

Joshua 7:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs
before their enemies!

Analysis

Joshua continues: 'O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies?' His concern focuses on Israel's reputation and, implicitly, God's reputation. The phrase 'turneth their backs' is military terminology for retreat or flight—deeply shameful in ancient warfare. Joshua grasps that Israel's identity as God's victorious people is at stake. If they flee from small cities, who will take them seriously? His question 'what shall I say' expresses a leader's burden—what explanation can he give? He lacks answers because he hasn't yet identified the real problem (Achan's sin). This illustrates that even earnest intercession can be misdirected when we haven't diagnosed root causes correctly. Joshua's focus on what to 'say' suggests concern about public perception and morale. He's right to worry—defeat threatens not just military campaign but spiritual confidence and corporate unity. However, his focus remains horizontal (what will people think?) rather than vertical (what has broken our covenant relationship with God?).

Historical Context

In ancient Near Eastern culture, military victory or defeat was interpreted as divine favor or disfavor. Defeat brought not just tactical loss but profound shame—it suggested your god was weak or angry. Joshua's concern 'what shall I say?' reflects this cultural framework. He must explain to Israel why God allowed defeat, but he lacks insight into the cause. The phrase 'turneth their backs' carried enormous shame in warrior cultures. Running from battle was cowardice; standing ground was honor. Israel's identity was tied to being God's victorious army—defeat

threatened this core identity. Archaeological evidence from ancient Near Eastern military texts shows that generals who suffered unexpected defeats faced not just strategic problems but legitimacy crises. Troops questioned leadership; allies reconsidered support; enemies gained confidence. Joshua's concern was well-founded—this single defeat could cascade into campaign collapse unless the root cause was addressed and covenant relationship restored.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How do you balance concern for God's reputation with examining your own heart for sin?
2. When have you focused on managing perceptions rather than addressing root spiritual issues?
3. What does Joshua's honest struggle teach about bringing authentic emotions to God in prayer?

Interlinear Text

וְיָ	אֲדֹנָי	יְהוָה	אֵיךְ	אֶחָדָם	אֶחָדָם	הֵפֶךְ	לְיִשְׂרָאֵל
O	Lord	H4100	what shall I say	their backs	H834	turneth	when Israel
H994	H136		H559	H310		H2015	H3478
לְפָנַי	עַתָּה	אֶתְּנֶנּוּ					
before	their enemies						
H6203	H6440	H341					

Additional Cross-References

Habakkuk 2:1 (Parallel theme): I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved.

Ezra 9:10 (Parallel theme): And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,

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