

## God's Silence Joshua 9

Why didn't God say something? Why didn't God warn His people about the lies the Gibeonites were telling? After all, up to this point in the book, God has told Joshua what to do over and over again, sometimes in great detail. But there's no "The Lord said unto Joshua" anywhere in this passage. All of a sudden, there's silence. And as a result, the people of God ended up making a decision they soon came to regret.

And maybe that's where you are today. Maybe you've got an important decision to make and you wonder why God hasn't made your pathway plain. Or maybe as you look back over your life, at decisions you wish you had made in different ways, you wonder why God didn't warn you at the time about the heartaches that were heading your way.

Well, just as we find in today's passage, maybe it's not God's fault that we haven't benefitted from His guidance. Maybe the reason we're not hearing from God is because we haven't asked for His advice. Or maybe our problem is that we think we've got things all figured out, and we just want God to help us flesh out our ideas and complete the projects on our own agendas. In spite of our insistence that we are faithful to God, maybe we're not really listening to Him at all.

That was certainly true of the Israelites in today's passage. For what did they do when the Gibeonites came to them with a sob story about how far they had come, so far that their clothes wore out and their food dried out? The Israelites took their words at face value, and they quickly jumped to the wrong conclusion. They relied on their own experience, their own judgment, their own common sense to make an important decision.

Instead, as verse 14 makes clear, they should have asked the Lord what to do, seeking His face in the Scriptures and in prayer. But because they didn't ask the counsel of the Lord, because they tried to figure it out on their own, they ended up being fooled.

And why is that? Because no matter how little we pride ourselves on, independent American Presbyterians want to hear it, the fact is that we are simply not capable of being in charge of our lives. Our tiny minds just can't take in all the information we need to make good decisions all the time. Our frame of reference is just too limited for us to understand all the confusing circumstances that are constantly swirling around us. We don't even know why things happen – why people get sick or have accidents or become the victims of crimes – let alone what to do about those things. And even when we try to live according to God's Word, we find that it is often very complicated. No, the bottom line is that we need to rely on God's wisdom, not our own. Instead of charging ahead in the silence, we need to stop and listen to God.

And one of the ways we do that is to consult what God has said in His Word. Now, that's one thing the Israelites thought they were doing right. As we saw last week, they had a great reverence for the Scriptures that God had given to Moses. In fact, they had such great respect for the Word of God that they wrote down a copy of it on big, whitewashed rocks at Shechem so that everyone could read it.

So maybe that's where the men of Gibeon got the idea for their ruse – maybe they read the writing on the rocks. After all, Deuteronomy 20:16 says that God's people were not to leave alive any of the inhabitants of any of the cities in the land which God was giving to them. But in the same chapter, verse 11 says that whenever people of distant lands would agree to make peace with God's people, the Israelites were not to kill them, but to accept their surrender and allow all of them to become their slaves.

So, when the Gibeonites lied and said they had come from a far country, and when they came up with all kinds of bogus proofs of their claim, they were basically tempting the people of God, not to defy God's Word or to ignore God's Word, but to give God's Word a shallow reading, to misinterpret the Scriptures by focusing only on part of God's Word so that they would end up disobeying a much more fundamental commandment.

And aren't we faced with the same sort of temptation at times? Aren't we often urged to read the Bible selectively, to focus on some passages while ignoring others? I mean, how many times have you had the beginning of Matthew 7 quoted at you? "Do not judge, lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged." We often hear this from people who are trying to get away with behavior that is clearly forbidden somewhere else in the Bible. In other words, folks like to quote one verse so they can defy something else God said.

But we all do this in one way or another. We love to hear the promises of God's protection like those we sing in "How Firm a Foundation." We love to hear the part of the gospel about God's forgiveness, but we're not so keen on the part about repentance – about the need to turn away from sin if we are to turn to God. We love the idea of following Jesus like the sheep follow the Shepherd in Psalm 23, but not so much His reminder that following Him always involves denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses. We love to read about God's unconditional, self-sacrificial love for us, but where it comes to us loving other people, and even our enemies in the same way, all too often we just turn the page.

So, what does all this mean for us? Simply put, we can't ignore anything that Scripture teaches. So that means we must speak the truth, but always with true love and humility. As we have received, we must freely give. We must follow Christ, not only through the green pastures and beside the still waters, but also through the valley of the shadow of death.

No, none of that will be easy. In fact, following God's perfect law of love is always challenging. But just like the ancient Israelites, we are called to obey all of God's Word, not just the parts we like. And we are called to do what God says because we're frankly not wise enough to figure out everything on our own. We are called to do what God says because our Almighty God deserves nothing less than perfect obedience from those He has created for His glory and saved by the sacrifice of His Son.

Okay, so we are all called to trust in God's perfect wisdom instead of relying on our reason and experience. And we are called to obey all of God's Word, not just cherry-picking the parts we understand or prefer. But what are we to do when, in spite of our best efforts at humble faithfulness, we screw things up? What do we do when we fall prey to temptation and end up making a really bad decision?

It wasn't long before the Israelites realized that was the situation they were in. Verse 16 says it only took three days for the truth about the Gibeonites to come out, the truth that they were not from some faraway city but actually residents of the Promised Land, and thus under God's death sentence. And when the truth came out, verse 18 says that some of the Israelites naturally got really upset with the mistake that their leaders had made. They obviously wanted their leaders to make things right by putting all those lying Gibeonites to death even though they had vowed to let them live. I mean, why should they be so concerned about telling the truth to a bunch of liars? Why not kill them all like God's Word said they were supposed to?

But in verses 19 and 20, the leaders refused to break their word. And why? Well, listen to what else we read in Deuteronomy, what chapter 23 says about keeping vows:

“If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.... You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth.”

So yes, the Israelites were wrong when they failed to seek God’s wisdom. They were wrong to follow only part of God’s Word and ignore the rest. But they would have been just as wrong to try to fix one mistake by making another. Breaking their vow, even a promise to such treacherous liars wouldn’t have corrected their previous sins – it would simply have added to them.

And the same thing is true for us. Maybe you didn’t ask God before you took a job. And maybe that job has turned out to be a real drag. But when you signed on, you made a commitment to work hard and earn your wages, so you can’t shirk your responsibilities just because you think your boss is a jerk. It does no good to add the sin of laziness, which is really just stealing from your employer, to your willful impulsiveness.

Or maybe you married someone for the wrong reasons – just because she was good looking or just because he was rich. And maybe you later realized that you should have sought God’s will before making such an important decision. Well, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 7 that we shouldn’t divorce a spouse who wants to stay married to us, even if that marriage started off in a sinful way or didn’t turn out the way we expected. Two wrongs don’t make a right, and God clearly says that breaking our vows is wrong.

But why is that? Why is it so important for God’s people to keep the promises we have made? Well, we’ve learned that we should consult God when we have decisions to make because God is the One Who is truly wise. And we know that we should obey all of God’s Word because God is our Lord and King, worthy of our total allegiance. Just so, God’s people should always keep our word because God is always faithful and true. His Word never changes, and He has never failed to keep any promise that He has ever made.

And don’t we see all these things so clearly in the cross of Christ? I mean, which of us would have come up with such wise plan to save the world – the Son of God dying so that sinners might be forgiven. And didn’t Jesus obey everything the Word of God said about Him, submitting Himself completely to the will of the Father, going to the cross even though it cost Him His own life? And don’t we depend on God’s faithfulness when we cling to the cross, claiming the blood of Christ as a sufficient sacrifice offered on our behalf? Don’t we count on God keeping His promise to forgive all those who trust in Christ as our Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord?

No, that’s the good news today: God is not silent. He has testified to His wisdom, His authority, and His faithfulness in the Person and Work of Jesus. And He calls us to follow Him, listen to Him, obeying Him, and trusting Him even as we live in such a way that others can trust us as well. Will we follow Him today?