

Discerning the Will of God

Joshua 9:1-10:15

Joshua 9 is a classic example of the challenge we sometimes face in applying the Old Testament. Often their original situation is similar enough to ours that application is straight-forward. Other times, as here, there is no surface connection, and we must search out analogies. As Israel moves into Canaan, God repeatedly tells them to kill all the current inhabitants of the land. But for the next many centuries, the inhabitants of Gibeon continue in the land, unmolested. Inevitably that would raise questions: Is Israel disobeying God? Should they slaughter these aliens? This text explains how the situation came about, and implicitly, why later generations should accept it.

This is hardly an urgent issue for us, so many centuries later, and so far away. Gibeonites are no longer ethnically distinguishable, so the question is irrelevant even in geographic Israel today. Constructing a contemporary parallel is little help, either: the current presence of Palestinians in the land of Israel arose out of much different circumstances, so this passage has little directly to say about land rights in the Middle East today. Besides, the New Testament never suggests that the land of Palestine today remains the 'holy land' or Israel's special possession. Nonetheless, the passage does speak to our efforts to ascertain the will of God: both the steps that Israel took, and the ones they missed, are instructive for us as we seek God's guidance in uncertain circumstance.

Day 1: Joshua 9:1-8 Obeying God's Word

The reader is allowed to eavesdrop on a secret hidden from Israel and Joshua: the Gibeonites design a ruse to trick the Israelites into signing a treaty. So we are alert to watch for their response. Notably, their initial reaction shows great reflex. The men of Israel say, "Perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?" Joshua, too, reacts with caution: "Who are you and where do you come from?"

Their caution arises from God's specific command. More than a generation earlier, as the previous generation anticipated entering the land, God had warned: "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you... Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land: for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices" (Exodus 34:12,15). Since that first generation was consigned to wander in the wilderness until they died, and a new generation arose, God repeats his warning. As Israel gathers by the Jordan River across from Jericho,

God again warns: "If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in our eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them" (Numbers 33:55-56). Attentive to the command of God, Israel greets the invitation to a treaty with due caution: "Perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?" Joshua, likewise: "Who are you and where do you come from?"

This is also where we must start in assessing any proposed course of action. Has God spoken directly on this issue? If so, we obey. No matter how attractive the option seems. No matter what we stand to gain, or how strong the temptation may be. Where God has spoken, we do not discuss, much less do we rationalize. We simply obey. As God urges Joshua, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth, meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it" (Joshua 1:8).

Day 2: Joshua 9:1-14a Using common sense and wisdom

God told Israel not to make a treaty with the current inhabitants of the land, and they are determined to comply. The problem is, these people did not carry passports. How to determine whether or not they are inhabitants of the land? Investigate. So they look through the strangers' kit, and find evidence to confirm their story: clearly they traveled a great distance to pay respects to this rising regional power. Perhaps their judgment is clouded in part by this appeal to national pride and ego: our reputation has spread so far that peoples from distant lands come to pay their respects! But apart from that, the Israelite instincts are still reasonably good: do not simply believe the story; check it out.

We do well to do the same today. We can improve by rejecting any pandering to our national pride or personal ego. We rightly emulate the cautious use of wisdom before jumping ahead into a new venture, even one that initially seems exciting or potentially rewarding. God has given us common sense, so he is not opposed to us using it.

Day 3: Joshua 9:14b Inquiring of the Lord

Their first and second instincts are right: obey God's explicit commands, and use common sense. The problem is, they need a third instinct which they inexplicably lack: "Consult God." Sometimes two out of three is just not enough.

God already anticipated circumstances in which Joshua would not know what to do, when Scripture would not speak specifically to the situation, and common sense would provide inadequate guidance. In Numbers 27, as Moses plans for Joshua to succeed him, God supplies a third source of direction: "[Joshua] is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him

by inquiring of the Urim before the Lord. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in” (Numbers 27:21). (This is a figure of speech called ‘merism’: ‘he will tell them when to go out and when to come in’ means he will guide their every move.) But somehow Joshua does not make use of this expedient here (though Eleazar is clearly available, appearing in subsequent chapters).

No such explicit mechanism – such as consulting a particular priest or prophet – exists today for us to consult God. This is rather a pity, as we face a great many instances when Scripture does not speak explicitly to our situation, and when the best way forward is not entirely clear. In the absence of an officially designated channel of direction, all manner of fools appoint themselves to speak on behalf of God. And desperate or gullible people follow.

Where Scripture and common sense provide inadequate guidance (and even where they do), we appropriately make the issue a matter of concerted prayer. At the same time, we want to acknowledge the subjectivity of perceived answers to prayer. We need to be careful not to manipulate an answer out of thin air; even more, not to appeal to prayer in order to authorize a dubious course of action.

Day 4: Joshua 9:15-27 Making the best of a bad decision

“What do we do now?” This question occupies the entire latter half of the chapter. It takes only three days for the Israelites to discover the Gibeonites deception and their own mistake. At this point, they are caught between a hard place and a rock: either they honor the treaty in violation of God’s command to destroy the peoples of the land, or they honor God’s command in violation of the oath they swore. Given biblical commands regarding the swearing of oaths, they are bound by the promise they made in the name of God, even though their treaty partners deliberately deceived them.

They do have one recourse that can partially assuage their injured pride. In soliciting the treaty, the Gibeonites thrice characterized themselves as “servants” of Israel. (That is, they placed themselves in a subservient political position for the treaty.) So Joshua invokes that arrangement: they are to be servants not only in name, but also in reality. In perpetuity, the Gibeonites are to be menial laborers for Israel: chopping wood and carrying water.

While the details will obviously differ from one case to another, this turn of events provides welcome reassurance that few mistakes are fatal, not even the failure to properly discern the will of God. We need not get so caught up in avoiding any bad decision that we succumb to paralysis by analysis. Sometimes we will make a mistake. Then we seek the best remedy to ameliorate its negative effects.

Day 5: Joshua 10:1-7 A price to be paid

Few mistakes are fatal, but many exact considerable cost. As here.

The Israelites do what they can to ameliorate their mistake and to compensate for the humiliation of their deception: they obligate the Gibeonites to serve them as menial laborers under the terms of the treaty. Still, treaty obligations work both ways. Lest Gibeon join forces with the Israelites, the rulers of five Amorite towns combine forces to take down their former ally. The strategy back-fires: Gibeon desperately appeals to Israel, which, obligated by the treaty, attacks and defeats the five kings. But the lesson for Israel is that there is a price to be paid for a flawed decision: in this case, they are drawn into an additional war.

So today, God may not save us from the consequences of flawed decisions, especially if the flaw arises as the result of failing to consult him before acting. Still, we accept the discipline, learn the lesson, and move on wiser in future.

Day 6: Joshua 10:8-15 The God who redeems mistakes

What has thus far been a remorseful account of a sad failure takes a sudden and surprising turn at the end. Through inexcusable spiritual carelessness, Israel is drawn into an unexpected war against a superior force. The consequences could be severe. But in the mercy of God, the potential disaster turns into an inspiring victory.

The author repeatedly emphasizes God's intervention to redeem Israel's mistake. In verse 8 God promises, "'I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you.'" Verse 10: "The Lord threw [the army of the five kings] into confusion before Israel." Verse 11: "The Lord hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites." Verses 12-14a: Joshua melodramatically – and likely poetically – calls for the sun and moon to stand still, so that they might complete the defeat, and God astoundingly grants his unprecedented request. (Ironically, those who neglected to consult God in the earlier decision find him fully ready to answer during the battle.) Verse 14b summarizes the obvious: "Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!"

This ultimately is our assurance when we face decisions that could have a major impact not only on our personal lives, but on the work of God. Should we risk it all to move ahead? Should we proceed slowly and cautiously? Often we will not know. Scripture may not address the issue explicitly. The evidence of circumstances will not be decisive. Even assuming that we think to consult the Lord, we may not all hear him say that same thing. We may make a costly mistake. Yet our confidence ultimately is not in the rightness of our decisions, but in the redemption of our God, who can glorify himself even in our mistakes.