

Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



January 7, 2018

The Price of Overconfidence

Often it's not the big battles that defeat us, but the little ones that follow after. Faith in God can too easily turn into a cocky confidence that sets us up for a downfall.

"So the men went up and spied out Ai. And they returned to Joshua and said to him, 'Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few.' So about three thousand men went up there from the people, but they fled before the men of Ai. . . . Therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water" (Josh 7:2-5).



After Israel's taking of Jericho (ch. 6), the little town of Ai should have been a cakewalk. But this minor operation turned into a debacle that dashed their hope of taking the land. Even Joshua fell to pieces when he heard the news of the defeat: "Alas, Lord God, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all—to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us?" (v. 7). The courage that had motivated the people to take the land evaporated in the face of this unexpected setback.

Unbeknownst to the Israelites, there was sin in the camp—one of their soldiers had taken forbidden loot in the

sacking of Jericho—and the defeat at Ai was God's way of forcing them to deal with the cancer in their midst, which they did (v. 10-26).

But there is another angle to this story that deserves attention. Notice the dismissive report of the spies who scouted Ai: "Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few." Their reasoning is understandable. Compared to the mighty fortress they had just overthrown, this little town was nothing, so taking it would be no problem. Joshua did not even bother to accompany the attackers. Israel saw no threat in this little target—and paid a price for their presumption.

Confidence in the prospect of success is a good thing. Abraham had faith that God would lead him to a good land; David had no doubts when he went forth to face Goliath; it was confidence that led a ragtag group of fishermen to proclaim the gospel before kings. But like all good things, confidence can morph into something more sinister. When *confidence* turns into *cockiness*, we set ourselves up for a serious fall.

Overconfidence has been the bane of God's people throughout the ages. Peter fancied himself Jesus' strongest defender—until he faced a threat he did not recognize. The Pharisees saw themselves as champions of truth and holiness in a godless culture, but their self-assurance turned into an arrogance that blinded them to their faults. Our own certitude can reach a dangerous threshold that inhibits our ability to see Satan's cunning traps. How else can we explain preachers who get caught up in sexual scandal, or nice church ladies whose gossip destroys whole congregations?

Joshua and the Israelites learned their lesson. After removing the sin in their midst, they turned their attention a second time to Ai (ch. 8). This time, they devised a careful plan to take the town by feint, using "all the people of war" to ensure overwhelming superiority. They left nothing to chance, and the result was a victory. We can win our battles against sin, too, but only if we take the enemy seriously. We must put our faith in God, not our own prowess, and never think of ourselves as beyond danger.

— David King



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