

It's a Sin to Be Cautious

Joshua 1:1-9; 14:6-15; Judges 1:27-36; 2:1-5

Theme: It is sinful to doubt the fulfillment of God's promises and to hesitate to obey the Lord in the name of caution.

Judges was a dark time in Israel's history, just as the so-called middle ages was known as a dark time in European history. We're told that during this time "everyone did what was right in his own eyes," and that "there was no king in Israel." This was a time of widespread lawlessness and godlessness in the land. As a result, God repeatedly punished his people for their failure to obey him. What I'd like infect many of us still. This unbelief, far from being a noble trait (often it is referred to as "caution" or "thinking realistically"), is actually a wretched sin in God's eyes which leads to flagrant disobedience and eventual ruin.

God's Promise, Joshua 1:1-9

Let's look far back into Israel's history. God had commissioned Joshua to lead his people into the land of Canaan to wage war against the inhabitants and to overtake the land therein. In ch. 1 of Joshua, God makes it absolutely clear that he has already given the land into the hands of the people. He offers it on a silver platter, promising them absolute victory. The only responsibility they have is to stake their claim in the land, trust in God's faithfulness, and undertake the campaign against the people in Canaan.

God's promise to the people is exhaustive. He tells them that every place where they set their foot he has given them that land. And he provides the dimensions for the apportioned territory—it is basically the entire land of what we now call Israel-Palestine. Nothing was to be excluded from what the Israelites could claim as their territory.

God's promise was also definite; no place is given to exception or doubt. God tells them that no one will be able to stand against them. God tells them, "I will not fail you or abandon you. You shall not fail." He assures them that in no wise should they fear that they will be unsuccessful in their campaign or that anyone will prevail over them. In other words, they're being told the final score before the game even begins; they're guaranteed to win even before they play. All that they need to do is to enter the land, obey God's instructions, and receive that which is rightfully theirs.

Caleb, Joshua 14:6-15

We see what the ideal of what the response of Israel should look like in Caleb. He had previously demonstrated his faith in YHWH's power when he gave a "good" report in Num. Now, as an "older" man (85), he shows that he's still just as willing to trust in God's faithfulness and power to deliver what he had already promised. As far as Caleb was concerned, God had promised it, and so it was as good as done in Caleb's eyes. All he needed to do was to go in and receive what he'd already been given.

Caleb's claim was based on the promise of God which he had received some forty-five years earlier. (It's interesting that Caleb realized that God's promise was still valid—time had not invalidated it.) His reasoning was that if God had indeed promised the land, then it would be Caleb's to claim. And it was no concern to Caleb that the infamous Anakites were in the land. These renowned giants had previously proved to be a stumbling-block to the Israelites, who decided that they were too strong a people for them to deal with (Num. 13:28). As far as Caleb was concerned, these were the people which God had instructed Israel to wipe out, and as long as YHWH was on his side, Caleb figured he could stand against any enemy. Also, the great fortified cities were no threat in Caleb's eyes, for he didn't look at who stood against him, but who stood with him.

Negotiating the Land, Judges 1:27-36

However, as we begin to look at the response and actions of the rest of Israel, we discover a disturbing trend. Far from trusting God's promise, the people are timid and cautious in their movements into the land. The past generations had been impressed with the size of the people in Canaan. Now, the people show that they are still just as intimidated with the powerful population of Canaan as they had ever been. Instead of boldly engaging in battle, the Israelites tiptoe around the land and negotiate on friendly terms with the natives. They play it safe.

How different did the Israelites' experience look than that of Caleb and what God had envisioned for them! They didn't claim anything; they negotiated it. The people were too strong for them; they couldn't drive them out; they subjected them to forced labor; they settled down in the land among the natives and became friendly neighbors. They just assimilated and fit right in with the very people whom God had told them to eliminate!

How could the Israelites have erred so greatly and missed what God had instructed them so terribly? May I propose that in large part they were acting according to practical military and economic principles? Also, they probably found it a whole lot easier to negotiate with the natives than to destroy them. It's always more comfortable to take the path of least resistance. Possibly it didn't seem very practical or necessary to kill the people just to take their land. Why not use these people to do the grunt work? And did the Israelite tribes really need all the land? It just made more

sense to negotiate than to take over the land completely.

God's Rebuke, Judges 2:1-5

God gives his evaluation of the Israelites' actions in Judges 2:1-5. Because the people had done this, because they had failed to trust the Lord's word and to obey his instructions, the people which they had allowed to live would forever be a frustration and irritation to them. How much easier would it have been for them in the long run if they had obeyed God's plain instructions in the first place!

The Danger of Being Practical

We're such a practical people. Do we really need to assume that God means to give us all that he's promised? Can we really believe that no obstacle which stands in the way of God's plan for us will stand against us? Have you ever talked with new believer—someone naïve enough to read the Bible and actually believe that all its words and promises are true and reliable? Thank God that we mature enough to the point where we understand that these are mere fairytales, that they provide good lessons, but when it comes to daily life we need to be more practical.

I don't know about you, but I get tired of hearing about the miracles that are done in other, more "primitive" countries where people are just simple and foolish enough to believe that God can do anything. Here in America, we're far too intelligent to believe that.

Let me propose that what I think it would have looked like for the Israelites to obey God wholeheartedly and to trust in him completely. I think they would have entered into the land, believing that God would truly give the territory of the land completely into their hands. I think they would have wiped out the native inhabitants entirely because those people would be deadly influences upon God's people. They would have done exactly what God had said and trusted that God would provide for what needs to be done.

Instead, their disobedience is linked to their lack of faith and trust. God makes it unavoidably clear throughout his word that faith is essential to a life that is pleasing to him. This is a faith that is willing to dangle the whole of your life upon a trust in God's wisdom and power. A lack of faith always leads to disobedience. If you cease truly trusting the Lord, you're going to begin to rely upon your own conniving and resources—and that always leads to bad things.

The problem with the Israelites' actions throughout the remainder of the book of Judges is that they became exactly like the Canaanites. An appropriate title for the book that we refer to as "Judges" may be "Canaanized," because it describes the canaanization of Israel. Instead of

annihilating the wicked Canaanite natives and initiating a new way of life, the people settled down in Canaan and became just like their neighbors. May I suggest that we, as believers in a life-changing God, often live lives that look just like our unbelieving neighbors and coworkers? We settle down among them, and the way that we face problems look just the way that others face problems.

Conquering the Land

What would it look like for us to “conquer the land”? It starts with simply trusting God’s word and God’s faithfulness to fulfill what he’s promised. If God said it, it is done. It doesn’t matter how big the giants—or the problems—are. God is absolutely able to subdue all enemies, and he expects us to boldly do what he says, trusting the results to him.

Where we often get tripped up is when we adopt a seemingly noble “cautious” attitude. Translated from the Israelites’ experience, where they assumed that the native Canaanites were too powerful for them and it would be wiser just to settle down among them and negotiate with them, we likewise think that our problems are too big, and so we had better just try and resolve them in the most practical way possible. What if God has a better way to resolve the issue? What if he just wants us to face our problems boldly, trusting him to annihilate the enemy before us?

I’m thinking of a situation in my life. At present it seems that I’m facing a giant that can’t be beat. What’s tempting for me is to give in to the attitude that the giant’s too big, I’m not big enough, and so I might as well accept that the giant has to live there. The problem with that attitude is that it ignores what I know God has spoken to my heart and through his word concerning his faithfulness. While this problem might not get resolved exactly the way that I have in mind, I know that God has better things in store. And it is not noble to take the self-pitying, negotiating approach which says that I’ll have to just accept the situation as what it is and be content to negotiate.

Where we get tripped up often is in understanding what God has promised and what we expect. The Israelites failed because they didn’t listen to God’s revealed word. God had made it absolutely clear to them what he wanted them to do. He told them clearly that he had given them all the territories of the land upon which they would set their feet. He told them to eliminate the native people of the land because they would influence the Israelites in their ways. The Israelites had clear, explicit instructions, yet they disregarded them.

What we “claim” from God has to be legitimately promised by God. There may be things that I want, but I don’t claim these from God. On the other hand, if God has promised me that he will provide for all of my needs, that he won’t ever leave me or forsake me, then these I can be confident will be granted without exception.

Let me go beyond this a little and talk about something a little more “spiritual.” There may be a promise that God has spoken to your heart in a very clear and powerful way. Perhaps it has to do with a loved one whom you’re praying for, or a relationship issue, or a financial need. I’m willing to believe that the people of God, as they walk closely with the Lord and listen to his voice and seek his face, are able to receive definite and clear promises of the living God who still speaks to his people through his word and through his Spirit. Thankfully, we have the general promises of God’s written word. But God also speaks to us by his Spirit—which always corresponds with his word—in a specific way to our hearts. As we spend time with the Lord in prayer and seek his will for our lives, we can learn to discern this voice. And let me assure you, if you believe that God has given you a promise by his Spirit, I would encourage you to pray for greater discernment, but I would also encourage you to trust that promise, while praying that God would clarify your understanding.

I pray for the spirit of Caleb which boldly demands, “Give me this land! It’s mine. God promised it to me. I want it, and I won’t settle for anything less.” His focus was attentive to the God who fought for him rather than the enemies who stood against him. When are we going to realize that it’s all about God’s ability and not about ours? To become despondent and self-pitying is actually terribly sinful because it means that we have disbelieved God and we make the situation dependent upon us. It isn’t about me; it isn’t about you. It’s about God, and we sin when we disbelieve in his ability to resolve the situation.

There’s also the issue of the moral and religious infection of the Canaanites, which resulted from the Israelites allowing the native Canaanites to live in the land. However, disbelief was the first cause of disobedience and the final disaster.

We are not acting nobly when we sin against God by failing to disbelieve him. If God has spoken, our only response should be to listen, to trust, and to act upon it. To do anything else is wrong, and leads to ruin—or at least distraction—in the end.