

Sharing God's Victories Joshua 10

Have you ever made a big mess of things? Maybe you told a lie, and then had to tell another to cover up the first one, and then another, and then before you knew it, you couldn't remember what you had told to whom. Or maybe you lost your temper and lost a friend, and you have no idea how to restore that relationship. Or maybe you chose a college or a career or even a spouse for proud or selfish reasons, only to find your life heading in directions you don't really want to go. Maybe one problem has led to another and another and you just don't see any way out.

Well, that was the situation that faced the Israelites in today's passage. As we studied last week in chapter 9, their leaders had been deceived by the Gibeonites, the pagan residents of a town just a few miles from Ai. Because the Israelites had conquered Ai, killing everyone in it, the Gibeonites had pretended to be from a far country so that the Israelites would make a peace treaty with them. And that's exactly what the Israelites had done. Instead of asking God what they should do, they rashly entered into a solemn covenant with the Gibeonites, letting them live even though they were under God's sentence of death.

And as we turn the page to chapter 10, we see how the Israelites' big mistake led to even bigger problems. For while the Gibeonites had surrendered to the Israelites, the rest of the unbelievers in the area decided instead to put up a fight. They decided to make an example out of the Gibeonites so that none of the other cities in the land would join forces with the invaders. So, a coalition of five kings set out to destroy Gibeon, even though all of them were, basically, unbelievers.

Now, such a dispute wouldn't normally have mattered very much to God's people – after all, those who aren't following the Lord, those who self-centered, those who motivated by hate and fear tend to get angry with one another, and there's not much we can do about it. After all, it never surprised Matt Dillon when a fight started among the drunks in the Long Branch Saloon.

But remember, the Gibeonites had made a covenant with the Israelites. As part of that agreement, they had sworn to serve the people of Israel, but the people of Israel had also sworn to protect the Gibeonites. Yes, this covenant had been made under false pretenses, but for better or worse, the Israelites had made unconditional promises to the Gibeonites in the name of God. And that meant those promises had to be kept. So in verse 7 we see the strange scene of God's people marching off to get involved in an intramural squabble among a bunch of godless people all of whom should have been their enemies.

But is this really so strange after all? For isn't this the same sort of thing Christ did for sinners like us? After all, why did He get involved with a bunch of people who didn't love or trust Him, a rabble of rebels who denied His authority and opposed His righteous rule? Why was He willing to make Himself a sacrifice for us, even though His own disciples betrayed and denied and abandoned Him – even though it was His own people that sentenced Him to death?

In part, for the same reason that the Israelites marched into battle to protect those treacherous Gibeonites – in order to keep God's promises. Back in chapter 8, we saw the Israelites remember God's promise to Abraham as they travelled to Shechem to build an altar and hold a worship service. They rejoiced in the fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham's descendants a great nation and to give them a place to live. But way back in Genesis 12, God had also told Abraham that in him, all the families of the earth would one day be blessed. And that promise was fulfilled in the Person and Work of Christ for all those who share the faith of Abraham.

For that is the good news of the gospel. Just as Abraham trusted God and that trust was accounted to him for righteousness, all those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord not only have all our sins placed on Jesus. We also have the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to our account. Because of Christ's cross and resurrection, we become heirs of God's blessings to Abraham. In short, we become the people of God because God is faithful to His promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and to us.

And if we are the people of God, that means we must be as faithful to our promises as He is faithful to His. For the Israelites in today's passage, that meant putting their lives on the line to protect a bunch of unbelievers with whom they had carelessly made a mutual protection agreement. For us, it might mean working to save a difficult marriage, giving up our own desires so that our beloved might be blessed. It might mean paying off a loan for a family member who has made bad choices. It might mean putting in extra hours at work to cover for a colleague who has come down with the flu, or just staying up late with a grieving friend who needs to talk. Whatever commitments we have made, whatever relationships in which we find ourselves, being faithful to God often means putting the needs of others before our own. For Christ has shown us that, in a sinful world like ours, keeping our promises of love always involves such self-sacrifice.

But if we can see in today's passage that we must keep our promises, even if that sometimes means getting ourselves into big trouble, we can also see that God is able to use even our worst mistakes, even our biggest disobediences to bring about big victories. For think about it – the people of God never would have made a covenant with the Gibeonites if they had been obedient to God. It was rash of them not to ask for God's guidance, and it was wrong for them to have made such a firm commitment to a bunch of lying unbelievers. But because the Gibeonites made this covenant, the rest of the people in the land decided to join together to attack them, to make an example out of them. And because all these unbelievers came together in one place, God was able to destroy them all in one day, hurling hailstones down on them from Heaven. The Israelites' disobedience thus turned out to be a key component of God's battle plan.

And how many of us can testify to the same thing? Hasn't God brought great good from so many of our mistakes and even our disobedience? I know that's true for me. It was in 1990 that I first became convinced that God wanted me to enter the pastoral ministry. I was a Methodist at the time, and my pastor was ready to get me preaching right away in the pulpit of a small nearby church. But I was too scared. Instead of launching off into pastoral ministry, I ran home and got my teaching certificate and tried to teach US History in high school.

I spent three miserable years running from God. But during that time, I began to attend a Presbyterian church, and taught an adult Sunday School class. My class confirmed God's call on my life. I was also elected a Ruling Elder, and got a copy of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which I wanted to learn more about. So, when I finally decided to study for the ministry it was as a Presbyterian at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson. And just when I was ready to graduate, this church happened to have a vacant pulpit.

But what if I hadn't been disobedient for four years? What if I had started preaching at a little Methodist church near Nashville in 1990? I would probably have gone to Asbury and then been assigned to a church in Tennessee or maybe South Georgia. It's hard to see how I could have ended up in Southwest Mississippi if I had followed that path. And so it seems that my three years of running from God were not an interruption of His plan for me. Those three years of disobedience were an essential element of the way I ended up in Claiborne County 22 years ago.

And the same sort of thing may be true for you, even today. Maybe you've got regrets. Maybe you got married or took a job or selected a college for the wrong reasons – but that doesn't mean God can't use those experiences and relationships to accomplish His will in your life. Maybe He's put you where you are so He can give you victory over some besetting sin, or so you can point someone else toward redemption and salvation. So, it doesn't matter how big a mess you've made of your life. God can use even our worst disobedience to accomplish His will.

But if that's true, if God can bring about great victories by working through our sin and rebellion, how much greater are the things we should expect Him to accomplish through us when we go along with Him willingly? For isn't that also what happened in today's passage? Once Joshua and his people decided to go into battle, God clearly told them in verse 8 that He had given His enemies into their hands. So, even though it was the Israelites disobedience that provoked this conflict, God still allowed Joshua and his people to join in the fight alongside the Lord Himself.

Now, make no mistake: God didn't need their help in order to win this battle. Verse 11 makes it clear that God did a whole lot more damage with His hailstones than His people did with their swords and spears. But God graciously allowed them to work with Him, allowing their efforts to magnify His great victory over the forces of evil.

And how did the people help win this victory? That may be the most amazing thing of all. In verse 12, we find that Joshua prayed to God, asking Him to make the sun stand still, to give the Israelites more daylight so they could pursue their enemies and utterly destroy them. And God answered such an impossible prayer. God gave the Israelites a whole extra day's worth of sunlight so they could complete the victory in which He had allowed them to share.

So, maybe one of your bad decisions has gotten you into a big mess, and you have no idea how to get out of it. Or maybe God is calling you to help someone or get involved in some situation that just seems impossible to solve. Well, could anything be harder than to make the sun stand still for an entire day? If God could do such a thing in answer to Joshua's prayer, why can't He answer your prayers for yourself, or your friends or your loved ones?

Yes, maybe that's the most amazing truth we find in this passage: if God can accomplish His will even through our mistakes, and if God allows us to participate in the victorious advancement of His kingdom, one of the biggest ways we are called to do this is through prayer. For what did Jesus promise us in our responsive reading this morning? "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and he who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to him who knocks." The good news is that God promises to answer our prayers, even if they are for something that seems to be downright impossible.

But as we pray, let's remember this too: prayers that are effective are those that are in line with God's will. After all, Joshua only asked for the sun to stand still so that his army could make God's victory more complete. Just so, in our responsive reading, Jesus points out that, as a good parent, God will only give us things that are good for us. And as our desires and our thoughts as well as our actions line up with God's will, as our prayers are offered in accordance with God's will, we can be sure that those prayers will be answered. Just as God promises to give His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him, we can be sure that His Spirit will work through us, and that our lives will yield victorious fruit, the fruit of helping God accomplish His plans for us and our loved ones.

So, no matter how great our mistakes may have been, let's cast aside all our regrets. Let's be confident in God's power to bring great good even out of the greatest evil. Let's move forward in faithfulness to God and to others, keeping our promises and seeking God's will in all our prayers and all

our actions. For as we take our stand on the Lord's side, as we align our desires and our deeds with our faithful God's good and perfect plans, we can be assured that we will share in the triumph of the Lord Jesus, triumph over wickedness in ourselves and the world around us, triumph over sin and death itself.