

“Common Sense and Prayer”

Joshua 9

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It was February in Gary, Indiana and for four years Bill and Sally had been working and living there, 1000 miles from home and family which were in Denver.

At four in the afternoon, Bill’s boss called him into his office and said he wanted Bill to move to Denver to open a branch office and he needed an answer by morning.

Bill decided to surprise his wife Sally with the news.

He arranged for a sitter for their baby, made reservations at a great restaurant and told Sally when he got home that he had some great news to tell her but it had to wait until dinner.

At the restaurant, after they ordered, Sally refused to wait any longer.

So Bill told her about the offer.

She was ecstatic at first and then she began to think about what they’d leave behind.

She spoke sadly about leaving some good friends they had had, the church they’d grown to love, and their significant ministry at the mission.

Bill countered with this being the job he’d always wanted, an increase in salary, and of course they’d be near family again.

Sally said that maybe they should pray about it.

Bill nearly exploded, “What’s there to pray about, isn’t this a “no-brainer?”

As they talked further even Sally finally agreed this was one of those times when the decision was a “slam-dunk”.

Bill could hardly wait to seal the deal the next morning.

Now I know that what I've told you thus far doesn't make for a very interesting story and you probably anticipate some twist in the plot at this point.

Even less interestingly, there is none.

Bill accepted the offer the next morning and three months later they were living happily back home in Denver.

I told the story because I wanted you to hear the brief exchange about the role of prayer in the face of the apparently obvious.

Sally thought maybe they should pray about the decision and Bill thought the decision was too clear to need prayer.

Now I could have chosen a story where prayerlessness in the face of an obvious decision resulted in tragic consequences but that's not usually the case and further, I think it misses the point.

The larger issue is how Bill compartmentalized different aspects of life.

- Apparently Bill thought there were times when you needed God's wisdom and guidance and times when you didn't.
- Apparently Bill had enough confidence in his own understanding and ability to know when a decision was obviously right.
- To Bill, prayer **and the dependency it indicates** were necessary when you didn't know the answer.

What we are going to look at today is the relationship of common sense and prayer.

Or said differently, we are going to look at the relationship of our own ability and our dependency on God.

It's a little like the issue demonstrated in the verbal exchange between a surgeon and his patient:

The doctor says, "I think you should pray."

And the patient responds, "Has it come to that!"

When do we pray?

When do we sense our need of God?

Do we usually rely on ourselves and only rely on God when we are desperate?

Chapter 9 of Joshua relates an unusual incident.

Under Joshua's leadership and God's intervention the army of Israel had invaded and conquered the central cities and armies of Canaan.

Word of their power and even their God's intervention on their behalf was spreading throughout the rest of Canaan. And those people knew that Israel left no survivors.

That left only one possibility for the people of Canaan: fight. Well there was one other possibility and the people from the city of Gibeon thought of it.

Joshua 9:1-6

"Now when all the kings west of the Jordan heard about these things--those in the hill country, in the western foothills, and along the entire coast of the Great Sea as far as Lebanon (the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites)--they came together to make war against Joshua and Israel.

However, when the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, they resorted to a ruse (a wily subterfuge or trick): They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. The men put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy. Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us."

Why did the Gibeonites pretend they were from far away?

As I've already indicated, the people of Canaan knew that Israel was killing everyone in Canaan but could make treaties with those from outside Canaan.

Through Moses, God had commanded the people:

Deuteronomy 20:10-18 "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you... However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them--the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--as the LORD your God

has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.”

Because the Gibeonites (who were part of the Hivites) knew this, they were going to attempt to trick the Israelites into thinking they were from a great distance away and thus no threat to Israel’s plan.

That would then hopefully lead Israel to make a treaty with them.

Hollywood make-up artists would have been proud of the Gibeonites.

They thought of everything - worn out clothes, dried-out leather wine-skins, moldy, dried-out bread – they looked the part of weary, far-from-home, non-threatening people.

Now, to me, this is where the reason for recording the incident in Scripture becomes apparent.

Watch how the Israelites decide what to do with the Gibeonites.

Observe the decision-making process.

Joshua 9:7-14

“The men of Israel said to the Hivites, "But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?"

"We are your servants," they said to Joshua.

But Joshua asked, "Who are you and where do you come from?"

They answered: "Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God. For we have heard reports of him: all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan--Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth. And our elders and all those living in our country said to us, `Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, "We are your servants; make a treaty with us." ' This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey.

The men of Israel sampled their provisions... Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath."

The Israelites did exactly what we would expect them to do.

They listened, they investigated, they reasoned, they counseled with one another and then they made a decision.

The Gibeonites not only had good props but they were also apparently good actors and psychologists:

- They appealed to fairness by speaking of to Israel's instructions to make treaties with those from far away.
- They appealed to the Israelites self-importance by saying, "We are your servants."
- They appealed to the Israelites pride by rehearsing the victories of Israel.
- They appealed to the Israelites religion by speaking of the fame of Israel's God.

And so Israel's leaders listened carefully.

But they also investigated with appropriate skepticism.

- They asked how they could know they were from far away.
- Joshua himself asked where they were from.
- They even investigated further; they broke open the supplies of the Gibeonites to inspect them.

I can imagine Israel's leaders standing back and asking each other, "What do you think?"

It seems the response was unanimous – "This is easy, this is a 'no-brainer', a 'slam-dunk', let's make a treaty – we can use the help."

Common sense, intelligence and good research make this an easy decision.

A little like moving back home to Denver from Gary, Indiana in February.

There is one phrase in the text from Joshua 9 that I left out earlier.

Look at the text again:

Joshua 9:14-15

“The men of Israel 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.”

Even the godly leader, Joshua, fell for it.

But what he fell for was **not** just the Gibeonites’ deception.

What he fell for was a reliance on his own common sense, his own understanding.

He fell for believing that there are times when you don’t need God, when the decision is so obvious that common sense alone or surely, above-average intelligence like ours is sufficient.

I want to remind you of a couple of verses that may be so familiar to you that you easily assume you know what they teach:

Proverbs 3:5-7a

“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.
Do not be wise in your own eyes...”

The late Bob Alden of Denver Seminary wrote that the 5th verse is arranged in Hebrew in such a way as to make the two verbs stand out in contrast:

Trust
In the Lord with all your heart;

On your own understanding
Do not **lean**.” (Alden, Proverbs, 37)

We are indebted to Mr. Charles Bridges who lived and wrote 150 years ago for a better understanding of these well-known verses.

When the Bible says, **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart”** it means that our **complete** confidence should be in God.

God is truth and he is faithful – we can have unlimited confidence in him.

In fact the Bible is quite clear about God’s attitude when we don’t trust him.

Not asking him is tantamount to saying God is unable, unwilling, or worse yet, unnecessary.

The Psalmist described Israel’s lack of faith in God this way:

Psalm 78:18-22

“They willfully put God to the test
by demanding the food they craved.
They spoke against God, saying,
“Can God spread a table in the desert?
When he struck the rock, water gushed out,
and streams flowed abundantly.
But can he also give us food?
Can he supply meat for his people?”
When the LORD heard them, he was very angry;
his fire broke out against Jacob,
and his wrath rose against Israel,
for they did not believe in God
or trust in his deliverance.

Conversely, the Bible declares, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart.”

And then very specifically the Bible rules out the alternative:

“And lean not on your own understanding”

Our confidence is not to be in ourselves.

Elsewhere in the same book we read, Proverbs 28:26 “He who trusts in himself is a fool...”

We naturally lean on ourselves.

Our own wisdom and ability become our God; the final arbiter in our decisions.

We bring God's truth to the court of our own judgment and we rule on the truthfulness of what God says.

Jeremiah speaks strongly of such an attitude:

Jeremiah 17:5,7,9

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man,
who depends on flesh for his strength
and whose heart turns away from the LORD...

But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose confidence is in him...

The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?”

Surely the Christian is one who understands that his reasoning ability has been seriously flawed by the “Fall”.

We were created in the image of God and had an unclouded ability to follow God but sin ruined that.

Ephesians 4:17-18 “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God...”

But we forget that.

We trust more in our own common sense, or above-average intelligence, than in God.

And that is proven by our inattention to prayer in the so-called “easy” decisions of life.

We are so convinced of and proud of our common sense that many of us would rather be called unprincipled than be called naïve.

We'd rather be accused of doing something wrong than be accused of being unable.

To me, it is the next phrase in Proverbs 3 that emphasizes the point of Joshua 9:

“In all your ways acknowledge him...”

The temptation that Joshua and we face is to select which situations need God's wisdom and which ones we are capable of handling ourselves.

The Proverb reminds us that we are equally dependent on him in all circumstances of life.

Bridges wrote, "Consider no circumstance too clear to need his direction." (Bridges, Proverbs, 24)

We must cultivate the habit of going to God first, continually and last. – not in place of hard work, study, and counsel, but in dependence in every circumstance.

Trusting in the Lord doesn't eliminate the hard work of investigation or research.

It doesn't eliminate the hard work of study.

It doesn't negate the need for counsel and adequate reflection.

Trusting in the Lord includes filling the mind with God's Word because it is the Word that the Spirit uses to guide.

But trust in the Lord acknowledges (deeply acknowledges) that it is the Lord who provides the wisdom to make good choices. It is an active (not passive) dependence on him.

Dale Davis in his book, No Falling Words, wrote,

"Now it was not that Joshua and the elders did not ask the right questions; they were suspicious at just the right points. It was not that they were sloppy in their investigation but that they were alone in their decision. It was not that they didn't think **but that they didn't pray.**" (Dale Davis 77)

The Psalmist wrote:

Psalm 5:3

"In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait in expectation."

Elsewhere:

Psalm 143:8

“Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love,
for I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.”

Again I quote from Charles Bridges who describes the attitude that should be ours:

“Let your will be kept in a quiet, subdued, cheerful readiness, to move, stay, retreat, turn to the right hand or to the left, at the Lord’s bidding; always remembering that is best which is least our own doing, and that a pliable spirit ever secures the needful guidance.” (Bridges, Proverbs, 25)

Paul spoke of the same issue when he wrote:

Philippians 4:6-7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Do we bring to God the tough decisions only?

The witness of the Old and New Testaments and the encouragement of our God, is that we bring everything to him in prayer.

Prayer is a confession of the limits our intelligence and ability.
And the lesson of Joshua 9 is that the limits are far greater than we want to believe.

Failure to pray is a statement of the irrelevance of God.

On a very practical note, one might ask, “What good does praying do?” - If a decision is called for, what I need are facts not prayer.

In Joshua's situation, a few more facts would have been very helpful.
 And prayer might have been the very means by which God
 would have impressed upon them the need for more facts.
 But more often, what God does is bring the truth of his
 Word to bear on our specific situation.

But it is not always more facts that we need.
 Too often the choice between good and best is difficult even
 with all the facts.
 What we desperately need is wisdom.

Wisdom is not information but the ability to properly apply the
 information and truth we already have.

And God declares in James 1:5

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who
 gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be
 given to him."

How he does that is not within the purview of this sermon, **THAT** he
 does it, is.

**And that he calls us to trust in him through prayer in
 everything in life, even the "slam-dunks" is what Joshua 9
 is about.**

In the situation of Israel, it didn't take long before the folly of their
 failure to pray became obvious:

Joshua 9:16-27

"Three days after they made the treaty with the Gibeonites, the
 Israelites heard that they were neighbors, living near them. So the
 Israelites set out and on the third day came to their cities: Gibeon,
 Kephirah, Beeroth and Kiriath Jearim. But the Israelites did not
 attack them, because the leaders of the assembly had sworn an oath
 to them by the LORD, the God of Israel..."

(Verse 22) Then Joshua summoned the Gibeonites and said,
 "Why did you deceive us by saying, 'We live a long way from you,'
 while actually you live near us? You are now under a curse: You will

never cease to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God."

"They answered Joshua, "Your servants were clearly told how the LORD your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you. So we feared for our lives because of you, and that is why we did this. We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you."

"So Joshua saved them from the Israelites, and they did not kill them. That day he made the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the LORD at the place the LORD would choose. And that is what they are to this day."

The consequences of their failure to pray, their "leaning on their own understanding," was with them ever after.

Even 400 years later, in the time of King David, Israel was still living with the consequences of this independent decision-making.

What it comes down to for us is the question of who we trust most - ourselves or God?

Israel's failure was NOT that they didn't need God when things went badly, but that they didn't need him when they thought they had it under control.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
Lean not on your own understanding,
In all your ways acknowledge him...

How will Israel's experience change your prayer life tomorrow?

Charles Bridges, Exposition of the Book of Proverbs, 1846

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