

- *What perils and evils in the world are to be fought because they stand in the way of the Gospel? What can you or should you do to fight them, and how will you go about this?*
- *Pray for all those who are engaged in fighting injustice and wrongdoing within either church or society; pray that they will be able to keep the channels of communication to the Lord clear and open. Pray unreservedly for their success.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God, when we are faint-hearted, lift us up. Lift up our hearts so that we may perceive Your will, lift up our minds so that we may understand Your Word, lift up our strength so that we may be courageous in deed, and lift up our voices so that we may praise Your Name. Lift us up forever, almighty God: ALLELUIA!

Prayer

Your grace, Lord Jesus, is beyond our understanding; for by grace You touch the lives of vast numbers of people. You offer them love, healing, help, salvation and the hope of eternal life; and by Your grace, You offer all these things freely. May we who feel Your touch respond positively to what You so generously give, and may we be content to trust Your gracious promises and make them ours. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christian Service

Pray today that the Lord will send His Spirit on the church and challenge His people to new forms of service and ministry to bring the Gospel to our hurting world today.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the oceans, and those who work to protect them*
- *Give thanks to God for the clothes you wear*
- *Pray for those who provide security for politicians at events*

Meditation

(A reflection on Isaiah 40:12-23)

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?

A craftsman who works with exquisite beauty and skill ...
 A parent who rears a child with great care and tender love ...
 An engineer who knows the finest details of how things work ...
 A young person full of potential, energy and drive ...
 A great leader who has the humility to love and serve ...
 A child who challenges us with truth and perception ...
 A professional who knows their business inside out ...
 A farmer who gives all to the work that must be done ...

To whom can you compare the Lord Your God?

Have you not heard? Have you not known?

He was there at the beginning, and He is greater than all things;

You can find Him everywhere, and in everything He has made.

Bible Study - Joshua 8:10-23

¹⁰ Joshua got up early the next morning rallied the people, and he and the elders of Israel marched up to Ai in the sight of the people. ¹¹ All the troops marched up with him, and approached the front of the city. They set up camp north of Ai, with a ravine between them and the city. ¹² Joshua took about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. ¹³ So they stationed the soldiers, with the main encampment to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it; but Joshua spent that night in the valley. ¹⁴ When the King of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the men of the city, hurried out in the early morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah, not knowing that an ambush was set against him behind the city. ¹⁵ Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before

them, and fled towards the desert,¹⁶ so all the people in the city were summoned to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were lured away from the city.¹⁷ There was not a man left in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel; they left the city open and pursued Israel.

¹⁸ Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Hold out the javelin in your hand towards Ai, for I will deliver it into your hand.' So Joshua held out his javelin towards Ai.¹⁹ As soon as he held out his hand, the troops in ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city, captured it and immediately set it on fire.²⁰ So when the men of Ai looked back, the smoke of the city was rising against the sky, but they had no chance to escape in this way or that, because the Israelites fleeing towards the desert now turned back against their pursuers.²¹ When Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke from the city was rising, they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.²² The other Israelites came out of the city against them, so they were trapped, with Israelites on both sides. Israel struck them down, leaving none of them as survivors or fugitives;²³ But they took the King of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua.

Review

After the amazing success of the battle of Jericho, everyone thought that taking Ai would be easy, but Israel had been forced to learn some hard lessons. In taking the Promised Land, the people of Israel were not simply acquiring land. They were fulfilling God's plan for generations to come, and this required their loyalty and obedience. It was also a test of resolve, for after failure, they had to show they were worthy of the covenant inheritance the Lord had promised them. They had been carried away with success (at Jericho), and now assumed the Lord's blessing without consulting God, or attending to the details of their tasks. Today, the story of what happened at Ai warns all God's people that if they are to do His will, they must learn their lessons, and watch out for ever present dangers of sin. This reading today is not just about the successful capture of Ai; it tells us what happens when God's people return to Him and do His will. There is much to be found if we look beyond the awful nature of ancient warfare.

Battle tactics The sacking of Ai by ambush is clearly described. It was a well known military tactic even in Joshua's day, and there are records from before that time describing similar military actions. However, we may well miss some of the pertinent details. For example, Ai was close to Bethel (see verse 17), and the positioning of troops (8:10-17) had a purpose. If the known ruse of an ambush was going to work, the troops had to be well hidden from sight not merely from Ai, but also from Bethel. The two cities were closely connected and the men of Bethel came out to help as soon as the battle commenced (8:17). We will only fully appreciate the need for careful positioning if we have a knowledge of the lie of the land. Note that the whole account is littered with references to what could be seen by whom and when; the strategy was more complex than we realise by skimming through the text! Joshua's plan was to occupy the whole of Canaan, not just one city, and Bethel was 'next' on the list for occupation.

Keeping the rules of engagement Everything went to plan, and we are left in no doubt that the proper chain of command was re-established. God was the Commander in Chief, Joshua was the officer in charge, and the people did what they were told with discipline. The battle was won with a small number, as originally thought; but this time, the small number of troops did what the Commander in Chief commanded. The result was that as victory was achieved, the spiritual rules of engagement (God's 'cherem', identifying what

should be destroyed) were obeyed. The verification of this was provided by the sign of smoke that rose from the city; described here in words identical to the burning of a sacrificial offering (8:21).

Godly leadership One of the most important features of the battle was the renewed leadership of Joshua. In the first battle for Ai (7:1-5) he was nowhere to be seen until the battle was lost. Here, he ensured everyone saw him leading the elders of Israel up to Ai (8:10), commanding the troops (8:11,12,13 etc.) and spending the night alone to prepare for battle (8:13), perhaps identifying the site for the battle (the 'certain place' of verse 14). Most dramatically, Joshua reminded the Israelites of the authority of its great leaders, by raising his javelin towards Ai as a signal to the ambush, and as a sign of the Lord's spiritual power and authority over the whole battle. Years before, Moses had held his staff high over the Red Sea as the people of Israel crossed (Ex 14:16), and Joshua had held Moses' hand high over the Amalekites (Ex 17:9f.) as the people of Israel fought their first ever battle. It was dramatic, but true drama is more powerful than mere signs. The consequence of Joshua's raised javelin was the capture of the city; it indicated both the success of God's plan and the faithful obedience of God's people.

The path of Christian discipleship is like a battle, and this story indicates the nature of spiritual battle against the enemies of the Lord who stand in His way. Faith without obedience is useless; action without leadership does not work; God's instructions require us to use knowledge, information and intelligence; moreover, in battle, all of these and more are ignored at our peril. As Jesus Himself said;

'Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.' (Luke 14:31-33)

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the features of successful spiritual warfare that are demonstrated in this passage.
2. Why does Israel need a 'land' in which to live? Check out why this is part of the Covenant promise (Gen 13,15,17,22 etc.).
3. What makes the difference between obedience and disobedience in doing the things of God now (think carefully)?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is very easy to glamorise spiritual warfare and imagine that it is somehow exciting to fight the enemy and win battles against evil. This is to misunderstand the nature of evil and ignore the deadly consequences of what Satan does in the human soul. No one should imagine they are engaging in spiritual warfare if they do not know that they are embarking on a course of action that without total obedience, will lead to catastrophe. Satan does not treat this as an exercise, and His purpose is to make us fail and draw us away from the Lord, whatever good reason we may have to fight Him in the first place. The words of Jesus are pertinent; 'count the cost'.

Ideas for discipleship programme