given unto you, as I said unto Moses" [Josh. 1: 3], the fine print, however, was that they had to observe all that was written in the "book of the law" for therein lay their prosperity and good success [v. 8].

Of the city of Jericho, God had warned Joshua that, with the exception of Rahab and her family, everything there was "accursed" and should not be touched or brought to the camp of Israel. However, the silver and gold and vessels of brass and iron were to be consecrated and deposited into the Lord's treasury [Josh. 6: 17-19]. But what happened? A young man called Achan of the tribe of Judah cornered some money and other valuable items and hid them in his tent [Josh. 7:20-21]. That was what polluted the whole camp of Israel and the defeat at Ai was a direct consequence of that sin [vv. 10-12]. When we face an unanticipated defeat, we should immediately look out because there might be sin in the congregation or us.

3. The wake-up call

God does not enjoy it when believers predispose themselves to unanticipated defeat. As Joshua and the elders of Israel lay before the ark of God in rags and tears for a whole day, God said to Joshua, "Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?" [Josh. 7: 10]. In other words, "you are embarrassing Me!" When David committed adultery and murder, God did not hesitate to remind him "by this deed thou hast given *great occasion* to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" [2 Sam. 12: 14]. Therefore, whenever we find ourselves in a situation of unanticipated defeat, it is a wake-up call that something has gone wrong in our relationship with God. We should take immediate steps to restore our standing with Him as follows:

a) *Repent and seek the Lord's face*

As soon as the defeat occurred, Joshua "rent his clothes, and fell before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads" [Josh. 7: 6]. They asked for forgiveness and prayed

for direction. It was thereafter that the Lord revealed to them that there was sin in the camp, the sin of disobedience [vv. 10-15]. The Lord is merciful. If we confess our sins, He will forgive us [1 Jn 1: 9].

b) *Return to the right path*

Joshua did not hesitate to deal with the error. He assembled the people and by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, he identified the culprit and burnt him, his family and property *in accordance with God's command* [Josh. 7: 16-26]. Thereafter, God gave Joshua specific instructions on how to capture Ai. They followed them and they won quite easily. It is not enough to ask for forgiveness when we are not ready to do restitution. We must return to the point from which we have strayed, and God is there waiting for us [Is. 30:21].

c) *Don't forget to thank God for restoring you!*

Joshua built an altar in mount Ebal and offered *burnt and peace offerings* to God "as it is written in the book of the law of Moses" [Josh. 8:30-31]. It is a privilege for God to forgive us after we have embarrassed Him with an unanticipated defeat. Therefore, we need to thank and praise Him after we have been restored. Offer Him something of value to you, not just merely going to church to clap and sing!

d) *Renew your covenant*

The defeat at Ai was a close shave and not something Joshua wanted to ever experience again. So, in the presence of the elders, officers and judges, Joshua wrote upon the stones a copy of the Law of Moses, and read all its contents before the congregation of Israel, including the women, children and strangers [Josh. 8: 32-35]. In like manner, we should renew our covenant of obedience and service to God and practise it *all the time* so as to make our way prosperous and successful.

As long as Satan and his agents are around us, there will be temptation and we could fall. However, what is important is to get up *immediately we fall* so that we do not give our enemies the opportunity to turn God's promises for us into curses. May God's will for our lives be done!