

# Iron Chariots Aside

Judges 1:19-29; Psalm 86:3-12; Luke 18:24-34



Life is a risky enterprise, regardless of what our society wants to say. We sell insurance to protect ourselves from the vagaries of financial insecurity. We bring lawsuits against corporations and individuals we think should be above making mistakes. We want life to be sterile, secure, predictable, and comforting. There should be an easy fix to every problem. We bring the same expectations to a life of faith in God. We want security and comfort, but God does not seem to protect us from life's struggles. We are challenged to trust God to see us through an unknown future. Should we expect God to come through when we see no possible solution?

The Hebrews became distracted along the path of obedience. *Yahweh's* promises had not panned out, as there were still Canaanites in the land. God had granted many victories, but there were groups they had not confronted in battle. They had enjoyed the victory of putting the surviving Canaanites to forced labor, but the victories promised had seemed too far-fetched to seek more. Judah's plight was perhaps the greatest discomfort of all. They had taken the hill country, but they were afraid to do battle on the plains. Those inhabitants not only had horses and chariots, but their chariots were made of iron.

*Yahweh* had promised victory, regardless of iron chariots.<sup>1</sup> When push came to shove, the people were unwilling to trust what they could not see. They settled for the hill country and weaker enemies. After all, they had to live with a perspective of realism, didn't they? It would be foolish to think that foot soldiers might prevail over iron chariot! Certainly, God did not want them to die at the hands of such formidable enemies. They would just have to be realistic and accept the facts. Jericho's walls might be dashed by trumpets, there was no hope for victory over iron chariots. They settled for less than complete conquest. So did Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. They decided they couldn't trust God for victory, so they gave in to "reality." They would just make the most of what they had.

The Rich Young Ruler had questions about something more. He wanted to know about eternal life. He was on top of the world. He had everything. He was young. He was rich. He had authority. He lived a clean, moral life. Jesus wanted him to start over. He wanted him to trust God rather than all the things that gave him a sense of importance and worth. We are tempted to view Jesus' words as a critique of wealth itself. Underlying Jesus' response, however, is a much greater critique, perhaps one that extends even to those of us who would not consider ourselves wealthy.

This man's problem was not the wealth within his grasp. The problem was rather the grasp his wealth had upon his life and ability to trust God. Wealth had become a limiting factor in his life, rather than a factor that would enable him to trust and obey God. Whereas the Hebrews arriving in Canaan were distracted from trusting God by the iron chariots of their enemies, this man's problem was dealing with all the visible things under his control. The Hebrews had felt limited by what they didn't have. It was the visible and predictable factors in life that kept them from trusting God. The same was true for this man. Wealth and power had seduced him from fully trusting God.

<sup>1</sup> Joshua 17:18.

Life was predictable for him. He was not distressed over meeting immediate needs. He had the luxury not only of material wealth and power, but the comfort of provision for his future. Amid his comfort, there was a disquieting influence regarding eternity. When Jesus asked him to give up the basis of his comfort and confidence to trust God, he walked away. That was asking too much.

He wanted eternal security to would mesh with his physical, material, and social security. He sought the comfort of a safe eternity without the addition of risk. He had too much to lose. Protecting his immediate sense of well-being took primacy over eternal concerns. He walked away, but not because he had everything. He walked away because he was unwilling to trust God more than the visible symbols of position, comfort, and security to which he was accustomed.

Jesus commented to the disciples on the difficulty of trusting God above visible signs of security. It is easier for those with nothing to lose to cast their lot on God than for those who have much. It is not popular to cast faith as demanding risk. We want faith to bring us comfort, peace, and tranquility. Jesus' words, however, seem to forever move us into a stance of discomfort, unease, and uncertainty. It is from that position that we can trust God without being dismayed by iron chariots. It is from that point at which there is no other way to proceed that we are able to trust God with abandon.

Perhaps we look at the rich man here too glibly. Which one of us would be willing to walk away from career, family, house, and land to wander after Jesus from town to town? The disciples found comfort in the question. They had already done what Jesus was asking of the rich man. They found peace in Jesus' words as they applied them to the step they had taken. The disciples were still not where Jesus wanted them. Of them, he asked a greater commitment.

What greater commitment could there be than to abandon all visible means of support to follow Jesus? The disciples were too busy patting themselves on the back to listen beyond Jesus' words of affirmation to hear the challenge facing them in his next discourse. They had left much to follow, but they still had ties to family and homes to which they might return. The steps they had taken to follow Jesus were significant, though not as difficult as what Jesus asked of the rich man. They had had less to lose in the exchange.

Then Jesus took the twelve aside to warn them about the next step in their calling of faith. They were now on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus would be insulted, ridiculed, flogged, and killed. His definitions and understanding of the immediacy and importance of following God's will outweighed not simply the rich man's concerns of giving up visible means of security. He called on the disciples to do more than leave all behind to expect new rewards. He asked them for faith to follow for the sake of being faithful. He wanted them to lay down their very lives when it became necessary. They were to trust God for eternity with no holds barred.

What about our own lives and service to God? What is it that limits our own faithfulness? What are we unwilling to risk in order to follow the Christ who calls us to faithful service? Are we focused on the insurmountable obstacles that appear as the iron chariots of old? Are they not susceptible to rust and mud? Are we concerned with the symbols of prosperity and security that can be so easily wiped away by hurricanes, tsunamis, and fire? Shall we bow down to chariots of iron or to Christ alone? Whom shall we serve? Is it worth the risk?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*