

“Things written aforetime...”

Victory at Jericho – Defeat at Ai

All of the amazing experiences of the children of Israel in the wilderness were crowned by the fantastic conquest of Jericho. Joshua went through all the preliminary motions of normal military procedure by sending in the spies, but God intended to overthrow Jericho by extra-military means.

We are told that “by faith the walls of Jericho fell down” (Hebrews 11:30). We are not to presume that every soul of the Israelites had perfect faith in the method God had chosen. He said to march around the city once each day for six days, and seven times on the seventh day. No spear or stone was to be thrown, no arrow launched, no voice raised while marching. What possible good could such foot-weary activity accomplish? Yet, God speaks of “things that are not, as though they were,” and he had said, before all the marching, “I have given into thy hand Jericho” (Joshua 6:2).

When all of the instructions of God had been followed, the walls of Jericho “fell down flat.” the great ring of Israelites ascended into the city, and finished the business with sword and fire. The faith of the congregation is credited for the victory. So, collective faith is a force to be reckoned with in accomplishing God’s work, even though it can be asserted that it is likely that all did not have complete faith. Yet, the power of all those who were faithful was sufficient for God to work His miracle.

The Apostle Paul saw benefits in collective faith for churches. He told the Corinthians he had hope that “...as your faith groweth, we shall be magnified in you according to our province unto further abundance, so as to preach the gospel even unto the parts beyond you...” (2 Corinthians 10:15-16). He also saw that the collective faith of the church of the Thessalonians was such as to cause them to spread the gospel, “not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place...” (1 Thessalonians 1:8). It would be impossible to believe that every soul in these churches had an ideal measure of faith, if we take human nature to be the same then as it is now! Yet, these examples demonstrate what collective faith can do.

At the same time, the sins of a few can have a powerful effect upon the force of the collective. The Israelites, flushed with the victory over Jericho, were soundly defeated before the lesser city of Ai. The reason? Israel had committed a trespass. No, not everyone in Israel, but only one man. Achan found and kept for himself some of the booty captured in Jericho, all of which was to be “devoted” to God. In the pall that followed the defeat, Joshua implored God to tell whose guilt had been the cause, and the one sin that had brought collective guilt was revealed (Joshua 7:10-12).

Why should the sin of one man cause the downfall of a whole nation? We might easily conclude from this that guilt can be transferred from one individual to another, but this idea would violate many other Bible passages, such as Ezekiel 18:20. It is just as

easy, however, to see that God used this method to magnify the influence of a solitary sinner within the collective. It was wrong for them to accept the idea that there was no sin in their midst.

Paul wrote of this problem to the Galatians. He said, "...who hindered you that you should not obey the truth?...a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump...he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment" (Galatians 5:7-10). He warned the Corinthians of the same fault. The "one" who had his father's wife had to be delivered unto Satan. "Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump" (1 Corinthians 5:1-7). So, the toleration of sinful individuals can rob the collective, the church, of its full force. It can even be defeated.

Perhaps the churches of today are not gaining spiritual conquests for the very reason that Joshua's army was defeated, and because of the lack of collective faith. Should not this example make us aware of our duty to "clean house?" Yea, verily!