

2016-07-10 Joshua 9 & 10 Lessons from the Battlefield

The two chapters of Joshua that we are to consider this morning – cover a lot of ground. They describe Israel's conquest of the southern portion of the land of Canaan. A map is helpful in getting an overview of these chapters. [Slides 1-8] Last week Jeff covered chapters 7 and 8, which describe the capture of Jericho and then Ai. Chapter 9 opens with Israel camped at Gilgal where the emissaries from Gibeon come to them. The Gibeonites deceive Israel's leaders into making a covenant with them. Even when Israel's leaders discover the Gibeonites have lied, they honor the covenant they have made. The kings of five southern Canaanite cities band together to punish this desertion from their ranks and attack Gibeon. Joshua and his forces counterattack the army of the five kings. The battle goes very well and Joshua realizes that this is an opportunity to destroy their enemies in the open field rather than face them behind their city walls. He asks God to extend the daylight to allow them to make the most of this opportunity. God miraculously extends the day and Joshua's victory is complete, capturing the city of Makkedah and probably Azekah and Yarmuth also. The day ends with the execution of the five kings who've hidden in a cave. Through the remainder of chapter 10, Joshua's army captures city after city in southern Canaan – taking in turn Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and, evidently many smaller towns. He seems to have killed all the combatants and most of the inhabitants of the cities. It does not seem that he physically destroyed the cities by fire or other means. Having eliminated the military threat in the south Joshua and his troops return to Gilgal. Significantly they have left at least three major cities unconquered – Gezer and Ekron which will remain thorns in Israel's side as Philistine cities and Jerusalem which will need to be taken eventually in the time of David.

The author of this book – we really don't know whether it was Joshua or a close associate – has compressed a military campaign that probably took many weeks – into just 2 chapters. He has not given us a chronicle – a day by day, blow by blow account, but an overview. There must have been long days of marching in the heat, making camp, breaking camp, preparing and repairing equipment, the logistics of supplying the army with food and water. He doesn't describe many of the smaller battles and skirmishes that must have taken place. There probably were many counsels of war – in which strategy, troop deployments, and tactics were worked out. We get some hint of these details in his summary at the end of chapter ten “So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negev and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. . . . from Kadesh-barnea as far as Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon.”

Of all the specific events he might have included, the author, writing as the Spirit guides him, pulls out just two major episodes that he wants us to consider more closely – the covenant with the Gibeonites in chapter 9 and then the miraculously long day of fighting in chapter 10. These two events contain some lessons that he wants us to take to heart. The major actors in these events are the Gibeonites, Joshua and Israel's leaders, and Yahweh the God of Israel.

In chapter 9, the initiative is by the Gibeonites. Israel preparing for the next battle in her camp at Gilgal; the kings of the various Canaanite cities while agreeing to band together for mutual defense, haven't yet mobilized their forces. The Gibeonites – perhaps because they are the next target in Israel's line of march – act. They send emissaries to Israel's camp and ask for a covenant – a peace treaty.

The plan they implement is risky. First , even if their deception was successful, there is no guarantee that Israel will agree to a treaty. Then, even if Israel agrees to a treaty, the Gibeonites could not have been sure that they honor that treaty once they learned that they had been deceived. The Gibeonites also had to weigh the near certainty that in making peace with Israel they would be now viewed as an enemy by their powerful neighbors – this risk becomes reality in chapter 10 when their neighbors immediately attack them once they have learned of Gibeon's defection to Israel's side. If Israel loses the war, Gibeon will suffer reprisals by their powerful neighbors. Why would the Gibeonites take such risks?

Only this – and the author has the Gibeonites tell us twice so that we 'll be sure to notice - "because of the name of the LORD your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan . . . it was told to your servants for a certainty that the LORD your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you—so we feared greatly for our lives." What makes the Gibeonites different than the other peoples of Canaan? Were they more righteous? No indication of that. Were they less enmeshed in idolatry and all the horrific practices that came with it? Not at all. We're they more fearful, more desperate? After all they were the next up on Israel's hit list. Perhaps, maybe they did feel more urgency than their neighbors. But I don't think that's the biggest difference. Their neighbors who were also fearful and desperate banded together and fell back on their own resources – they trusted in themselves and in their gods to save them. **In contrast the people of Gibeon were convinced there was no hope of salvation in themselves, their armies, their alliances, their old gods. They had come to believe that their only hope of deliverance was in running toward Israel and Israel's God.** And they did just that. Their plea for mercy is a crazy mixture of desperation and audacity.

Remember the Canaanite woman, perhaps she was even a Gibeonite, who came to Jesus in the district of Tyre and Sidon? "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." Jesus didn't answer at first – seemingly to test this woman's resolve. She continues to cry out. Then testing her even more severely he responds, "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.**" Far from being put off by his answer, she seems to take encouragement from the fact that Jesus has noticed her. She throws herself down before him "Lord, help me!" Then a final test. Jesus replies, "**It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.**" Instead of seeing a put down, instead of seeing a refusal, the woman's heart leaps – now I see my chance, he's given me a opening. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Jesus said to her "**Woman, your faith is great, it shall be done for you as you wish.**" Desperation and audacity – Jesus simply called it faith. Matthew 12:22ff.

SLIDE – The Gibeonites

What do we learn from Gibeon? Regardless of the perceived risks – **it is always the best, the wisest, the safest course to turn toward God in faith.** You have heard the report – maybe from a friend, maybe in this room on Sunday morning, maybe from the apostles themselves as you've read the New Testament. You've heard that Jesus died for your sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised again on the third day. You've heard that, because of what Christ has done, God will forgive you, accept you as his child, and begin setting you free from the things that enslave you – fear, guilt, shame, addictions, whatever. But you think – there are risks – I may lose my friends, my family, my job. I may have to give up some things that care about. Turning to God and trusting in Him, entering into a covenant with Him is always the best, the wisest, the safest course of action. Do it soon, do it today. Afterall, apart from Christ, we are all under a sentence of death - "dead in our trespasses and sins."

Understand your condition, feel that desperation and let it drive you to boldly approach the throne of grace.

What of Joshua and Israel's leaders? What are we to learn from them? I think two things – one is a behavior we should avoid and one a behavior that we should imitate.

SLIDE – Joshua and Israel's leaders

The author makes a special point of mentioning **the behavior to avoid in verse 14 “And they didn't ask counsel of the Lord.”** Oops! This failure of Joshua and Israel's leaders in seeking God's help is difficult to explain. Was it collective amnesia? Hadn't they just suffered defeat because of Achan's sin? Was it pride? “They live a long way from here and they've heard about us. Aren't we bad?” Were they suffering from combat fatigue already and hoping for a quick ending? Did they hope that, having destroyed two cities, this delegation was perhaps the beginning of the end? Joshua and Israel's leaders seem naïve, gullible. They fail to ask some very obvious questions.

If these people live so very far away, why do they want a peace treaty to begin with?

Old bread? Wouldn't they have purchased new provisions as needed along the way? Why keep old bread unless you're trying to prove something?

Why are they unwilling to tell us exactly where they've come from? They seem evasive.

What's the hurry? If they live far away surely there is time to check out their story.

Of course, their gravest fault is not failing to ask the emissaries more questions. Rather it was failing to ask for God's help. There's a strange irony here. The idolatrous Gibeonites, who have only heard rumors about Israel's God, are asking for His help. Israel who should know their God intimately by now, fails to seek His help. When we see it in this story, their failure is so obvious and puzzling – but there is also something very, very familiar about it. Something that makes me ask “How many times a day is this little sentence 'he didn't ask the counsel of the Lord' true of me?” More than I know. Certainly more than I care to admit. Even worse, have I gone through a day not having asked for God's help at all? With some amount of shame – I'd have to answer that “yes.”

The remedy for this fault is “praying without ceasing” as Paul instructs us – asking for God's leading and help in all of our decisions and efforts. In big and small, alone and with others, the routine and exceptional. Proverbs 4:5 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.”

SLIDE – Joshua and Israel's Leaders

The second lesson we learn from Israel is something very positive. They did not compound their mistake with sin. Joshua and Israel's leaders, even when they realize that they have been deceived, do not violate the covenant they have made. They might have made excuses, “They lied to us!” “We must obey God's commands to destroy all the inhabitants of the land.” “We must keep the peoples' loyalty and they are grumbling about this decision.” But they didn't make excuses. They understood that their God is a God who makes and keeps covenants with those who are unworthy of his mercy, and they chose to be like him and keep the promise they have made.

We who are the Lord's we ought to keep our promises, just as God keeps His promises to us. Our marriage vows, our business contracts, our credit agreements, our commitment to be somewhere and do something, the promises we make to one another when we became members of this body. Keep your vows, your covenants and commitments. Psalms 15:1 . . . 4 "Who shall abide in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? . . . He swears to his own hurt and does not change." It is a very dangerous practice to try to fix our mistakes by committing a greater sin. Don't do that.

What do we learn about Israel's God, who is also our God?

SLIDE – Israel's God

1. There is no one who is so far from God that God will not hear and answer their plea for help. It is difficult to imagine a people who are further from God, less likely as candidates for His mercy, than the Gibeonites (Hivites). They are idolaters of the worse sort. They were under a sentence of death – This was God's long range plan – 40 years before he has promised (Exodus 23:23) "I will blot them out." He had not forgotten. In Joshua 3:10 "The LORD will drive out from before you, the . . . Hivites (and 5 other "ites"). Their time is short; they are the "next up" as the armies of Israel close in from the east. Their motives for approaching God are not at all noble - simply fear and self-interest. Even their plea for mercy is disguised in a deliberate, elaborate lie. By any measure they did not approach God in the "right way."

But, in this passage as we do in so many other places in Scripture, we find that our God, the God of Israel, does not and, it seems, cannot withhold mercy from those who come to him. He is the God who spared Rehab, the God who would have spared Sodom and Gomorah, if only ten righteous people had been found there. He is the God who forgave and restored an adulterer and murderer who prayed "according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." He is the God who spared an entire generation of Assyrians who repented at Jonah's half-hearted preaching. He is the one who, through his prophet Isaiah, pleads "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." Here we learn that our God will never say, "I will withhold my mercy from you because you did not ask in the right way." Our God is the God who says, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out."

SLIDE – Israel's God

2. God uses even our mistakes for His purposes and glory. God used this covenant to draw out the five kings from their cities so that Joshua could destroy them in the open field, rather than face them behind the walls of their cities. This is no reason, no justification, to purposefully sin or to be careless in our decisions. But God is not surprised or put off his plan by our failures. He is much better and greater than that.

SLIDE – Israel's God

3. There is no difficulty that we experience, no battle in which we are engaged, that is beyond God's ability to help. Our God is the complete master and sustain-er of His creation. He can move heaven and earth to help us. In this instance he caused huge hailstones to fall on the Canaanite army; He caused the daylight to be extended, as much as an additional 24 hours. How did He do that? If the earth stopped revolving things would fly around, the tides would overwhelm the land, the physics of planetary motion would be violated, etc. No one has any idea how He did that – but the one who created the universe and holds it up and holds it together by the word of his power can manage. And if He did this for his people Israel, He is certainly able to handle our emergencies, crises, and conundrums.

Our God can move heaven and earth to deliver his people and to punish the wicked. Sky grew dark and the earth quaked when Jesus died. The sky will grow dark, there will be hail and the earth will move when Jesus returns. Psalm 104:32 reminds us that His physical creation obeys Him. "He looks at the earth and it trembles; He touches the mountains and they smoke."

In our biggest battles and challenges – our God is worthy of our complete trust. He will help us if we cry out to Him. Our God is bigger than our stupidity and mistakes, merciful to all who call upon Him, and powerful beyond our comprehension.

These are good things to know "For we wrestle not with flesh and blood – not even a particular relative or neighbor or candidate or political party - but against rulers, against authorities, against cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

What if Joshua and Israel's leaders had "sought the counsel of the Lord?" What do you think the Lord would have said on this occasion.

What part did Gibeon play in Israel's history? Joshua 18:21-25; Samuel 21:1ff; 1 Kings 3:4-5 1 Kings 9:2; Nehemiah 3:7.

God seems to have let Joshua and Israel's leaders "off the hook" even though they disobeyed Deut 7:1-2; in contrast Israel suffered defeat and Achan was punished severely for disobeying Josh 6:18. Why?

This passage places covenant keeping above the command to utterly destroy the people's of the land. Why would this be so? Does this seem consistent with other passages of Scripture?