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Mistakes, Emergencies and Mercy

Joshua 9 & 10

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series: Ventures in Faith: The Book of Joshua

Have you ever known that gut-wrenching feeling when you know you messed up bad and you should've known better but you did it anyway? You want to defend yourself but you know what you did is indefensible? I have experienced that emotion more times than I care to admit as I regularly do damage to people. And that emotion is never stronger than when the person I do damage to is God.

Maybe some of you can relate to that. Have you ever sinned against God, and you knew better, but you sinned anyway? You opened that secret browser tab anyway; you let that make-out session go too far anyway; you let your wife or your kids experience the full brunt of your rage anyway. And you're left just waiting for God to punish you or worse, just to give up on you? Have you ever known that God is disappointed with you? This moment, this emotion, is exactly what is about to happen to Israel in the book of Joshua. And as we read Joshua 9 and 10, we are going to learn God's MO for dealing with his people in moments like this—moments of sin and rebellion.

Open your Bibles to Joshua chapter 9. We left off last week at a high point in Israel's conquest of the land God promised his people. After Achan sinned, the Lord helped his people win a huge victory against the city of Ai, and then all the people sat on the side of two mountains and listened to the entire law of God being read in this promise of devotion and renewal of their covenant with their God. They had this brand new beginning. Israel is back on top. But this high point leads to an alarmingly quick downfall. Look with me at verse 1:

Now when all the kings west of the Jordan heard about these things—the kings in the hill country, in the western foothills, and along the entire coast of the Mediterranean Sea as far as Lebanon (the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites)—

The passage begins with "When all the kings heard these things." What things? What had the Canaanites heard? Surely part of what the kings heard was Israel's great victory taking the city of Ai, but I don't think that's all they heard. I think they also heard about Israel's defeat at Ai before their eventual victory. They heard about how the Israelites had fled and been routed in battle. Imagine if you're a Canaanite. This new force of nomadic ex-slaves has shown up on your eastern border and has convincingly won a series of battles on the east side of the Jordan River. You're watching closely as they start marching toward you across the river and they win another battle at Jericho. These guys look invincible, like the 2016 Warriors. But then they lose, and lose big in their next battle at Ai. They eventually come back and win the series—they destroy Ai.

But now you're playing them next and they look a little different to you. Instead of this invincible foe, now you start thinking that maybe, with the right strategy and a couple of key mid-season

trades, maybe you can take these guys down after all. Maybe they aren't as scary as we thought. And that's exactly what we see out of the Canaanites: two different reactions. The first reaction is: The kings of Canaan make war. This conglomeration of kings decides if they band together, they can beat Israel. Israel isn't invincible; they lost once, they can lose again. So they muster up a huge fighting force to oppose Israel. But Gibeon reacts differently. Gibeon pulls a Kevin Durant and decides, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

The second reaction is: The Gibeonites make a treaty. In order to make a treaty they come up with this elaborate trick—a lie—to persuade Israel's leaders they are from a distant land far away. And they promise to be Israel's servants if only Israel will protect them. Israel has been explicitly told to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan. As we read on we learn that Joshua isn't sold on Gibeon's sandals and bread, and he asks the right question: Where are you from? But the Gibeonites try to dodge the question, like a Jedi mind trick. "We are your servants." But Joshua persists, and so they lie with a vague answer, "we come from a distant land."

Then the Gibeonites do something interesting: they make a profession of faith. They say, "we came because of the fame of the Lord your God" (they even use the proper name for God, Yahweh your God). And then they talk about what the Lord did for his people at Sihon and Og. Those were battles the Israelites won on the east side of the Jordan, before Moses died, and in doing so they are being intentionally deceptive. Their profession of faith is ironically clothed in a lie.

Now, some commentators have said that the Gibeonites only talked about God, Yahweh, because they were flattering the Israelites, trying to butter them up so the Israelites would fall for their trick. And it's true, there is some flattery going on here, and certainly it's true that this flattery ends up persuading the Israelites, as we are going to see. But I think that this is also a true profession of faith, a terrible profession of faith, but a true one. The Gibeonites had heard about the fame of God and what he had done at Sihon and Og, Jericho and Ai, and they believed that Yahweh was more powerful than their gods, more powerful than they were. If they didn't believe this, they wouldn't have come to Israel at all. And so Gibeon truly confesses faith, or trust, in God. They want to be on Yahweh's side.

Which, if you remember, is the whole point of God giving the land to his people—that they might be a witness, a light, to the power and goodness of God so that all the nations would worship him. And what we know, but the Gibeonites didn't, is that God is extremely merciful. The Gibeonites had heard about the Lord's power in battle, but they hadn't heard about God's mercy to Rahab, the prostitute who confessed faith in Jericho.

And based on that, it seems the Gibeonites did not need to lie to Israel, but that by doing so they actually put themselves at greater risk of destruction. Instead, they could have professed faith and fallen on the mercy of God. But they don't. And fortunately for them the Israelites also sin.

The text says: "The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath." This is where Israel sins, although they haven't realized it yet. Maybe you're thinking, how could Israel do this? They just saw God work, like yesterday! They just read the entire law of God yesterday! How do they not consult God? But how many times have you done this? How many times have you relied on your own understanding and wisdom? It's not an act of willful rebellion that gets Israel in trouble, but of forgetfulness and compartmentalization.

Israel will consult God on spiritual things, but not on the other stuff. The other stuff we don't need God to help us decide, things like treaties, your vote in the presidential election, or conflict at work, or decisions about where to send your kids to school, or a decision about where to go to college, or whether to date this person or break up with that person, or where to invest your free time, or how to relax and wind down at the end of the day, or how to spend your money. We make decisions all the time without giving a thought, much less a prayer, to God despite the fact that Scripture repeatedly tells us to consult him. Proverbs 3:5-6 says: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."* And yet, time and again, it doesn't even come into our mind. Like Israel. So Israel makes an oath, and we learn later it is an oath by the Lord.

After three days the Israelites discover the Gibeonites' lie, their deception. They realize they've been duped and that they have sinned. They have that moment of clarity after your sin when the weight of what you have done overwhelms you. And when the Israelites find out, the people begin to grumble against their leaders for making this treaty. If you know anything about Old Testament history you know that God's chosen people were world-class grumblers. Your kids have nothing on the Israelites. For 40 years all they did was grumble and complain and whine, and there they go again. But the difference is that this is probably the first and only time in their history that they are complaining appropriately.

And it's because, unlike when Achan sinned, this time it is the leadership of Israel that has failed. It is the leaders who trusted in their own understanding and, as a result, disobeyed a direct command of the Lord to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan. Yes, they were duped. But they were duped because they forgot about God. And now they had made an oath, an oath by the Lord, no less. They swore to God not to destroy the Gibeonites. And, to the leaders' credit and the Israelites dissatisfaction, they decide to keep their oath. Two wrongs don't make a right. You can't fix a sin against God by sinning against God.

So as a punishment for their deception, the leaders of Israel make the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers, essentially people who do menial labor that no one really wants to do. But

there is an irony that goes on here. They are made woodcutters and water carriers in the House of the Lord, what is known as the Tabernacle, where God spoke to his people, and later the Temple in Jerusalem. So the Gibeonites are made to do menial labor, but they also are given an important role in the worship-life of Israel. They get folded into Israelite religion. They are the people who set up the chairs, vacuum the floor, and put things in the right place on stage. It may be menial work, but it is important, valuable work to the worship of Yahweh. They become Yahweh-worshippers, God's people. Notice though, amid the lying voices of Gibeon, the grumbling murmurs of Israel and the arrogant oaths of the leaders, there is a deafening silence from God.

Now Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem heard that Joshua had taken Ai and totally destroyed it, doing to Ai and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and that the people of Gibeon had made a treaty of peace with Israel and had become their allies. He and his people were very much alarmed at this, because Gibeon was an important city, like one of the royal cities; it was larger than Ai, and all its men were good fighters. So Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem appealed to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish and Debir king of Eglon. "Come up and help me attack Gibeon," he said, "because it has made peace with Joshua and the Israelites." Then the five kings of the Amorites—the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon—joined forces. They moved up with all their troops and took up positions against Gibeon and attacked it. The Gibeonites then sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal: "Do not abandon your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us! Help us, because all the Amorite kings from the hill country have joined forces against us." So Joshua marched up from Gilgal with his entire army, including all the best fighting men (Josh. 10:1-7).

These five kings band together and they attack Gibeon because they are threatened in a couple ways. First, these kings are threatened militarily. Gibeon is a great city, the text says, full of fighting men. And now these warriors are added to Israel's warriors, who have looked to be pretty good fighting men themselves. This is an arms race, of sorts. But it isn't just that these kings are threatened militarily. As in nearly all wars in the history of the world, there is also a financial threat. Israel's defeat of Ai and subsequent treaty with Gibeon cut off these kings' most lucrative and stable trade route with northern kingdoms.

So these kings decide to combine their armies and attack Gibeon with massive force, hoping to punish Gibeon for their betrayal, weaken the Israelite army, and reopen trade with the North. And Gibeon, this large city full of great warriors, knows they don't stand a chance, which should tell us something about the size of the force coming to destroy them. So they call on their new alliance to come help them.

Think about Joshua's position. He is in a lose-lose situation. If he goes to fight, he goes without the assurance of God's presence against a massively superior military force. Joshua hasn't heard anything from God since before Israel fought against Ai. And since then Israel renewed their covenant, read the entire law, and then blatantly sinned. Israel proved unfaithful, sinful, and unholy yet again. And God forgave them before, but surely his patience has run out this time.

But if Joshua doesn't go, then he breaks his oath made in the Lord's name and sins egregiously again, ensuring Israel's destruction after this massive enemy force inevitably defeats Gibeon and turns to attack Israel. So Joshua marches toward Gibeon's aide, knowing it is Israel's only chance of survival, but without the smallest hint that the Lord is still with him. I mean, how could he expect that? How dare he even hope for that?

I wonder how many of you have ever been in a lose-lose situation with God like that before. Where you've thought, "after what I've done, I know he isn't with me anymore now. Not this time. How dare I even I hope for that?" I imagine that as Joshua marched, he marched with his shoulders slouched, his head hanging, his feet dragging, overcome by guilt, regret and despair. And it's at this moment, that the Lord finally speaks.

The Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you" (v. 8).

The Lord tells Joshua—"I know you're afraid! Don't be. I have given them into your hand,"—past tense, as if to say, the battle is already over, I got this. Not one, not one of them will be able to withstand you. Here in this one verse we catch a glimpse of the character of God. God is not some impersonal being just waiting to crush you the next time you make a mistake. No. *"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love"* (Psalm 103:8). Yet again, despite the unfaithfulness and sinfulness of his people, the Lord steps in and promises he is still fighting for them. And when the Lord fights for his people, there is no force in heaven or on earth that can stand against him.

After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took them by surprise. The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, so Joshua and the Israelites defeated them completely at Gibeon. Israel pursued them along the road going up to Beth Horon and cut them down all the way to Azekah and Makkedah. As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them, and more of them died from the hail than were killed by the swords of the Israelites. On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel! Then Joshua returned with all Israel to the camp at Gilgal (verses 9-15).

Renewed by God's assurance of his presence and his encouragement, Joshua marches in a strategic, yet grueling, all-night march—20 miles, much of it uphill, led by only the moonlight. And when the army arrives at Gibeon, presumably exhausted, they don't have to do a thing. The Lord scatters and confuses this massive, organized fighting force like a kid who jumps on an ant-hill. These armies, who have tried to oppose the people of God, finally meet the people's God face-to-face. Like a mama bear whose cubs have been threatened the Lord routs them. As they flee in confusion the Lord starts throwing hail down, huge stones from his storehouses in heaven. And the text says that more of the enemy died from the hailstones than from the entire Israelite

army. Then Joshua prays this prayer, asking God to make the sun and the moon stand still, and the Lord answers that prayer.

Commentators debate what is actually happening here. This surely isn't figurative language like some have argued, but the original language allows for a few potential meanings: it could mean that the earth's rotation stopped or slowed down. It could mean there was some kind of solar eclipse or some other celestial phenomenon that somehow aided Israel's army, and there are a host of possibilities there. I'm not sure exactly what happened that day, but the point of the text is clear: the Lord did some sort of supernatural, physical, celestial miracle in response to Joshua's prayer in order to fight for Israel.

This battle isn't won by Israel, but by the Lord. The Lord confuses the Canaanites, the Lord heaves hailstones down, and the Lord stops celestial bodies in their place. The Lord fights for his people. And when the Lord fights for his people there is no force in heaven or on earth, not one, that can stand against them. All that is left for the people of Israel is to deal with kings who dared to fight against God's plans and his people. Once their armies are destroyed these five kings try to hide in a cave, but Joshua has huge stones rolled in front of the cave while they mop up the last of the fighting. Then the whole army returns to where the kings are hiding.

Now the five kings had fled and hidden in the cave at Makkedah. When Joshua was told that the five kings had been found hiding in the cave at Makkedah, he said, "Roll large rocks up to the mouth of the cave, and post some men there to guard it. But don't stop; pursue your enemies! Attack them from the rear and don't let them reach their cities, for the Lord your God has given them into your hand." So Joshua and the Israelites defeated them completely, but a few survivors managed to reach their fortified cities. The whole army then returned safely to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah, and no one uttered a word against the Israelites. Joshua said, "Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me." So they brought the five kings out of the cave—the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. When they had brought these kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, "Come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings." So they came forward and placed their feet on their necks. Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the Lord will do to all the enemies you are going to fight." Then Joshua put the kings to death and exposed their bodies on five poles, and they were left hanging on the poles until evening. At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the poles and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day (verses 16-27).

These kings, these leaders of this massive fighting force, flee to hide in a cave before the power of God. And their hideout becomes their prison, and their prison becomes their grave. But before it does, Joshua brings these kings out and calls his leaders over, the same leaders who earlier this week sinned and did not consult the Lord. Joshua lifts up his foot and he puts it on the neck of these great kings, these commanders of a massive military. He calls his leaders over and has each one of them lift their foot and place it on the neck of these kings. And Joshua says, *"Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous."*

This, this is what the Lord will do to all the enemies you are going to fight” (v. 25). Then these kings, these rebels, are put to death and hung on a pole before they go to their grave.

By the power of the Lord Israel defeated these armies completely. Verses 28-43 go on to tell of the specific cities that the Lord gave over to his people and how he did it. It says that Joshua subdued the whole region. Joshua and his army, in one campaign take the entire southern half of their inheritance. The text is clear, **“All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel”** (v. 42). The Lord takes Israel's sin and turns it into success, their evil and turns it into victory because the Lord fights for his people, despite their sin.

So what does that mean for you and me and us? What is the Lord saying to you in this passage? Two things. First, sinner, the Lord will not abandon you. We get a glimpse of God's immeasurable mercy in this passage. When God had every right to leave his people to the destruction they brought on themselves. When his people, the leaders of his people, directly disobeyed one of his commands, and forgot him altogether, he still did not abandon them.

The same is true for you. Yes, you are a sinner. Yes, you mess up. Maybe you walked in here this morning and you didn't even want to come because you felt like, how dare I walk into the house of God with the people of God after what I did last night or this morning. Maybe there is a persistent sin that you continue to succumb to, over and over again: Anger. Lust. Gossip. Lies. Hatred. God's mercy is immeasurably greater than you can imagine. He has not abandoned you. Throw yourself on the mercy of God. Trust that he has not abandoned you, his son or daughter, despite your sin.

And if you aren't his son or daughter, if you haven't put your faith in Christ, you're not one of these church people, there is good news for you too. We find out in this passage that the Lord is not only merciful to his people, but to all those who profess faith in him, even when those professions of faith are terrible. The Gibeonites, like Rahab, profess faith in God, and are saved from destruction. If you will put your faith in God, you too will be saved from destruction. If you want to know more of what that means, or you want to make that decision, there are going to be people up here after the service that would love to talk with you about that and help you make that decision.

So first, sinner, the Lord will not abandon you. But the second thing I believe God is saying to you from this passage is that the Lord will win the fight. We see in this passage that God is not only immeasurably merciful, but also surpassingly powerful. When a massive military force tries to oppose the plans of the Lord, the Lord absolutely crushes them. No one, not one, can stand against the power of the Lord. And this is good news for you because whether you know it or not, you are in a battle. But the battle you face is not of flesh and blood, but as Paul says, **“against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the**

heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). Satan is described as being a lion, prowling around to devour you. You are under attack. Every moment of every day his army shoots flaming arrows of lies, and swings swords of sin, in the hopes that they can separate you from the Lord and destroy you.

You don't need me to tell you that. You know that. You feel that. You experience that every single day. Satan is in your head saying things like, “You deserve better than him,” “Take a look at her,” “If God really loved you they wouldn't be sick,” “You're a waste of space on earth. No one would even care if you were gone,” “It's not even that bad. Everyone does it. You'll give in eventually anyway.” Blow after blow. A relentless attempt to destroy you. You are under attack. So Paul tells you to put on the full armor of God. And he promises that it can defend you against every one of the devil's schemes (Eph. 6:11). Have no doubt, on your own you will lose to this force that is attacking you. Joshua's army did not stand a chance against the conglomeration of kings. But the Lord is surpassingly powerful. The Lord will win the fight. The Lord will crush his enemies before you, like a kid crushes an ant. You may not be a match for Satan, but Satan is no match for the Lord. The Lord will win the fight.

But how can you know? How can you trust that the Lord really is powerful enough to win your fight? After all, you've been fighting it a long time. Or maybe you know the Lord is powerful enough, but how can you know the Lord is really merciful enough to still fight for you? After what you've done? After how many times you've done it? In the dark moments of despair, of regret, of self-loathing, when your soul is plagued by your own sin again, how can you know that the Lord is still fighting for you? Because of Jesus. Jesus assures you.

We have seen over and over again in this book that Jesus is the new and better Joshua. Jesus is the one who leads God's people against their spiritual enemies into our inheritance. But Jesus didn't fight like Joshua did. Instead of marching an army all night up a hill, Jesus walked alone to the enemy side. And Jesus suffered the punishment of every Amorite king, every man or woman or child that would dare fight against God. Like these rulers Jesus hung on a pole. And like these rulers at dusk Jesus was thrown into a cave to rot. But unlike these rulers Jesus surely is not there to this day! He was raised to life! He walked out of that grave. So yes, you are a sinner. And yes, the wages of sin is death and you deserve to hang on that pole. But while you were a sinner Christ hung on that pole for you and the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. Jesus has made a way. And if Jesus fought for you then, he is still fighting for you now.

Scripture declares that Jesus is coming back one day, that great warrior, and from atop his white horse with one word he will destroy every army that stands against him and put everything under his feet. (Rev. 19:11-16, 1 Cor. 15:25-28). And then he will call you over and put your foot on Satan's neck (Rom. 16:20), and will say to you, “do not be afraid.” Sinner, the Lord is still fighting for you.

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