

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Joshua #10

Sermon Summary #10

God's Words / Our Prayers: Never One without the Other Joshua 8:30-9:27

On a couple of occasions in our series on Joshua, I've mentioned how some people make the mistake of thinking that they can take the experience of the people of Israel in 1,500 b.c. and impose it, somewhat simplistically, upon our own situation in 2012 a.d. The reason why this is a mistake is that Joshua and the people of Israel were living under the Old or Mosaic Covenant. Their relationship with God, therefore, was governed and shaped by the laws set forth in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy. We, on the other hand, live under the New Covenant established by Christ. We as the Church are not a theocratic nation with definable geographic boundaries. The Church is an international spiritual body governed primarily by the Scriptures of the New Testament.

This is not to say, however, that we can't learn from Joshua and the experience of Israel. Of course we can! In fact, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that what happened to them was "written down *for our instruction*." He's even more explicit in Romans 15:4 where he says that "whatever was written in former days [referring to the OT] was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures [again, a reference to the OT Scriptures] we might have hope."

It was with this in mind that I sat down and read through our passage for today. As I reflected on the experience of the nation Israel in Joshua 8:30-35 and then again in Joshua 9 and their interaction with the Gibeonites, I kept asking the question: "If this was written down for **our** instruction, what is it precisely that God wants us to learn from it?"

As I asked that question, the text spoke loudly to me. I came to realize as I kept reading and reflecting on this passage that it is primarily about the foundational role of God's Word in our lives and the absolute necessity of prayer in seeking guidance from God. Let me explain.

God's Words

There are only four things you can do with God's Word(s). (1) Some people *trivialize* the Word of God by denying its inspiration and rejecting its authority. They reduce it to little more than a human collection of merely human ideas about human religious experience. (2) Others don't trivialize God's Word but they do *trifle* with it. These folk acknowledge that the Word is inspired but they don't take it seriously except on those occasions when it serves their interests. They pick and choose what suits their fancy and frequently avoid the difficult and demanding parts. (3) Then thirdly there are those who *tamper* with God's Word. That is to say, they labor to change it, to reshape it, to remake it to say what reinforces their personal preferences and contributes to their personal comfort. (4) Finally, there are those who *tremble* at God's Word. "This is the person to whom I will look with favor: the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at my word" (paraphrase of Isa. 66:2).

But what does it mean to tremble at God's Word? I think it involves both *fear and excitement*. There is fear because when one reads God's Word we are confronted with an indescribably powerful, immeasurably holy, unfathomably majestic God and we become painfully aware of all our shortcomings and failures and sins and we feel helpless in our own strength to do anything about it. But there is also excitement because we discover in God's Word the glory of his grace and mercy to sinners like us; we see that in God's Word there is joy and gladness and peace and food for our souls that will forever satisfy.

The person who trembles at God's Word is the one who happily confesses that it is GOD'S Word and then eagerly makes haste to obey it. The person who trembles at God's Word is the one who knows that his/her response to it will either make or break his Christian life and his relationship to Christ.

Joshua was a man who trembled at God's Word. That is why he was determined to cultivate in the hearts of Israel that same reverence and exciting passion for the revelation of God in Scripture. In fact, that's what Joshua 8:30-35 is all about.

Let's remember the context of this passage. In Joshua 6 we read of the glorious defeat and destruction of Jericho. In Joshua 7 we read of the sad and disillusioning defeat at the hands of the armies of Ai, all of which came about because a man by the name of Achan chose to trifle and tamper with God's Word rather than tremble before it. In Joshua 8 we read of the victory at Ai, as God once again came to the aid of his people and extended their presence in and possession of the promised land.

To some, vv. 30-35 seem terribly out of place. In Joshua 8:29 we read of the rather grisly death of the king of Ai. But then immediately, in v. 30, we find ourselves 20 miles north in the shadow of Mt. Ebal at a worship service!

There is a reason for this. The covenant renewal service in vv. 30-35 is designed to tell us that ***Israel's success in defeating her enemies is not primarily about knocking off Canaanites but rather about the submission of God's people to the authority of God's Word.***

What we read here in 8:30-35 is actually the obedient response of the people to what Moses had commanded in *Deuteronomy 27:1-28:14*. I'll read only a portion of the passage:

“And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you. And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly. Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the people of the LORD your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today” (Deuteronomy 27:2-10).

So that's precisely what Joshua and Israel did. They first built an altar of uncut stones on Mt. Ebal. There they offered burnt offerings, a symbol of their complete dedication and commitment to God. They also offered up peace (or fellowship) offerings which symbolized their well-being in God's presence, and they worshiped!

Then, second, they wrote God's law on stones and read it publicly (vv. 32-35). Having secured large, flat stones they coated them with lime and perhaps used red paint to print the 10 Commandments, together with the blessings and curses of the law of Moses. Nothing was to be left out. Notice how the word “**all**” is used: “he read *all* the words” of the law, according to “*all* that is written in the Book of the Law.” There was “not a word of *all* that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read.”

Finally, they engaged in an *antiphonal chant*. All 12 tribes gathered together in the valley of Shechem, between Mt. Ebal on the north and Mt. Gerizim on the south. It provided for them a magnificent amphitheatre. Six tribes stood on the slopes of Ebal and six stood on Gerizim. We're not sure how they did it, but perhaps the Levites or priests would read the curses of the law and the people on Ebal would shout Amen! Again, they would read aloud the blessings and the people on Gerizim would shout Amen! Or it may be that the people themselves chanted aloud the curses and blessings of the law and the other side responded with a loud affirmation.

Why? What was the point? First, it was to demonstrate God's hatred of sin and his determination to judge it, on the one hand, and to make known his love of obedience and his promise to bless it, on the other. It was a reminder to Israel of why they first suffered defeat at Ai and why they also ultimately triumphed. Second, it was Israel's declaration of their commitment to abide by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

The simple truth communicated here is that ***your response to God's Word will either make or break your Christian life.*** It's a vivid reminder to us today that any time the Word of God is read or explained or prayed or preached, we as God's people must affirm and embrace its truth and authority over our lives.

Our Prayers

But it is not only God's words that are essential to godly living. There is also the matter of our prayers. This brings us to Joshua 9, which, if it weren't so serious, would have to be judged as one of the funniest chapters in all of the Bible.

Following the covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 8, the Israelites returned past the charred remains of Ai and Jericho and to their camp at Gilgal. Meanwhile, the news of Israel's victory over Ai galvanizes the remaining Canaanite kings to join forces in preparation for war (9:1-2). Perhaps having heard of the first victory that Ai experienced in battle with Israel, they feel confident that the people of God can be defeated.

But there was one group of people who decided to take a different approach. The Gibeonites frankly acknowledged that the Israelites could not be defeated. No confederacy of nations, no amount of military planning could help. So in desperation they concocted an ingenious plan. They disguised themselves to deceive Israel into thinking that they were not among the many Canaanite people groups but were in fact from a far away land.

According to 9:4, "they acted with cunning." I like the NIV translation which says "they resorted to a ruse." Their aim was simply to *trick* Joshua and Israel into thinking they had traveled many miles from far away and were therefore no threat to the people of God.

[The city of Gibeon is approximately 9 miles northwest of Jerusalem.]

By the way, in view of their incredible acting performance, I was tempted to title this sermon: "And the Oscar goes to . . . the Gibeonites!"

Their disguises were perfect. They put on tattered and worn out clothes, sandals, and used worn out and mended wineskins, all to convince Israel that they weren't locals but had come to the end of a long journey from a distant land. The story they told in vv. 7-13 perfectly matched their clothing.

"We've heard about your God. We know how everyone is defeated who comes into battle against you. We came from far away to make a covenant with you and to serve you. Look at our food. It was warm when we left home but it is cold and moldy now. All of our clothing is falling like rags off our backs!"

Israel was duped. They were conned. They bought the story hook, line, and sinker. And in direct violation of the command given to them by God (Exod. 23:31-33; Deut. 7:1-2), they entered into a covenant of peace with the Gibeonites.

Let's be honest: you have to give the Gibeonites credit. This was truly an Oscar-winning performance on their part. They lied and deceived, but they were undeniably clever in the way they protected themselves from destruction.

In fact, they were so clever and well-prepared that they were careful not to say anything about the recent defeat of Jericho and Ai. After all, if they were truly from a far away land they would have no way of knowing about those battles.

At first, Joshua and the Israelites were suspicious (vv. 7-8) and asked all the right questions. ***But there is one thing they failed to do***, and that is the most important lesson for us today:

They failed to ask God! Look again at v. 14 – "So the men [of Israel] took some of their provisions [most likely to taste them to determine if in fact they were old and showed signs of having been brought on a long journey], ***but did not ask counsel from the Lord.***" Literally, "they did not seek the Lord's *mouth*!"

What should Joshua have done? He should have availed himself of the incredible privilege and blessing that had been explained years earlier. Look with me at Numbers 27:18-23 –

“So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.’ And Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the LORD directed through Moses” (Numbers 27:18-23).

The point here is found in v. 21. There Joshua was told that anytime he needed guidance or counsel or help from God in dealing with a difficult situation that wasn’t explicitly addressed in the Mosaic Law, he should come to Eleazar the priest and God would speak to him through the Urim and Thummim. Simply put, *Joshua failed to pray. Joshua failed to seek God’s wisdom in the matter. Joshua and all Israel relied on their own wisdom and intelligence and ended up being duped by the Gibeonites!*

Now, let me wrap up this story before we conclude with some points of practical application.

We read in the remainder of chapter 9 that when Israel learned that they were Gibeonites from the land of Canaan and had not come from a far away land, they chose not to attack them. ***They honored their covenant*** with the Gibeonites even though they had employed deceit and cunning to obtain it. We thus read in vv. 19-21 . . .

To have broken the oath would be to dishonor God. It was in the name of God that the oath had been taken (see v. 19 – “by the Lord”). To swear by the name of the Lord and then break the oath would imply that God is not to be trusted.

The oath was upheld for centuries until the time of Saul. We read in 2 Samuel 21:1-2 precisely what happened

“Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, ‘There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.’ So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah” (2 Samuel 21:1-2).

According to Joshua 9:22-27, the Gibeonites were content with the arrangements. It wasn’t the best thing in the world that they were cursed to serve Israel as woodcutters and as those who fetched water for them, but it was better than being slaughtered like the residents of Jericho and Ai.

So what can we learn from this almost humorous story?

(1) Common sense is essential for righteous living, but it’s not always enough. It is not our ultimate criterion for decision making. Appearances can often be deceiving, as also people can be! Even the wisest and most skilled and mature of God’s people can be duped. You can’t always trust what your senses tell you. Experience is important, but it isn’t infallible. After all, the Gibeonites looked authentic. But it was all a ruse.

(2) Things we consider routine and obvious and insignificant often require the most intense prayer and seeking of God’s help. Little things as well as the big ones are always matters of prayer.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in ***everything*** by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8).

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

(3) Knowledge of the Scriptures is essential. We’ve just seen how Israel embraced the totality of God’s Word and renewed their commitment to the Law of Moses. ***But knowing the Bible does not justify prayerlessness!*** The Bible doesn’t provide an answer to every question we have in life. It answers all the essential questions regarding what is true and what is false regarding God and our relationship to him. It answers all essential questions about what is good and what is evil. But when it comes to making application of God’s Word to particular challenges and decisions we face, we must turn to the Lord in prayer.

(4) We often make errors of judgment at times when we least expect it to happen. Joshua and the people of Israel were *coming off an incredible spiritual high*. They felt strong and reaffirmed in their relationship with God. They had dealt with sin in the life of Achan. God was present among them and had just enabled them to defeat the armies of Ai. They said, in effect, “We can handle this one on our own. It’s obvious these people aren’t from Canaan. They are no threat to us. There’s no need to bother God with this.”

We must be wary of cocky self-confidence and independence. Beware of spiritual complacency. Beware of thinking that God will do for you apart from prayer what he has promised to do for you only through prayer.

(5) Do nothing without consulting his Word and seeking his face. No matter how routine, obvious, or small the matter may be: seek his face. Go to the throne of grace. No matter how much you may know, how confident you may feel, how mature you may seem, how high and happy you may be, don’t fail to make inquiry of the Lord.