

# The Travail of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Holy Spirit's energy is crucial for victory, and defeat occurs when the people of God separate from the ground of the authority of darkness, neglect unity, or presume upon God's power.*

**Scripture:** Joshua 5:13

**Topics:** "Spiritual Warfare", "The Work of the Holy Spirit"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Holy Spirit's travail in the life of believers, using the story of Joshua's defeat at Ai to illustrate how spiritual failure arises from disobedience and a lack of unity among God's people. He highlights that the ark represents Christ's glory while Joshua embodies the Holy Spirit's energy, which is essential for moving forward in faith. The sermon stresses that the Holy Spirit is grieved by sin and presumption, which leads to defeat, and that the honor of God's name is paramount in the believer's life. Joshua's deep distress over the defeat reflects the Holy Spirit's sensitivity to spiritual principles and the need for the Church to maintain its unity and dependence on God. Ultimately, the message calls for a heart-quest to identify and rectify the sin that hinders spiritual progress.

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## Transcript

We are going to spend a little more time in the seventh chapter of the Book of Joshua. As you know, this chapter tells the story of a tragic defeat in the life of the people of God. There had been a wonderful experience of victory at Jericho, and that victory shows that it was God's will for His people to go on from victory to victory. We have seen that Jericho represented a complete victory over all the enemies in the land, and it set the standard for all the future, so when we look at Jericho and the great victory there we see what God intended to be the history of His people. But at the very next city they met with defeat - the victory was turned into defeat.

We have already seen the main factor in that defeat: the people had left the real ground of victory. Spiritually they had gone back on to the old ground on the other side of the Jordan. We spent a lot of time on that, but it was not the only reason for this defeat. We touched upon another factor, and it is that upon which we are going to dwell more fully now.

First, there are one or two things connected with that which we must notice.

The two most prominent factors in this story are the ark of the testimony and Joshua. We have seen that the ark is a type of the Lord Jesus and all that God has made Him to be as a testimony for His people, so

that it represents the greatness and the glory of Jesus Christ. We need not stay longer with the ark just now, and we will pass on to Joshua.

After the death of Moses Joshua is always seen to be associated with the ark. Now, we must understand what Joshua represents. The ark represents the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ, and Joshua represents the energy of the Holy Spirit. He is not a type of the Holy Spirit, but he represents the energy of the Holy Spirit. You remember that when the people had crossed the Jordan Joshua lifted up his eyes and saw a man. He went up to this man, who had his sword drawn, and said: "Art thou for us, or for our adversaries? And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come" (Joshua 5:13,14). So far as the Church is concerned, the Holy Spirit is the man with the drawn sword. The Apostle Paul speaks of "the sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17), and the Holy Spirit is the one with the sword, and the one who is the Captain of the hosts of the Lord. On another occasion Paul said: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17). It is the sovereignty and lordship of the Holy Spirit in relation to the people of God.

"And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant?" (Joshua 5:14). Joshua, therefore, absolutely submitted himself to the Holy Spirit, and was under His dominion for all that lay ahead. Thus he becomes a representation of the Holy Spirit's energy.

One characteristic of Joshua as representing the energy of the Holy Spirit was that he was always forward-looking in relation to the testimony of Jesus, and the attitude of the Holy Spirit is one of always looking onward, anxious to go on with the testimony of Jesus. If you study the history of Joshua you will see that that was true of him all his life. When the twelve men went out from the wilderness to spy out the land, ten of them brought back an evil report and discouraged the people from going forward, but Joshua and Caleb said: "Let us go up at once" (Numbers 13:30). It was Joshua who went over, and here we find him still looking forward. He never looked back, for it was contrary to his very disposition. He could not accept defeat.

Another characteristic of Joshua was that he was always a man for a fight, for a battle. He had led the battle in the wilderness, when Amalek came out against the Lord's people, and here he is in the land leading in the battle.

In these two ways Joshua represents the energy of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit has His way in our lives we will always be going forward, and we shall neither look back nor shall we stand still. Joshua was like an old war-horse. I remember reading about one once. It was in the days when men went to war on horses, and this one had been in many battles. He came to understand the meaning of the sound of the bugle, and whenever it sounded the Advance he put his ears back and stood erect, ready for the battle. The time came when that old horse was too old to fight any more, and so he was turned out into a field, to spend the rest of his life quietly at rest. One day, after he had been there some time, a coach came along the road by the field, and sitting at the back of the coach was a man with a long trumpet. As the coach passed that field the man put up his trumpet and blew a long blast. The old horse put up his ears and made a rush right across the field to the road. He was ready for the battle again! But the coach went past, and after a little while the old horse put down his head and his ears, turned round, and walked away. He was very sad! I think Joshua was very much like that - or shall I put it the other way? I think the Holy Spirit is like that: always in the spirit of the battle.

Joshua had never been defeated in battle until he came to Ai. That was the first time in his life that he had been defeated in battle, and we can understand, therefore, why he was so distressed. It says: "And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord" (Joshua 7:6). He cried unto the Lord and said: 'Oh, Lord, why have You allowed this? All Your enemies who hear of it will say that You have been defeated. Lord, what will You do for Your great name?' And the Lord said: 'Why are you calling to Me? Israel has sinned. They have taken of the forbidden thing.' Then it says that Joshua arose early the next morning and set to work to find out what the sin was. That is the thing with which we have already dealt, and we now come to the other thing.

You see, the Holy Spirit was grieved at Ai, and the energy of the Holy Spirit could not go on while He was grieved. I must remind you that here in the land over the Jordan the people were in a new position altogether. I have said that they were in the position of the Letter to the Ephesians, and in the Letter to the Ephesians (so-called) we have the key to this defeat at Ai. There everything is set in the realm of spiritual conflict. Three things comprise victory or defeat. The three things are: 1. Separation from the ground of the authority of darkness, the prince of this world. 2. The unity of the people of God. 3. The absolute dependence upon God, and no presumption.

When the Lord said to Joshua that "Israel hath sinned" - not Achan, you notice - He first of all meant that a link had been made, by Achan, between all the people and the ground of this world where Satan has his kingdom. It was the disastrous effect of a sinister and subtle return, in principle, to the old Egypt and wilderness ground, from which both the Red Sea and Jordan had meant redemption by Divine power. This opens up the immense matter of the Church's weakness and helplessness before "the world rulers of this darkness" because of a 'world' ground in the Church. The effect is weakness, defeat, and shame. The first step toward recovery has to be a heart-quest to know where and how the devil has found his occasion.

Then in "Ephesians" the unity and solidarity of the Church are an essential basis for ascendancy. Israel's responsible men had said that - Ai being so much less than Jericho - only 'some' of the fighters need go up against it. Thus the principle of oneness was violated or ignored. They lost sight of the fact that the prince of this world is the same in a local and particular situation as he is in the greater and more universal, and that the Divine principles are the same however 'small' the situation may appear to be. It was proved and demonstrated at Ai that we cannot have great universal ideas of the Church and its principles, big conceptions and teachings about the Church, and then neglect to observe them in local and - what we might think to be - lesser situations. Achan may have been just a local matter, but he could not be isolated from the general spiritual laws of all Israel. God does not so regard it! "The body is one", and what applies to the whole applies to each and every member, whether individual or corporately local. Achan's family was an affecting factor. Parents, or a parent, may raise serious "Church" issues if they have not - at least - been very clear, definite, and firm as to the home and family situation, so far as Divine principles are concerned. They may fear to lose something by such a course, but there comes a point where faithfulness to God involves God in faithfulness, sooner or later. Yes, sooner or later, failure in spiritual principles will find us out and disqualify us before God; in the meantime detrimentally affecting the body corporate. Ai says that God's eyes are watching.

Then, this attitude of Israel's soldiers was presumption. It was an attitude of 'We can do it'. That was the essence of Satan's temptation of Adam and the defeat of humanity. It is the very terrible snare of any humanism. We are as much dependent upon Almighty God in a 'minor' issue as in a major, and failure to recognize this may make a very major issue of what we thought was minor.

Now note: Joshua entered into a great travail over this matter. Shall I put that in another way? The grief of the Holy Spirit was registered in Joshua's heart, and until things were put right for the Holy Spirit the people could not go on.

I am putting my finger upon something very important as to the people of God. There is nothing more important in this universe than the honour of the Name of the Lord, and that became the focal point of Joshua's distress. It was no less a matter than the honour of the Name of the Lord: "Lord... what wilt thou do for thy great name?" Joshua was afraid that the Name of the Lord would be dishonoured because of this defeat, and the causes of defeat were those we have mentioned. The Holy Spirit is very sensitive to spiritual principles.

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-travail-of-the-holy-spirit/>

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