

# Joshua 8:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw, and, behold, the smoke of the city ascended up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that way: and the people that fled to the wilderness turned back upon the pursuers.

## Analysis

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Ai's despair: 'And when the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw, and, behold, the smoke of the city ascended up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that way: and the people that fled to the wilderness turned upon them.' The phrase 'looked behind them' indicates Ai's forces, confidently pursuing Israel, glance back and see catastrophe—their city burning. The smoke ascending 'to heaven' emphasizes visibility and totality—the city's destruction is complete and obvious. The statement 'had no power to flee this way or that way' describes total demoralization—psychological collapse translates to physical inability to retreat. Simultaneously, Israel's 'fleeing' force turns to attack. Ai's army finds itself trapped between Joshua's force (now advancing) and the burning city (ambush force emerging). This complete reversal—from confident pursuit to utter entrapment—demonstrates how quickly circumstances change when God fights for His people.

## Historical Context

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Ancient battlefield psychology was crucial—morale often determined outcomes more than numbers. Discovering their city burning while engaged far from it would have shattered Ai's morale instantly. The realization that the 'fleeing' Israelites were actually strategic decoys, that a hidden force had captured their undefended city, and that they now faced enemies on multiple sides would have

created panic. The phrase 'no power to flee' suggests complete disorientation—they couldn't flee toward their burning city (now held by enemies) nor toward the wilderness (Israelites blocked that route). This trap resulted from overconfidence and poor tactical judgment—leaving the city completely undefended. Ancient military wisdom counseled maintaining reserves precisely to prevent such disasters. The sudden reversal of fortunes—from apparent victory to crushing defeat—illustrates warfare's unpredictability and the decisive importance of morale. When God fights for Israel, psychological and physical victory come together.

## Related Passages

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**Hebrews 11:1** — Definition of faith

**Romans 1:17** — The righteous shall live by faith

## Study Questions

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1. How does this sudden reversal (confident pursuit to utter defeat) illustrate the danger of presumption in spiritual warfare?
2. What does the phrase 'no power to flee this way or that way' teach about the completeness of defeat when opposing God's purposes?
3. When have you seen apparent victory suddenly become defeat (or vice versa) through God's intervention?

## Interlinear Text

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וַיַּרְא אֶנְשֵׁי יִפְנֵן וְעַל הַר יְהוָה	אַחֲרֵי מֵבָעַם	יְרָא אֵלָיו	עַל הַר יְהוָה	עַל הַר יְהוָה
looked H376	of Ai H5857	behind H310	them they saw H2009	ascended up H5927
וְעַש	בָּעֵד יְמֵה הַעִיר	וְלֹא הַשֵּׁם יְמֵה	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי הַר	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי הַר
and behold the smoke H6227	of the city H5892	to heaven H8064	וְלֹא H1961	H0
וְלֹא יָמַד יְמֵה	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי אָדָם	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי אָדָם	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי אָדָם	בָּעֵד בְּנֵי אָדָם
and they had no power H3027	that fled H5127	this way or that way H2008	this way or that way H2008	this way or that way H2008
וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ	וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ	וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ	וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ	וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ וְלֹא נִתְּהַפֵּךְ
and the people H5971	that fled H5127	to the wilderness H4057	turned back H2015	upon the pursuers H413 H7291

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