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Bridgeway Church

Joshua #11

Sermon Summary #11

Are you a “Big God-er” or a “Little God-er”?

Joshua 10:1-15

The title to my message this morning may sound a little strange, so let me explain where it came from.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was for many years the pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He exerted a huge influence on two men in particular who turned out to be my spiritual and theological mentors, so needless to say I have a special place in my heart for him.

About 12 years after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Barnhouse was invited back to preach in chapel. His former professor of Old Testament, Robert Dick Wilson, sat attentively on the very first row. After Barnhouse had concluded his message, Wilson approached him and said:

“If you come back again, I will not come to hear you preach. I only come once. I am glad that you are a big God-er. When my boys come back to the seminary, I come to see if they are big God-ers or little God-ers, and then I know what kind of ministry they will have.”

Barnhouse was a bit confused and asked him to explain himself:

“Well,” said Robert Dick Wilson, “some men have a little god, and they are always in trouble with him. He can’t do any miracles. He can’t take care of the inspiration of the Scriptures and their preservation and transmission to us. They have a little god, and I call them little god-ers. Then there are those who have a great God. He speaks, and it is done. He commands, and it stands fast. He knows how to show himself strong on behalf of those that fear him. You have a great God, and he will bless your ministry. You are a big God-er!”

How big is your God? Is he big enough to create the universe and uphold it by the word of his power and providentially govern its direction and bring about the consummation of all things in precisely the way that he planned? Or do you worship and love and serve *a tiny god, a pygmy god, a diminutive deity, a wee little god who easily fits in your back pocket or in a box of your own making, a so-called god who is unsure of himself and can’t guarantee that anything he desires to accomplish will ever ultimately be brought to pass?*

This I can tell you for sure: *Joshua was a big God-er!* In spite of his failure in dealing with the Gibeonites that we saw so clearly in chapter nine, Joshua knew that his God was big enough to work all things together for good. He had confidence that God was big enough to defeat the enemies of Israel and to grant them their inheritance in the promised land. He knew that his God was powerful enough to pull off any miracle necessary to the fulfillment of his purposes.

It is very, very difficult to read and understand Joshua 10 if you aren't a big God-er. If you are a little God-er, the events in this chapter will bother and confuse you. Worse still, you will leave here doubting whether what we read in Joshua 10 ever really happened at all. Big God-ers, on the other hand, love Joshua 10. Let me explain.

You will recall from Joshua 9 that Israel entered into a covenant of peace with the Gibeonites. Although the Gibeonites tricked Joshua and the other leaders, the agreement that Joshua forged with them to protect them and not destroy them was in place. When the surrounding Canaanite kings heard of this covenant between Israel and the Gibeonites, they interpreted it as the beginning of a dangerous and threatening trend that had to be addressed. Their solution was to unite their military forces and launch an all-out assault against Gibeon. This is what we read about in Joshua 10:1-5.

The men of Gibeon responded by turning to Joshua for help. This we see in v. 6 . . . It would have been so easy, even understandable, for Joshua to ignore their cry for help. I suspect he was greatly tempted to turn a deaf ear to their appeal. After all, the Gibeonites had made a fool of Joshua and all the leaders of Israel. They had embarrassed him in front of the people. His credibility as a leader had suffered damage. A less honorable man, a more prideful man, might have rejoiced in the plight of the Gibeonites and let them take their lumps!

But Joshua had given his word. Joshua had made an oath to the Gibeonites (see 9:15). He was keenly aware of his moral obligation to the Gibeonites. After all, they were now the servants of Israel and it was only right that he provide them with protection now that they are threatened.

We see here an illustration of the principle found in **Psalms 15**. The person of integrity, according to v. 4, "*swears to his own hurt and does not change.*" The NIV renders this, "He keeps his oath even when it hurts!" In other words, *his honor is more important than his wallet. Once he gives his word, he sticks to it no matter what happens to his reputation or how uncomfortable life may become.* For this person, integrity has no price tag. He's willing to make material and physical sacrifices in order to be honest. Often, if there is no risk of loss or painful consequences, one will never know if one has integrity. One will never know if what motivates you is *moral conviction* or *moral convenience* until you are forced to suffer loss for standing your ground or keeping your word.

Returning to our story, we are told in chapter ten that Joshua and his armies made an arduous, up-hill journey of some 25 miles. It was a 3,500 foot climb along steep and difficult terrain.

According to v. 8, God promises Joshua that victory is coming. "Don't be afraid, Joshua. I have given them into your hands." Observe how *divine reassurance of victory does not stifle but stimulates human ingenuity and activity.* God's promise does not lead Joshua to sit and passively watch the victory occur. Rather he is energized to pursue it all the more vigorously with every ounce of strength (v. 9). God's sovereignty should never undermine our efforts but rather energize them with renewed confidence.

We read in v. 10 that “the Lord threw them into a panic before Israel.” Clearly God not only can but does in fact control and influence the minds of men. God put fear and panic in their hearts in order to facilitate Israel’s military victory over them.

V. 11 is stunning! You thought the hailstorm of April 2010 here in OKC was intense! It was nothing to compare with what God threw against the Canaanite kings that day. This was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill hailstorm. This was more than a natural phenomenon that turned out in Israel’s favor. This was a miracle of monumental proportions. Big God-ers have no problem understanding this! Note:

(1) The Lord is singled out as responsible for it: “*the Lord* threw down large stones from heaven on them” (v. 11a).

(2) Only the enemies of Israel suffered from the hail. This was obviously a hailstorm that was restricted to the area where the Canaanite kings and their armies were located.

(3) The hail was huge, large enough to kill more of the enemy than fell under the sword of Israeli soldiers (v. 11b).

(4) A hailstorm during mid-summer would have been a rarity in this part of the world. David Howard points out that “there are only five to eight days of hail per year in the coastal plain, mostly in midwinter” (237, n. 189). And even then the hail is not typically of such deadly force.

Of course, what happens next is one of the most famous stories in all of Scripture. Look closely with me at the first half of v. 12.

“At that time Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord gave the Amorites [i.e., the Canaanites] over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel . . .”

The question we must answer is simply this: Who is it that spoke in the sight of Israel? Was it Joshua or God? Did Joshua speak to the sun and moon or did he pray to God who in turn spoke to the sun and moon? The grammar of the text actually allows for either, and ultimately we have no way of knowing.

In any case, what actually happened? Without getting bogged down in too much detail, let me set before you the three most likely interpretations.

(1) A number of evangelical scholars believe this is all *figurative language*. They point to the poetic structure of the passage and argue that there wasn’t a literal or physical alteration of the light of sun and moon. Rather, this was figurative language found often in the OT that portrays *the totality of God’s victory over the Canaanites and the awesome appearance that God made that day in fighting on his people’s behalf*. Thus the words directed to the sun

and moon describe in poetic terms Israel's victory in battle but say nothing about any miraculous repositioning or change of movement of the sun and moon themselves.

Those who take this view don't deny that God can perform great miracles. They simply see here an example of what we also find in **Habakkuk 3:11** where the sun and the moon are personified and described as if they were people, standing still in the heavens, in awe and amazement at the power of God. See also Psalm 96:12, 98:8, and Isaiah 55:12.

Although this view has some merit to it, I'm not convinced. There are better options, in my opinion.

(2) A second, and perhaps the most popular, option is that ***God miraculously extended the light of day*** in order to give Joshua and Israel more time to bring the defeat of the Canaanites to consummation. In other words, the battle had raged long throughout the day and Joshua didn't want the onset of nighttime to give his enemies a chance to regroup and recover. So, he prayed that the sun would not set in the west but would "stop" and its light enable Israel to finish off the Canaanites.

Note: It's important to remember that the author of the book of Joshua is not arguing in any shape or form that the sun literally moves or rotates around the earth. Biblical authors simply did in their way what we do in ours: they employed what is called ***phenomenological*** language. This means that they described events as they **appeared** and not necessarily as they actually **are**. We do this all the time. Tonight on TV your local weatherman will say something like, "The sun set at 8:13 this evening and the sunrise will occur at 6:42 tomorrow morning." We all know that the sun neither sets nor rises, but it ***appears*** to do so.

Thus, for Joshua to say that the sun "stood still" and the moon "stopped" is not an error. We would be compelled to acknowledge an error only if the Bible explicitly taught that things *appeared* one way when in fact they did not, or if the Bible explicitly taught that things *were* one way when in actual fact they were altogether other. But when the Bible says that an event appears in a particular way, that is to say, it seems to the naked eye and from the vantage point of human observation to be a particular way, when in fact it actually is another way, is not an error.

If this second view is correct, how did God do it?

Many contend that God miraculously stopped or slowed down the rotation of the earth. If you are wondering whether or not he could actually do it, may I remind you of what Paul says in Colossians 1:16-17 . . . ! The God who called into existence out of nothing every particle of physical matter and who continually upholds and sustains it in being, would have no problem pulling off a miracle of this magnitude. I'm a big God-er and this poses no problem for me. St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin all embraced this view. Having said that, I'm not persuaded that's what happened. Here are two reasons why.

First, it seems unlikely that God would have performed a global miracle involving the entire earth merely to extend the light for a brief period of time in the area of Gibeon.

Second, this isn't the only occurrence of a miracle of this sort. In **2 Kings 20:1-11** Hezekiah falls sick and is told he will die. He prays to the Lord to extend his life who says, "Yes, I'll give you an additional 15 years." Hezekiah asks for a sign that God will truly heal him. The prophet says, "O.K., the shadow will go backwards ten steps." He's referring to something like a sundial, which consisted of a series of steps across which the shadow cast by the sun would move. The sign was that the shadow would reverse itself ten steps, the equivalent of about 5 hours. The point being that the sun appeared to move eastward instead of westward across the sky. *If this was a global miracle it means that God not only stopped the rotation of the earth but actually reversed it!* But we are told in **2 Chronicles 32:24-31** that ambassadors from Babylon traveled to Palestine to gain information about "the sign that had been done *in the land*."

By the way, the many stories you've likely heard that scientists at NASA, in their space-flight calculations, have identified a missing day in astronomical history that can be accounted for by what happened to Joshua and Hezekiah are part of urban legend. I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but there is no confirmation of this from any reputable astronomist.

(3) The most likely explanation of what happened isn't that Joshua prayed that sunlight be extended at the end of the day but that *he prayed that darkness be extended at the beginning of the day, that is to say, early in the morning hours*. Several things are worth noting.

First, the Hebrew verb translated "stand still" in v. 12 literally means "to be dumb" or "to be silent" and "still." This could easily refer to the sun and moon *ceasing to shine their light* rather than to any cessation of apparent movement. The same is true again in v. 13 where the word translated "stopped" could mean that the radiance or light from sun and moon ceased to shine.

Second, according to v. 9 Joshua and his armies had been marching "all night," which implies *he attacked while it was still dark. Thus the battle may have occurred in the late hours of the a.m. or just before dawn and what Joshua prays for is that God would somehow block the light of the rising sun as well as that of the moon in order to prolong the darkness and thus aid the surprise attack Joshua was about to launch*.

Third, look again at v. 12. "Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon." Aijalon was about 10 miles west of Gibeon. This suggests that the sun was to the east over Gibeon and the moon to the west over Aijalon, which would require that the time be early morning. If this is true, it argues against the idea that what happened was a prolonging of sunlight at the end of the day and argues for the idea that it was a prolonging of darkness at the beginning of the day.

Fourth, what about v. 13b where it says that the sun "did not hurry to set for about a whole day"? Scholars point out that this could as easily be rendered, "as on an ordinary day." Thus, if the sun was not visible because God somehow miraculously blocked its light this text would simply be describing the situation in terms of how it appeared to those on earth. Since the sun was blacked out one could not see it run its course across the sky "as they typically watched it on any ordinary day."

I'm inclined to think this is the best explanation. But if this all refers to God somehow preventing the sun to normally shine as it does at the beginning of each day, *how did he do it?* Some argue that God did this by means of a *cloud cover* resulting from the hailstorm or perhaps by a *solar eclipse*. But it's hard to see an eclipse here in that the sun and moon are described in opposition to each other, not in conjunction. Another major problem with the solar

eclipse interpretation is that astronomers know precisely when solar eclipses occurred in central Palestine between 1500 and 1000 b.c. and none of the dates fits the time when we know Joshua lived. ***Perhaps this miracle was like the one in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. We read about the ninth plague in Exodus 10:21-23,***

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.’ So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived (Exodus 10:21-23).

Regardless of which view you end up embracing, ***the most amazing thing in this story isn’t that God performed a miracle of nature to assist Israel in its battle against the Canaanites. The most amazing thing is that God “heeded the voice of a man” (v. 14).***

What’s amazing isn’t that God hears our prayers and responds to them, because there are numerous incidents involving people like Moses and Rachel where it is said that God “heeded” the voice of an individual. What makes this particular instance so singular, stunning, and unprecedented, is that God listened to Joshua and intervened in the routine operation of nature to provide victory for his people.

It is as if God said to Joshua: ***“I’m going to put myself under the command of a man! I am in no man’s debt. I don’t owe Joshua or anyone else anything. I am free and sovereign to do as I please. But in this case, what pleases me most is to do whatever Joshua asks me to do!”***

Although nothing up until this time in biblical history could compare with it, there was yet another event that occurred later on that has to be regarded as equivalent. I’m referring, of course, to how God responded to the prayer of **Elijah**. Listen to how James describes what happened in 1 Kings 17-18,

“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit” (James 5:17-18).

The argument has been made by cessationists that biblical miracles were clustered or concentrated in only three major periods of history: the days of Moses and Joshua, the time of Elijah and Elisha, and the time of Christ and the apostles. The point of this argument is that Elijah and Elisha, for example, were special, extraordinary, unique individuals who cannot serve as models for us when we pray.

But James says precisely the opposite! The point of vv. 17-18 is to counter the argument that Elijah was somehow unique or that because of the period in which he lived he could pray with miraculous success but we cannot. James wants us to know that Elijah was just like you and me. He was a human being with weaknesses, fears, doubts, failures, no less than we. In other words, James is saying: "Don't let anyone tell you Elijah was in a class by himself. He wasn't. He's just like you. You are just like him. Therefore, pray like he did!"

Don't forget the context: James appeals to the example of Elijah to encourage us when we pray for the sick! The point is that we should pray for miraculous healing with the same faith and expectation with which Elijah prayed for the end of a three-year drought.

Yes, it was remarkable what God did in heeding the prayers of Joshua to bring about this incredible miracle in nature. Yes, it was remarkable what God did in heeding the prayers of Elijah to cause the rain to stop and yet again, three years later, to cause the rain to fall.

And even more remarkable is that James is telling us that Elijah wasn't any different from you and me. Therefore, pray for one another that you may be healed!

And yet, there really isn't anything all that remarkable in any of these stories if you are a big God-er! If you know God to be great and big and immeasurable and majestic, these are but the fringes of his power, the mere droplets in an ocean of divine omnipotence.

Are you a big God-er? If so, come to him with big requests! Come to him with impossible tasks! Come to him asking for the unlikely. Come to him asking for the supernatural. He's a big God, bigger than you or I or Joshua or Elijah could ever imagine. Come and ask!