

PERSONAL APPLICATION

GIDEON'S SIGNS – JUDGES 6-7

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“So we, through the eyes of faith, must simply accept that no matter what happened, the people of Israel witnessed a miraculous act of divine intervention. And they praised the Lord for what they experienced.”

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THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land continued well beyond Jericho. There existed a vast area of land to conquer, inhabited by hosts of Canaanite pagans. Following Jericho's destruction, the Lord led His people against the city of Ai. His command for the destruction of Ai was similar to that of Jericho, only this time God's people were allowed to keep their plunder and not dedicate it to the Lord. That makes sense, after all, because Jericho's destruction was the first in the land of Canaan, and as such, represented a sort of "firstfruits" of the conquest. As with our firstfruits, the Lord asks that His people offer them to Him as a sign of deep reverence and worship. But Ai was now the second city to be conquered, and its significance in the Lord's eyes was different.

Joshua's battle plan was fairly simple. He ordered thousands of his troops to sneak out in the middle of the night and await an ambush of their enemies. When daylight came, the rest of the Israelite army went to the walls of the city. The king of Ai fell right into Joshua's trap. He opened the gates of the city to let his army engage in battle. The Israelites feigned a retreat into the valley which lay before the city, and when the armies of Ai had advanced into the valley, Joshua's soldiers, hiding in the hills in preparation for an ambush, swept down and destroyed the Canaanites. Having destroyed the army of Ai in the field, Israel turned to the people left in the city. The extent of the killing and destruction was immense. We read in Joshua 8:25 that in one day 12,000 men and women, all the citizens of Ai, were killed. The body of the king of Ai was hanged for all to see.

The thoroughness and inevitability of Israel's conquest now began to alarm all the nearby cities and their leaders. When righteousness becomes aggressive, evil unites its forces. The righteous of this world often seem to fail because they have a difficult time joining forces. But, whenever wrong is threatened, it closes ranks. Remember how Pilate and Herod, who had been enemies, were united and became fast and dear friends after their common association with the Christ?

The neighboring kings began to believe their only hope of survival was to ally with one another. The kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites rallied their forces into one army and engaged in war against Joshua and Israel. But a Gibeonite king and his people, rather than join forces against an unbeatable foe, came up with a clever ruse to fool Israel into signing a peace treaty with them. Even though the Gibeonites were clearly in line for the destruction God commanded for all the other pagan tribes, they sent a delegation to Joshua loaded with moldy bread. Yes, you read correctly. They carried with them loaves of moldy bread. And their donkeys carried very worn sacks and old, cracked wineskins. The Gibeonites themselves wore old, worn out clothes. The Gibeonite delegation approached Israel, claiming to be a tribe on a long journey from a distant land. Since the people of Israel were only commanded by God to conquer the cities of the Promised Land, the Gibeonites appeared to be out of Israel's "line of fire," so to speak. To Israel, these people were not marked for destruction, and there was no reason to attack them. The people of Israel were not bloodthirsty; they were simply obedient to the commands of their God. So Israel made a peace treaty with them.

When the Israelites learned they had been tricked, many of them wanted to destroy the Gibeonites, but the leaders of Israel, citing the treaty to which they had agreed, refused to attack. Instead, they made many of them their woodcutters, and water carriers. Those who had once been enslaved in Egypt now enslaved many of the people of Gibeon.

When the Amorite king of Jerusalem learned that Israel had made a treaty with his nearby neighbors, the Gibeonites, he panicked. It was bad enough to have the Israelites on the march, but if they were allied with the Gibeonites, who were no pushovers themselves, all seemed to be lost. The king of Jerusalem allied himself with four other Amorite kings and attacked the Gibeonites, hoping to achieve a "first strike" victory. The Amorite kings most certainly believed their overwhelming force would be victorious. People sometimes think victory will be assured with superior power and strength, but the history of our world suggests nations often win a war not because they are strong, but because they are right.

The Gibeonites, allied to Israel by their treaty, called for Israel's help in defeating the Amorite kings, and Israel felt it had to honor its treaty. Joshua and all his armies marched throughout the night to help. They were able to take the Amorite kings and their armies by complete surprise and the enemies of Israel were thrown into confusion. The Israelites chased the Amorite armies down a long descent to the plain of Aijalon below.

And if that wasn't remarkable enough, the Lord began a supernatural intervention into the battle to provide God's people with further evidence of His presence and power. First, He hurled huge hailstones from the sky, killing more of the Amorites than were killed in the battle itself. This is not the last time the Lord would use nature as a weapon against Israel's enemies. In future years, when Samuel and the people of Israel were threatened by the Philistines, the Lord would cause loud thunder to throw the Philistines into such a panic that they would be routed (1 Samuel 7:10). Or consider the many plagues the Lord inflicted upon Egypt in order to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go free. Many of these plagues were outgrowths of nature, plagues involving frogs, lice, hailstones and darkness.

In an interesting description of His power and purpose, God once said to Job, "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or seen the storehouses of the hail which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle?" (Job 38:22). We are given a picture of our world's Creator as One who has stored up for His divine purposes the instrument of nature itself. We see the same power over nature revealed by His Son, Jesus, when He calmed the waters of the raging sea before His dumbfounded disciples with the words, "Be still!"

When it came to the Amorite kings, God's miracles of intervention in the forces of nature didn't stop with hailstones. The real miracle was yet to come. Joshua, seized by poetic passion, called for the sun and moon to stop in their tracks, allowing a longer day with which to exterminate the Amorite enemies.

Now, there's an interesting footnote to Joshua's poetic exclamation. The Bible tells us that the words Joshua spoke are written in the Book of Jashar. Have you ever heard of that book? Of course not! This book, like many writings from ancient times, was never found "canonical," that is, inspired by God and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). As a matter of fact, the Book of Jashar has never been found at all. It may be still lying beneath an archaeologist's shovel somewhere, or, much more likely, may never be found. But the book must have been fairly important to the people of Israel because it's mentioned more than once. Second Samuel 1:18 records how the men of Judah were taught a "lament of the bow" which was also recorded in the Book of Jashar.

And there are other books of which we have no copies; manuscripts that held some importance to Israel, for example, the "Book of the Wars" which is quoted by Moses in Numbers 21:14. These manuscripts may have been collections of victory songs which were used by Israel in times of celebration. In any event, the words of Joshua through which the Lord began His incredible miracle were, at one time, also recorded in this book of which we have no copy.

After Joshua said his words to the Lord before the people of Israel, the Lord intervened. We read that the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed its descent for one full day.

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As the author records, "There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a man. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!" (Joshua 10:14).

What do we make of this miracle? It seems so utterly unbelievable at first. For one thing, since the time of Copernicus we have known the sun doesn't revolve around the earth, rather, the earth revolves around the sun. Which means that if the sun stopped in the middle of the sky, it was the earth that stopped rotating, not the sun. Of course, from the perspective of an individual standing on the earth, it would appear as if the sun had stopped its revolution. And that is one reason we recognize the absurdity of using the Bible as a scientific textbook rather than a record of God's divine grace. The books of the Bible were never recorded for the purpose of helping us understand the scientific causes of the world's events. They record, by the Holy Spirit's direction, people's perception of God at work among them.

Many individuals have read this particular miracle from God with a sense of immediate disbelief. Some will say, for example, that if the earth had really stopped rotating in its orbit, everything attached to this world would have flown off into space. And had that happened, we would certainly have some sort of geological record of an immense catastrophe striking the entire planet at this moment in history. Others have suggested that perhaps it just seemed as if the day had grown longer, much as we can sometimes feel an afternoon dragging on forever. We've all had the experience of looking at our watches then going about our business for what seems to be a long period of time, only to look again at our watches and discover a mere five minutes have passed.

Some have even claimed this story to be poetic license, that we can't accept this event literally because Joshua speaks his words using imagery of poetry. And as support for that assertion, they will point to the song of Deborah in Judges 5:20 where Deborah, praising the Lord for Israel's victory over the Canaanite kings, says, "From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera." Nobody, of course, understands Israel's battle with Sisera to have involved the celestial stars coming to life and fighting against the Canaanites. We understand Deborah's song to involve exaggeration and hyperbole, typical of many victory songs. So, some will say that even as Deborah used poetic license to emphasize Israel's victory, we should interpret Joshua's account of this miracle in the same context.

The problem with such an argument is that a description of the miracle occurs outside Joshua's poetic utterance. The writer of this book makes it clear that Joshua's words were not mere hyperbole. The sun did indeed delay going down for a full day, the Bible goes on to say (with some understatement in this writer's opinion) that there has never been a day like it!

For anyone who believes in the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, nothing is impossible. God, who can defeat the inexorable deterioration of aging and death, can do anything He wants. God, who promises us an eternal destiny of joy and happiness after a physical resurrection in which we will receive glorified bodies, can achieve any miracle He wishes. He, who created the world, can even stop it on its axis.

And the problem with doubting one miracle in Scripture is that it casts doubt on all the

others. If we must find a rational explanation for this miracle, then we must look for them throughout the record of God's miraculous interventions. And that may inevitably lead us to question the miraculous nature of the resurrection itself. So we, through the eyes of faith, must simply accept that no matter what happened, the people of Israel witnessed a miraculous act of divine intervention. And they praised the Lord for what they experienced.

This is how the people of Israel perceived God at work to lead them into victory and conquest. Particularly when it comes to this miracle, we must never forget that God is the Lord and Master of time itself. He created time, and He will one day end the time with which we are accustomed. If He is interested in warping this creation of time, He has the power and ability to do it. As Peter said, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day (2 Peter 3:8)." Peter's faith is one which understands that time serves the Lord rather than vice versa.

It is within His prerogative and within His parameters to extend the hours of a day should He so desire. And it is ever within His prerogative and power to bring God's people into a timeless dimension without disturbing the orbit of the earth. The fact is, the Lord may have performed this feat in ways we can't even imagine, so although we may never have a scientific explanation for how this miracle occurred (as is true of all miracles), we must believe that to the eyes of the Israelites, it was the day that the sun stood still. For that miracle, they and we praise and give glory to God!

PERSONAL APPLICATION*GIDEON'S SIGNS – JUDGES 6-7*

Dear Heavenly Father, we acknowledge many moments in our lives when we feel lost and directionless. Keep us ever mindful that in crises or frustrations You are with us guiding and leading us. May we never doubt Your presence in our lives. Strengthen us with Your Word and the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In His Name. Amen.

1. As we turn to Gideon's miraculous signs we find the Israelites in a "pickle." What problems are they having and why are they having them? (Judges 6:1-6)

2. Over and over again we watch the Israelites fall away from the Lord, encounter seemingly insurmountable enemies, return to the Lord, and find deliverance from their oppressors. How is this pattern a reflection of our lives (Romans 7:15-25) and what is the solution?

3. Where does the "angel of the Lord" first appear? (6:11)

Why do you think this sort of appearance might seem surprising to some?

What does this suggest about where we might find angels (Hebrews 13:2)?

4. How does Gideon respond to the angel of the Lord? (6:13)

Share a time in your life when you responded to the Lord in a similar manner.

5. What important point is the Lord showing us by choosing Gideon to be Israel's deliverer? (6:15-16; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; 3:18-20)

Of what comfort is this to the average believer like you and me? (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Who else, like Gideon, has claimed to be unqualified for the Lord's call — and why?
Exodus 3:11, 13, 4:1, 10

Jonah 1:1-3

Jeremiah 1:6

Isaiah 6:5

6. What was the first sign by which the angel of the Lord assured Gideon of the validity of his message? (6:20-22; Leviticus 9:23-24)
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7. What was Gideon afraid of? (6:22-23; Deuteronomy 4:33, 5:26; Isaiah 6:5)
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Why is this no longer a problem for us? (Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:14-18, 3:12)

8. What two tasks did the angel of the Lord call on Gideon to perform? (6:25-26, 6:14)
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Gideon tore down the altar to Baal at night rather than in broad daylight. Why? (6:27)

Share a time when the antagonism of friends or family restrained your Christian witness.

9. Explain the two signs Gideon required of the Lord to assure him he was to attack and conquer the Midianites. (6:36-40)
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Why do you think one sign was not enough?

How did Gideon feel about asking the Lord for a second sign? (6:39)

How does the parable of the unjust judge help us understand that Gideon had nothing to fear in asking for a second sign? (Luke 18:1-7)

What does Jesus say about those asking for miraculous signs in Matthew 12:39?

What made Jesus condemn these particular individuals for their request? (Matthew 12:24)

10. Explain how the three hundred soldiers were chosen by God to fight Midian. (7:3-7)

Why did the Lord select so very few? (7:2)

11. How long after the defeat of Midian did Israel stay faithful (8:28, 33)?

12. What thoughts do you have about looking for the Lord's signs before making important decisions in your life?

13. Even though we may not always seem to experience the Lord's miraculous signs, why should we never doubt His love and presence? (Romans 8:38-39)
