

Get in the Game!

Joshua 11

And the hits just kept on coming. It was tough enough for the Israelites to have to fight five kings at once, as we saw in chapter 10. But this northern alliance was even more overwhelming. Verse 4 says their army had as many people as the sand on the seashore, so no matter how you count the Israelites, they were obviously outnumbered. Oh, and the inhabitants of the land also had horses and chariots, the most advanced weapons known in the ancient world. In short, the Israelites were outgunned and outmanned. They were confronting the most serious opposition they faced in the entire campaign to take the Promised Land. Things just kept getting harder and harder for them.

And isn't that the way life works most of the time? Don't the difficulties and challenges become more difficult as time passes? Oh, I know – when we're kids we think that adults have it made. After all, they have so much freedom. They can stay up as late as they want. They can have ice cream for supper. They can drive everywhere. But the fact is that when you are in school, your biggest problems are passing tests and getting along with your friends. The consequences of failure may be heartbreaking, but they usually aren't that serious, at least in the long run.

But once you graduate, the stakes are much higher. Instead of getting a poor conduct grade for habitual tardiness, your boss may fire you if you show up late for work too often. Failing a test may bring down your grade point average, but making a poor presentation or alienating a client may mean losing a sale, a raise, or even a job. Cheating on your girlfriend may bring on the heartache of a break-up, or perhaps the pain of a slap in the face. But cheating on your wife can cost you your house, your kids, and half of your income if you get divorced. Grownups may have more freedom than children, but we also have a lot more responsibility.

And the older we get, the greater are the challenges that we face. For all those commercials to the contrary, you really can't stop your hair from turning gray or falling out, and you can't keep all the wrinkles out of your skin. There's a reason that after awhile the golfers start playing on the Senior Tour – even Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson just can't drive the ball as far as they used to. And once chronic pain and illness sets in, once you start to lose loved ones, the ideas that children have about the freedom of adulthood become laughable. For eventually, if the Lord tarries, we'll all have to face that last, worst enemy, the one before which we all stand completely helpless – death itself.

So, what do we do in the face of problems that just get more and more difficult? What do we do when we can't ignore our problems and when we have absolutely no way to solve them? Well, what did the Lord tell Joshua? God didn't deny the existence of that huge, well-equipped army gathered at the waters of Merom. He didn't tell Joshua to turn tail and run back across the Jordan or back to Egypt. In verse 6, God simply said, "Be not afraid." And why not? "Because tomorrow I will deliver all of them up slain to you." In short, God promised that He would do the impossible, that He would accomplish through the army of Israel what they could not do in their own strength.

And Joshua had good reason to believe that God would do exactly that. After all, Joshua had seen God perform lots of other miracles. He could remember the plagues on the Egyptians – the Nile turning into blood, the darkness descending on the land, the mysterious death of all the Egyptians' firstborn. He had walked through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River on dry ground as God held back the waters. He knew how God had made the walls of Jericho come a-tumblin' down to allow His people to destroy that city. He remembered how God had hurled down hailstones upon on the army of the five

kings, and provided a whole extra day of daylight so Joshua's army could destroy them and conquer the southern part of the Promised Land. Joshua knew God could do anything.

Moreover, God had given Joshua specific instructions on how to accomplish so many of his previous victories. God had told the people to wait by the banks of the Jordan River three days before crossing. God had told them to march around the city of Jericho for seven days before He destroyed its walls. God had told Joshua to set an ambush so he could conquer the city of Ai. In a very real sense, God had led His people every step of the way on their journey out of Egypt into the Promised Land.

But this challenge would be harder for Joshua, and not just because he was facing a larger, better-equipped foe. Because this time, there would be no miraculous intervention, no parting of waters, no collapsing walls or hailstones from Heaven. And this time, God would prescribe no particular tactics. No, this time Joshua and his army would have to win the battle themselves, in the span of a normal day, following their own battle plan.

Now, they would have the Lord's help, to be sure. Verse 8 makes it clear that God indeed delivered that tremendous army into the hands of the Israelites. Moreover, verse 20 explains that it was God who hardened the hearts of the inhabitants of the land so that they would charge into battle with the Israelites. But it was still up to Joshua and his army to win the victory that God made possible. Joshua was the one who would have to lead the Israelites in the surprise attack that verse 7 describes. And in verse 8, it was the Israelite army that would have to defeat their enemies and chase them all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean, over 20 miles away. In this case, on this occasion, if God teed up the ball, Joshua and his army had to drive it.

And isn't the same thing true for us? After all, none of us keep our training wheels on forever. Just as players progress from T-ball to coach-pitch to little league, God was allowing Joshua and the Israelites to make progress. And the time had come for them to stand on their own, to fight for themselves, to win their own victories. And the events of today's passage proved that Joshua didn't always need miracles from Heaven in order to win his battles. He just needed to put aside his fears, make the best decisions he could, work as hard as possible, and trust the Lord for the outcome.

And that's what all of us need to do as well, no matter the problems that we face. Yes, we trust God to accomplish miracles when we face situations that are impossible for us. Of course we pray that God would give us all the help that we need in order to accomplish His will in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. But as we pray, even for the miraculous, and as we trust God, we also need to get up and get busy. Instead of waiting for God to do all the work, we must do whatever we can to advance the cause of His Kingdom, showing and sharing the love and truth and justice of Christ in everything that we do.

In other words, while we need to trust our coach and listen carefully to his instructions, and study the play book and practice, there comes a time when we have to get off the bench and get in the game. As Christians, that means we must pray as though everything depends on God, but at the same time work as though everything depends on us. And just as Joshua did, we can be confident that God will accomplish His good and perfect will in us and through us, even if also sometimes in spite of us. So we need to get in the game.

Oh, but there was one other thing Joshua did in accomplishing this great victory in the power of God – He was obedient to God's commands. We see that fact repeated over and over throughout the passage – in verse 9 and in verse 12 and in verse 15 we read that Joshua did everything the Lord had commanded him to do. Everything.

And that obedience extended even to something that didn't make any military sense at all. For in verse 6, the only thing God specifically told Joshua to do in the battle was to destroy all the enemy's chariots and warhorses once the battle was over.

Now, what sense did that make? These were the most advanced armaments of the age. Before the invention of the stirrup, it was easy for soldiers to practice archery while on horseback, but only a chariot allowed a man to attack with the speed of a horse but also with the power of a footsoldier, wielding not only arrows but swords and spears. Chariots were the tanks of the Ancient world. So, if the Israelites could have learned how to use these horses and chariots for themselves, they would have presented a much more formidable front to their enemies in the future. That would have made sense.

So, why did God specifically tell them not to use such effective weapons? Perhaps God wanted His people to maintain that important balance between work and prayer that we've already discussed. For it is certainly the case that if we gain too much power it's easy to forget that God is the One Who is ultimately responsible for all our victories. It's easy to let too much power or too much wealth or too much wisdom or too much popularity go to our heads, losing our dependence on God and descending instead into sinful, selfish pride.

But however much sense all of that makes, the fact is that God didn't tell Joshua why he should destroy all that valuable materiel. And the fact is that God continues to set boundaries on the tactics that He allows us to use to accomplish His will, even though those boundaries sometimes don't make sense.

And that means that while we Christians are called to work as hard as we can to accomplish God's will, we cannot attempt to achieve divine ends through worldly means. If we are to spread the truth of God's love and grace, we must practice what we preach, treating everyone in a loving and gracious way. Everyone. And that requires us to reject all the commonsense, worldly tactics of the enemy, tactics such as hate or fear, no matter how effective we might think such tactics may be, no matter how often we see other people use them.

And isn't this the same thing Paul says in our responsive reading from Romans 12? We must not be conformed to the standards of the world. We must never pay back evil with more evil, but instead overcome evil with good. And that means we must ask God to bless even our enemies, even the opponents of the gospel, even those who look down on us or even persecute us for our faith. We must ask God to bless them. We must love them.

No, none of that may make sense to us. But if we are to face our increasingly difficult challenges the way Joshua faced his, if we are to work as hard as we can for God's glory, we must not only trust God to accomplish the results He wants through our efforts – we must trust the limits He places on our actions. For just as Christ won the greatest victory by walking the way of the Cross, if we are to follow Him we must walk the same road, loving and serving and forgiving even ungrateful sinners just as He did.

So, let's get off the bench and into the game, showing and sharing the love of Christ. In spite of the greater and greater difficulties we face, let's rely on His power even as we urge everyone to receive Him as Savior and submit to Him as Lord. But let's always be careful to play by His rules and according to His playbook so that we may clearly display Christ to the world.