

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Prayer God does not answer: July 15th: Some notes

I have stuck with the way the Zondervan “All the Prayers of the Bible” classifies Joshua Chapter 7; though you can argue about that classification. Briefly, the story is that the Israelites, after hesitation, preparation, prayer, and an extended siege of an unusual kind, and making use of inside information, successfully attacked and destroyed Jericho. This was the first big Promised Land victory... though archaeology seems to suggest that, by the time Joshua arrived, Jericho was not the vast metropolis it had been. God had been heard as instructing dedication to God of all the city’s treasures (meaning kill everyone, except the prostitute who has sheltered the Israeli spies and her family, and destroy everything). Achan had ignored this and carried off some loot, which he had hidden in his tent. The next Israelite target was Ai: a much more challenging site, because it was on high ground and required the attackers to march up a steep hill. Spies were sent out to survey the battle ground, but the Israelites much too readily concluded that this would be a walk-over. The invading force was routed, with fairly small loss of life but with bog time undermining of the popular rumour that had served them well at Jericho – that the Israelites and their God were invincible.

I don’t see any statement about prayer before the battle of Ai. (So, hard to argue that prayer to God for victory was unanswered.) A great deal of prayer after the unexpected defeat, including Joshua rather cheekily pointing out to God that God’s reputation was at stake. (Remember that “gods” then were generally territorial and sometimes tribal; so “our god is stronger than your god” was a serious issue.) God’s answer was to point to Achan’s sin (a retrospective punishment for the Jericho loot). Achan and family destroyed. Then Ai captured by a much better planned attack; and, very oddly, this time looting was allowed.

But the “unanswered” prayer theme is much bigger than Chapter 7 of Joshua. God was heard to promise the Promised Land to Abraham. In terms of occupying that Promised Land (other than on a gypsy basis), Abraham didn’t make it, nor did Isaac, nor did Jacob. Then the Egyptian exile; then the 40 years in the wilderness (which only two of the original escapees survived; then the long process of occupation, which seems never to have reached the anticipated boundaries. Not a great deal of deep and long peace in the Promised Land, then Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, and exile again. The return, but under Persian etc and in due course Roman imperial rule. Centuries of prayer for a Promised Land to be lived in peace. In the 21st Century, some (particularly American) Christians are praying for Israeli victory in the Middle East, to lead to the End Times and THE KINGDOM.

On this grand scale of things, the prayer lessons seem to be: keep praying “Your will be done” (in big things and in little things), accompanied by “Help me to try to do your will” (mainly in small things, but in big things when we get to vote, to petition, to write to our MP, to argue for justice). In terms of the very big things, God’s timescale is not our timescale. Remember that on the Mount of the Transfiguration Jesus was seen talking with Moses and Elijah.