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Introduction

The Lord encourages Joshua, and promises to deliver Ai into his hands, and instructs him how he is to proceed against it, Joshua 8:1, Joshua 8:2. Joshua takes thirty thousand of his best troops, and gives them instructions concerning his intention of taking Ai by stratagem, Joshua 8:3-8. The men dispose themselves according to these directions, Joshua 8:9-13. The king of Ai attacks the Israelites, who, feigning to be beaten, fly before him, in consequence of which all the troops of Ai issue out, and pursue the Israelites, Joshua 8:14-17. Joshua, at the command of God, stretches out his spear towards Ai, and then five thousand men that he had placed in ambush in the valley rise up, enter the city, and set it on fire, Joshua 8:18, Joshua 8:19. Then Joshua and his men turned against the men of Ai, and, at the same time, those who had taken the city sallied forth and attacked them in the rear; thus the men of Ai were defeated, their king taken prisoner, the city sacked, and twelve thousand persons slain, Joshua 8:20-26. The Israelites take the spoils, and hang the king of Ai, Joshua 8:27-29. Joshua builds an altar to God on Mount Ebal, and writes on it a copy of the law of Moses, Joshua 8:30-32. The elders, officers, and judges, stand on each side of the ark, one half over against Mount Gerizim, and the other against Mount Ebal, and read all the blessings and curses of the law, according to the command of Moses, Joshua 8:33-35.

Verse 1

Fear not - The iniquity being now purged away, because of which God had turned his hand against Israel, there was now no cause to dread any other disaster, and therefore Joshua is ordered to take courage.

Take all the people of war with thee - From the letter of this verse it appears that all that were capable of carrying arms were to march out of the camp on this occasion: thirty thousand chosen men formed an ambuscade in one place; five thousand he placed in another, who had all gained their positions in the night season: with the rest of the army he appeared the next morning before Ai, which the men of that city would naturally suppose were the whole of the Israelitish forces; and consequently be the more emboldened to come out and attack them. But some think that thirty thousand men were the whole that were employed on this occasion; five thousand of whom were placed as an ambuscade on the west side of the city between Beth-el and Ai, Joshua 8:12, and with the rest he appeared before the city in the morning. The king of Ai seeing but about twenty-five thousand coming against him, and being determined to defend his city and crown to the last extremity, though he had but twelve thousand persons in the whole city, Joshua 8:25, scarcely one half of whom we can suppose to be effective men, he was determined to risk a battle; and accordingly issued out, and was defeated by the stratagem mentioned in the preceding part of this chapter. Several eminent commentators are of opinion that the whole Israelitish force was employed on this occasion, because of what is said in the first verse; but this is not at all likely.

1.It appears that but thirty thousand were chosen out of the whole camp for this expedition, the rest being drawn up in readiness should their co-operation be necessary. See Joshua 8:3, Joshua 8:10.

2.That all the people were mustered in order to make this selection, Joshua 8:1.

3.That these thirty thousand were sent off by night, Joshua 8:3, Joshua himself continuing in the camp a part of that night, Joshua 8:9, with the design of putting himself at the head of the army next morning.

4.That of the thirty thousand men five thousand were directed to lie in ambush between Beth-el and Ai, on the west side of the city, Joshua 8:12; the twenty-five thousand having taken a position on the north side of the city, Joshua 8:11.

5.That the whole of the troops employed against Ai on this occasion were those on the north and west, Joshua 8:13, which we know from the preceding verses were composed of thirty thousand chosen men.

6.That Joshua went in the course of the night, probably before daybreak, into the valley between Beth-el and Ai, where the ambuscade of five thousand men was placed, Joshua 8:13, and gave them the proper directions how they were to proceed, and agreed on the sign he was to give them at the moment he wished them to act, see Joshua 8:18: and that, after having done so, he put himself at the head of the twenty-five thousand men on the north side of the city: for we find him among them when the men of Ai issued out, Joshua 8:15, though he was the night before in the valley on the west side, where the ambuscade lay, Joshua 8:13.

7.That as Ai was but a small city, containing only twelve thousand inhabitants, it would have been absurd to have employed an army of several hundred thousand men against them.

8.This is confirmed by the opinion of the spies, Joshua 7:3, who, from the smallness of the place, the fewness of its inhabitants, and the panic-struck state in which they found them, judged that three thousand troops would be quite sufficient to reduce the place.

9.That it appears this judgment was correctly enough formed, as the whole population of the place amounted only to twelve thousand persons, as we have already seen, Joshua 8:25.

10. That even a less force might have been sufficient for the reduction of this place, had they been supplied with battering-rams, and such like instruments, which it does not appear the Israelites possessed.

11. That this is the reason why Joshua employed the stratagems detailed in this chapter: having no proper instruments or machines by means of which he might hope to take the city by assault, (and to reduce it by famine, which was quite possible, would have consumed too much time), he used the feigned flight, Joshua 8:19, to draw the inhabitants from the city, that the ambush, Joshua 8:12, Joshua 8:15, might then enter, and take possession of it.

12. That had he advanced with a greater force against the city the inhabitants would have had no confidence in risking a battle, and consequently would have kept within their walls, which would have defeated the design of the Israelites, which was to get them to issue from their city.

13. That, all these circumstances considered thirty thousand men, disposed as above, were amply sufficient for the reduction of the city, and were the whole of the Israelitish troops which were employed on the occasion.

Verse 8

Ye shall set the city on fire - Probably this means no more than that they should kindle a fire in the city, the smoke of which should be an indication that they had taken it. For as the spoils of the city were to be divided among the people, had they at this time set fire to the city itself, all the property must have been consumed, for the five thousand men did not wait to save any thing, as they immediately issued out to attack the men of Ai in the rear.

Verse 10

Numbered the people - וַיִּיפְחֹד אֶתְּהָאָם (vaiyiphkod eth haam), he visited the people - inspected their ranks to see whether every thing was in perfect readiness, that in case they should be needed they might be led on to the attack. There is no doubt that Joshua had left the rest of the army so disposed and ready, part of it having probably advanced towards Ai, that he might easily receive reinforcements in case of any disaster to the thirty thousand which had advanced against the city; and this consideration will serve to remove a part of the difficulty which arises from Joshua 8:1, Joshua 8:3, Joshua 8:10, collated with other parts of this chapter. Had he brought all his troops in sight, the people of Ai would not have attempted to risk a battle, and would consequently have kept within their walls, from which it was the object of Joshua to decoy them. See the preceding observations, particularly Joshua 8:10-12 (note).

Verse 17

There was not a man left in Ai or Beth-el - It is very likely that the principal strength of Beth-el had been previously brought into Ai, as the strongest place to make a stand in; Beth-el being but about three miles distant from Ai, and probably not greatly fortified. Therefore Ai contained on this occasion all the men of Beth-el - all the warriors of that city, as well as its own troops and inhabitants. Others think that the Beth-elites, seeing the Israelites fly, sallied out of their city as against a common enemy; but that, finding the men of Ai discomfited, and the city taken, they returned to Beth-el, which Joshua did not think proper to attack at this time. From Judges 1:24 we find that Beth-el was then a walled city, in the hands of the Canaanites, and was taken by the house of Joseph.

Verse 18

Stretch out the spear - It is very probable that Joshua had a flag or ensign at the end of his spear, which might be easily seen at a considerable distance; and that the unfurling or waving of this was the sign agreed on between him and the ambush. (see Joshua 8:13, and the preceding observations on Joshua 8:1 (note), observation 6); and on seeing this flag or ensign unfurled, the men who lay in ambush arose and entered the city, making the fire previously agreed on. See Joshua 8:8.

Verse 19

Set the city on fire - See on Joshua 8:8 (note).

Verse 20

They had no power to flee this way or that way - They were in utter consternation; they saw that the city was taken, they found themselves in the midst of their foes; that their wives, children, and property, had fallen a prey to their enemies, in consequence of which they were so utterly panic-struck as to be incapable of making any resistance.

Verse 24

Returned unto Ai, and smote it with the edge of the sword. - This must refer to the women, children, and old persons, left behind; for it is likely that all the effective men had sallied out when they imagined the Israelites

had fled. See Joshua 8:16.

Verse 26

Joshua drew not his hand back - He was not only the general, but the standard-bearer or ensign of his own army, and continued in this employment during the whole of the battle. See on Joshua 8:18 (note). Some commentators understand this and Joshua 8:18 figuratively, as if they implied that Joshua continued in prayer to God for the success of his troops; nor did he cease till the armies of Ai were annihilated, and the city taken and destroyed. The Hebrew word קִדּוֹן (kidon), which we render spear, is rendered by the Vulgate clypeum, buckler; and it must be owned that it seems to have this signification in several passages of Scripture: (see 1 Samuel 17:6, 1 Samuel 17:45; Job 39:23): but it is clear enough also that it means a spear, or some kind of offensive armor, in other places: see Job 41:29; Jeremiah 6:23. I cannot therefore think that it has any metaphorical meaning, such as that attributed to the holding up of Moses's hands, Exodus 17:10-12, which is generally allowed to have a spiritual meaning, though it might be understood as the act of Joshua is here; and to this meaning an indirect glance is given in the note on the above place. But however the place in Exodus may be understood, that before us does not appear to have any metaphorical or equivocal meaning; Joshua continued to hold up or stretch out his spear, and did not slack from the pursuit till the forces of Ai were utterly discomfited.

Verse 27

Only the cattle and the spoil - In the case of Jericho these were all consigned to destruction, and therefore it was criminal to take any thing pertaining to the city, as we have already seen; but in the case before us the cattle and spoils were expressly given to the conquerors by the order of God. See Joshua 8:2.

Verse 28

Unto this day - This last clause was probably added by a later hand.

Verse 29

The king of Ai he hanged on a tree - He had gone out at the head of his men, and had been taken prisoner, Joshua 8:23; and the battle being over, he was ordered to be hanged, probably after having been strangled, or in some way deprived of life, as in the case mentioned Joshua 10:26, for in those times it was not customary to hang people alive.

As soon as the sun was down - It was not lawful to let the bodies remain all night upon the tree. See the note on Deuteronomy 21:23. The Septuagint say the king of Ai was hanged ἐπὶ δύο δένδρων ἡμίονοις, upon a double tree, which probably means a forked tree, or something in the form of a cross. The tree on which criminals were hanged among the Romans was called arbor infelix, and lignum infelix, the unfortunate, ill-fated, or accursed tree.

Raise thereon a great heap of stones - This was a common custom through all antiquity in every country, as we have already seen in the case of Achan, Joshua 7:20.

Verse 30

Then Joshua built an altar - This was done in obedience to the express command of God, Deuteronomy 27:4-8 (note).

Verse 32

A copy of the law of Moses - מִשְׁנֵה תּוֹרָה (mishneh torath), the repetition of the law; that is, a copy of the blessings and curses, as commanded by Moses; not a copy of the Decalogue, as some imagine, nor of the book of Deuteronomy, as others think; much less of the whole Pentateuch; but merely of that part which contained the blessings and curses, and which was to be read on this solemn occasion. See the note on Deuteronomy 27:3.

Verse 33

Half of them over against Mount Gerizim - See the arrangement of the whole of this business in the note and observations on Deuteronomy 27:26 (note). And see also the notes on Deuteronomy 28:1-68 (note).

Verse 35

With the women and the little ones - It was necessary that all should know that they were under the same obligations to obey; even the women are brought forward, not only because of their personal responsibility, but because to them was principally intrusted the education of the children. The children also witness this solemn transaction, that a salutary fear of offending God might be early, diligently, and deeply impressed upon their

hearts. Thus every precaution is taken to ensure obedience to the Divine precepts, and consequently to promote the happiness of the people; for this every ordinance of God is remarkable, as he ever causes the interest and duty of his followers to go hand in hand.

1.It may be asked, Seeing God promised to deliver Ai into the hands of the Israelites, why needed they to employ so many men and so many stratagems in order to its reduction? To this it may be answered, that God will have man to put forth the wisdom and power with which he has endued him, in every important purpose of life; that he endued him with those powers for this very end; and that it would be inconsistent with his gracious design so to help man at any time as to render the powers he had given him useless.

2.It is only in the use of lawful means that we have any reason to expect God's blessing and help. One of the ancients has remarked, "Though God has made man without himself he will not save him without himself;" and therefore man's own concurrence of will, and co-operation of power with God, are essentially necessary to his preservation and salvation. This co-operation is the grand condition, sine qua non, on which God will help or save. But is not this "endeavoring to merit salvation by our own works?" No: for this is impossible, unless we could prove that all the mental and corporeal powers which we possess came from and are of ourselves, and that we held them independently of the power and beneficence of our Creator, and that every act of these was of infinite value, to make it an equivalent for the heaven we wished to purchase. Putting forth the hand to receive the alms of a benevolent man, can never be considered a purchase-price for the bounty bestowed. For ever shall that word stand true in all its parts, Christ is the Author of eternal salvation to all them that Obey him, Hebrews 5:9.