

The Strength That God's Sovereignty Supplies: A Meditation from the Book of Joshua

November 8, 2019

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*¹⁰ The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
¹¹ The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
-- Psalm 33:10-12 --*

Throughout the book of Joshua we see the personal presence of God. In battle after battle, Yahweh fights for Israel. Through his appointed leader Joshua, God brings justice on a land whose sin has finally come to judgment (cf. Gen. 15:16), and he brings salvation to Israel, as more than 31 city-states rise to fight God's people.

Indeed, if there is any theme that recurs in Joshua, it is God's sovereignty over the affairs of the nations. As Psalm 33:10 puts it, "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples." Yet, God's sovereignty does more than run roughshod over the affairs of men. His personal actions in the world actually bring to fruition the sins of the nations, which in turn demonstrates his righteousness in bringing judgment on evil. Simultaneously, his covenant promises lead his people to bold action. Rather than passively waiting for God to act, God's actions impel his people to follow suit.

Joshua teaches us, therefore, how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility work together. In particular, we see God's sovereignty in his judgment and salvation. And for those of us who are seeking to know God and his ways in the world, it is worth our time to consider both. In what follows, let's consider how these often confused and competing themes (God's sovereignty and man's responsibility) work in harmony in the book of Joshua.

God's Judgment and Man's Sin

Throughout the battles with Jericho, Ai, the five kings of Southern Canaan, and the great horde of Northern Canaan, the ultimate reason for hostility towards Israel has been veiled from the reader. In the final battle, however, it becomes apparent why these thirty-one cities have waged the way they have—God has hardened their hearts. As Joshua 11:18-20 explain,

Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. ¹⁹ There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. They took them all in battle. ²⁰ *For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the Lord commanded Moses.*

Notice the explanatory clause in verse 20. As with Pharaoh (Exodus 4–14) and Sihon (Deut. 2:30), God hardened the hearts of these nations, which is to say, he let them be who they wanted to be. Or, as Romans 1:24, 26, 28 puts it, God handed them over to their sin---which is to say he gave them their greatest idolatrous desire. God hardened their hearts by withdrawing his hand of restraining grace and letting their darkness shine through. God was not active in making sinners sin. Rather, like the absence of the sun produces darkness, so God's withdrawal of his light left the people of Canaan to do what their darkened hearts desired.

In the context of Joshua, this hardening may have looked like this: When the wave of fear passed, after Ai defeated Israel because of Achan's sin, it gave these cities confidence to fight against God. More importantly, this renewal of self-esteem gave them confidence to fight for themselves again. You might even hear their voices in a passage like Psalm 2:2–3:

The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
³ "Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."

As a result of their hardness of heart, their judgment was just. There was not some measure of goodness within them that God overlooked or cruelly denied. No, God brought to light these nations' wickedness through the long process of war in Canaan (v. 18).

Moreover, in the timing of his actions, God shows us how his sovereign hand steers the nations. Thus, without denying the responsibility (indeed the culpability) of men in these chapters, we see how God directed all the events of Joshua, let the nations rage, and put them to death as a just response to their wickedness.

Today, we must believe God does the same thing. Only, we do not have a divinely inspired book to interpret all of his sovereign actions. Nevertheless, we do have this book (Joshua). And in it we find reason to repent and bow the knee to the God of Israel.

Truly, the sovereignty of God is not a reason to throw our hands up in despair. If anything, it leads us to lift our hands in praise and prayer, asking God to have mercy on us, sinners that are! All that God does in human history, he does to reveal the intentions of our hearts, and thus we ought not complain that God hardens hearts. We must ask him to be merciful to us and soften---yay, even, circumcise---our hearts. For he alone can do this, and it is his great delight to be merciful to those who seek mercy. (Which of course, is also a mercy that he first grants).

God's Grace and Man's Obedience

In Joshua, we also find another aspect of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Namely, when Joshua and Israel heard God's promise to defeat their enemies, they did not wait in passivity; they acted with proactive courage. As Dale Ralph Davis notes, "Verses 6–7 contain an implicit recognition of the energy in God's sovereignty. . . . In verse 6 Yahweh gives his sovereign assurance, 'I will hand all of them over to Israel, slain' (NIV); in verse 7 Joshua and Israel blast into the enemy camp in a surprise attack" ([Joshua](#), 96–97). Davis continues,

I do not want to overplay the text. But isn't the sequence significant? Divine sovereignty does not negate human activity but stimulates it We frequently look at the teaching of divine

sovereignty too simplistically. Some will allege that if God ordains something as certain it renders human effort irrelevant: "Let's go [sic] and let God." But Joshua knew better. His view was not let go but to grab hold. Divine sovereignty creates confidence, which calls forth our effort even to the point of reckless abandon. God's sovereignty is not a doctrine that shackles us but a reality that liberates us, not a cloud that stifles but an elixir that invigorates. ([Joshua](#), 97)

This is the biblical view of sovereignty and responsibility. It is compatible and not contradictory. Therefore, it is crass to make God's sovereignty and human responsibility a zero-sum game, where God puts in his portion and we put in ours. No, God is Spirit, not flesh. Thus, his actions are not constricted by the creatures he has made, the way that men and women compete for space in a crowded subway. With God, it is possible for him to work in and through his creatures (without ever confusing who is working). Similarly, it is unnecessary to suppose that the sum total of actions in the world are the sum of God's actions and man's.

As Joshua 11 illustrates: it is far better to see God's antecedent promise and resulting actions in and through the work of Joshua and Israel. Indeed, from the human point of view, we can risk boldly and live "recklessly" because God's providence is so certain. That is to say, we can take risks that appear reckless because there is nothing reckless in God.

Likewise, to eviscerate another popular cliché, as Spirit-filled Christians we are not called to "Let go and Let God." Rather, when we let God (lead, empower, instruct, direct, supply, etc.) us, we can say, "Let's go." Indeed, those who believe most fully in God's exhaustive and meticulous sovereignty are impelled to serve him mightily.

Such service in our lives may not defeat thirty-one kings in Canaan like it did with Joshua (ch. 12), but it may bring salvation to thirty-one nations, or plant thirty-one churches, or invest thirty-one thousand dollars in a pregnancy care center. We don't know what God will do with our meager efforts, but when we trust in his sovereign power, we are supplied to serve him with all the strength he supplies (Col. 1:28–29). In this way, God's sovereignty does not cancel human responsibility, it makes it possible.

And for that reason, we should continue to meditate on the sovereignty of God in Scripture, so that our hearts would grow ever more confident in him---and not ourselves. In Joshua, this is the difference between Israel and the kings of Canaan. The unbelievers heard of God's power and fought against him, but the believers heard of his power and ran towards him. They found grace in him and by that grace they did incredible things. Truly, God's sovereignty bolsters faith, and such faith empowers faithful living.

May God be gracious to us and give faith to trust his sovereignty and may his sovereignty be a source of comfort and confidence.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds