

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

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

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

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

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

וַיִּפֹּן ו	אֲנָשִׁי	הָעִיר	אַחֲרֵיהֶם	וַיֵּרֶא ו	וְהָיָה	עָלָה
looked	H376	of Ai	behind	them they saw	H2009	ascended up
H6437		H5857	H310	H7200		H5927
וְעַשֵּׂה	בְּהֵמָה	וְהָיָה	וְלֹא	הַשָּׁמַיִם	הָעִיר	בְּהֵמָה
and behold the smoke	of the city	to heaven	H3808	H1961	H0	
H6227	H5892	H8064				
וְיָד יָמָם	הֵנָּה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה	וְהָיָה
and they had no power	that fled	this way or that way	this way or that way	this way or that way	this way or that way	this way or that way
H3027	H5127	H2008	H2008	H2008	H2008	H2008
וְהָעָם	הֵנָּה	הַמִּדְבָּר	וְהָיָה	אֶל	הָרֹדְפִים	וְהָיָה
and the people	that fled	to the wilderness	turned back	H413	upon the pursuers	
H5971	H5127	H4057	H2015		H7291	

From KJV Study • kjevstudy.org