

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

May 24, 2020

The Valley of Opposition

Pastor Heather Zempel

Well, right before the world went crazy, I took my five year old daughter to swim class and as we're standing on the pool deck, getting ready for class to start out of nowhere, unprompted, in a very loud voice, so the entire gym could hear she turns around to me and says, "Mommy, do you know what Jesus can do? Anything! He can do the impossible." And I'm like looking around like a little nervous. I'm trying to get her to take the volume down a little bit. I'm shushing her a little bit. And then I caught myself and wondered why. I mean, I believe that Jesus can do anything. I believe that Jesus can do the impossible. Don't I want everybody in this gym to know that as well? And I just had a moment where I wondered what was going on internally and I wondered if in that moment, I had confused spiritual maturity with some sort of social propriety. I just wondered if maybe my faith needed to look a little bit more like the faith of my kid's.

Now, over the past five weeks, we have been walking through, praying through and praising our way out of some valleys. We have lamented, and we have praised and worshiped. We have fought for racial unity and we've slain giants. We've prayed for 40 days, and this weekend, we will follow Joshua into 'The Valley of Opposition geographically, it's the Valley of Aijalon. So if you have your Bibles go ahead and turn over to Joshua 10 or you can check out the notes tab on our online campus.

Now, let me set up some historical backdrop. So the children of Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. They've been wandering around the wilderness for 40 years. That generation it has passed on in Joshua has stepped in to lead the people into the Promised Land. For them, they've seen the waters of the Jordan River part, they've seen the walls of Jericho tumble, they have seen the city of Ai fall, they have seen the power of God. And then Joshua takes them all to Mount Ebal and read them all the words of Moses and so they recount and recite the promises of God. And while they're basking in the glory of that victory some men arrive claiming to be from a far off land from a faraway place, hoping to seek a treaty of peace, an alliance. And we're told specifically in Joshua nine, verse 14, that the Israelites did not consult the Lord about that matter. I think they did what a lot of us do when we're feeling like we're on a spiritual high. They just went with their gut. And so they sign this peace treaty, they sign this alliance without consulting the Lord. And as it turns out, these men were not from a far off far distant land. They were actually from a city seven miles to the west, called Gibeon. They had seen the movements of Joshua and the Israelites, and they're realizing that they were the next stop on the map. And they had a very strategic location where they were positioned and so they tricked Joshua and the Israelites into an alliance.

Now speaking of location, let's talk a little bit about geography. We've been talking about valleys so let's look at some maps for a moment. I think a lot of times when we think about the story of God, we wonder, why did God place his story in such a backwoods, hidden, insignificant place. But I just want to

demonstrate for a moment that God put his people exactly where he did for a very specific reason. If we look at the map of the ancient world, we find that this land called Canaan or the Promised Land is actually a land bridge between three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. It sits in the Fertile Crescent between the two great cradles of civilization, Mesopotamia to the northeast and the Nile River to the southwest. This was literally the crossroads of the ancient world. Whoever controlled that piece of land influenced the spread of technology, culture, commerce, and ideas. In the ancient world, if you have a message to get out, you position yourself at the crossroads.

Now let's move in a little bit for a closer look. When we look at this land, it's flat on the sides, it's hilly in the middle, and across the middle of those hills is a saddle. It's called the Benjamite Plateau and it's where the tribe of Benjamin will eventually settle. You can see it's just a very thin allotment of land between Ephraim to the north and Judah to the south. It's a really, really tiny piece of land. But it's incredibly strategic because this is where the main north south and east west highways of the ancient world converged and because of its geography because of its topology. Roughly about two thirds of the Old Testament is going to occur in that small strip of land. When we think about Old Testament places like Hebron, Bethlehem, Gibeah, which was Saul's capital, Gibeon, Rahma, Mizpah, Bethel, Shiloh, Shechem all of it is happening right there in or close to the Benjamite Plateau. And so Joshua has taken the eastern edge of the plateau at Jericho. He now is in an alliance with Gibeon on the western edge of the plateau. He controls the crossroads of the ancient world. And that's where we pick up the story in Joshua 10 verse one.

¹ *Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard that Joshua had captured and completely destroyed Ai and killed its king, just as he had destroyed the town of Jericho and killed its king. He also learned that the Gibeonites had made peace with Israel and were now their allies.*

² *He and his people became very afraid when they heard all this because Gibeon was a large town—as large as the royal cities and larger than Ai. And the Gibeonite men were strong warriors.*

³ *So King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem sent messengers to several other kings: Hoham of Hebron, Piram of Jarmuth, Japhia of Lachish, and Debir of Eglon.*

⁴ *“Come and help me destroy Gibeon,” he urged them, “for they have made peace with Joshua and the people of Israel.”*

⁵ *So these five Amorite kings combined their armies for a united attack. They moved all their troops into place and attacked Gibeon.*

⁶ *The men of Gibeon quickly sent messengers to Joshua at his camp in Gilgal. “Don’t abandon your servants now!” they pleaded. “Come at once! Save us! Help us! For all the Amorite kings who live in the hill country have joined forces to attack us.”*

⁷ *So Joshua and his entire army, including his best warriors, left Gilgal and set out for Gibeon.*

⁸ *“Do not be afraid of them,” the Lord said to Joshua, “for I have given you victory over them. Not a single one of them will be able to stand up to you.”*

Alright, let's look at that map just one more time to see where these people are located in what's going on. Joshua and his men are camped at Gilgal and they have an alliance with Gibeon giving them control over the Benjamite Plateau and giving them control of the crossroads. The Amorite king of Jerusalem realizes that he is now cut off from the major highways of the ancient world and that Joshua systematically moving across the land. And so he forms a coalition with the four others Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon to take it back. Joshua has five armies coming at him.

And so from Gilgal, we read in verse nine,

⁹ *Joshua traveled all night from Gilgal and took the Amorite armies by surprise.*

¹⁰ *The Lord threw them into a panic, and the Israelites slaughtered great numbers of them at Gibeon. Then the Israelites chased the enemy along the road to Beth-horon, killing them all along the way to Azekah and Makkedah.*

¹¹ *As the Amorites retreated down the road from Beth-horon, the Lord destroyed them with a terrible hailstorm from heaven that continued until they reached Azekah. The hail killed more of the enemy than the Israelites killed with the sword.*

¹² *On the day the Lord gave the Israelites victory over the Amorites, Joshua prayed to the Lord in front of all the people of Israel. He said, “Let the sun stand still over Gibeon, and the moon over the valley of Aijalon.”*

¹³ *So the sun stood still and the moon stayed in place until the nation of Israel had defeated its enemies.”*

Whew! Okay, there's a lot in here, and there's not enough time to unpack probably all the questions and all the concerns that you have and so in the notes tab, and the online forum, and also in our sermon discussion guides, we're going to give you some more resources to dig into some of the history to dig in with to some of the questions that you might have with this text. But here's what I want to draw our attention to today. First of all, Joshua and his men are camped at Gilgal that is a 20 mile trek that they took at night, uphill about a 3000 foot descent, I'm sorry, ascent just to get to the battle. It was an eight to 10 hour hike, just to get to Gibeon. And then at some point along the way, Joshua prays sun standstill, over Gibeon moon over valley of Aijalon.

Now here's the way most of us understood or were taught this story, especially if we grew up in Sunday School. We were taught that Joshua and his men have been fighting this hard battle all day long. It's been grueling and intense, and the sun is going down. It's hovering on the horizon, but Joshua and his men are on the brink of victory. And so Joshua calls out to the Lord for more daylight to finish the job. But let's go back and look at that map just one more time because I want us to see something. Where is Gibeon? Gibeon's in the east. Where is Aijalon? Aijalon is in the west. What time of the day is the sun in the east, and the moon in the west? In the early morning at sunrise. Joshua is not praying that the day would be prolonged rather, he is praying for the cover of darkness to continue so he can launch his surprise attack. Not only that, but Joshua's men are advancing towards the west and as the Amorite kings turn to face him, the sun will be in their eyes as it comes up on the horizon.

Now, the author doesn't clue us into any of this. The author doesn't explain to us the strategic positioning of the Benjamite Plateau. He doesn't describe for us why the King of Jerusalem is so set on attacking Gibeon. And he doesn't tell us the calculation of the 10 hour hike in the dark uphill in order to get to the battle. And he doesn't clarify for us, whether it's sunrise or sunset. But having this kind of spatial awareness helps us read the story better, and it helps us apply the lessons better. I think along with that, it should raise our level of confidence in the credibility of the text. Because knowing this geography and this typography in such an intimate way reminds us that these are not fairy tales. They're not morality tales, that these are the stories of a living God that involve real people living in a real place and a real time and people who are writing it, that know the land that it's taking place in.

Now let's get back to really what's the most important thing, which is this crazy prayer that Joshua prays, sun stand still, moon stand still. Now my background academically is as a biological engineer. So my brain just really begins to spin on this was this literal? Was it metaphorical? Was there some sort of Eclipse that the earth literally stopped spinning on its axis? Was it a miracle of refraction? Was the light diffused through that hailstorm? But at the epicenter of all of this conjecture of all of these questions, what I have to realize is that the question that is the most curious the question that is the most relevant the question that I have the hardest time answering is why don't I pray prayers like that?

If I intellectually and unapologetically embrace a doctrine of the omnipotence of God, then why don't I live like I believe that just a little bit more? Why don't I pray like I really believe that just a little bit more? Does my life shout to the world that my God can do the impossible? Am I willing to see myself standing on the brink of a move of God? And how do we practically go after a move of God? I think the first thing we need to see a move of God is to pick up some magnifying glasses. Because if we want to see a move of God today, we need to put a magnifying glass on the miracles God did yesterday.

On April 22, 2012, I preached a message titled, "If Not". It was about the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being told to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, and if they didn't do it, they'd be thrown into the fiery furnace. And I was riveted by their response, where they said, "Look, we're not

gonna bow down to the idol if you throw us into the furnace or God is able to deliver us, but even if he does not, we will still worship Him."

When I preached that message, Ryan and I were in about the middle of a seven year journey through infertility. And though it wasn't specifically mentioned in that message it was playing in the backdrop. As daily I was magnifying the greatness of God over my life while also digging deep to find the resilience to say, "But I will praise you, even if you don't show up the way that I think you could, or should". Now, I didn't connect the dots on this until a couple of weeks ago but it was three years to the date on April 22, 2015, that I went into labor with Sawyer. On April 22, 2012, I was prophesying a praise that was coming three years in the future. We've got to put a magnifying glass on the miracles of God in the past. So now when I'm believing for another move of God, I just drop a magnifying glass on April 22, 2012 and April 22, 2015.

Joshua had seen miracles. He had seen the Red Sea part; he had seen water come gushing out of a rock; he had had manna delivered to his doorstep daily; he had crossed the Jordan River at flood stage and he had seen the walls of Jericho come down in response to people's praise. There were great miracles of God that he was living in and leaning into. And if we want to pray, sun stand still prayers, we have got to develop and live in a theology of the greatness of God. And we develop that when we put that magnifying glass on the miracles that he's done in our lives, and the lives of the people around us. And I think that's why it's so important that we do this in community that we live in community that we lean into community because sometimes I need to put a magnifying glass on a miracle that God has done in your life in order to believe for the next one for mine.

Not only that, but we need a record of promises. If we want to stand on a promise that God has given today, then we want to anchor ourselves and the promises that he fulfilled yesterday. If we could rewind the clock from this moment in Joshua 10, 40 years earlier, when Joshua predecessor's Moses in Exodus 17, is standing in his own valley of opposition with the Amalekites. And an Exodus 17:14 they experienced this incredible victory, and we read this:

¹⁴ After the victory, the Lord instructed Moses, "Write this down on a scroll as a permanent reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will erase the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

I think that's so interesting. God makes a promise to Moses, but says make sure that Joshua hears this. I just wonder in that moment was God beginning to lay tracks for Joshua to run on to know that God was a promise maker and a promise keeper.

And we fast forward in Joshua's own story. He's marching in the middle of the night into his own valley of opposition. And God whispers a promise to Joshua before the battle even starts, "I have given you victory over them". When Joshua prayed, sun stand still it sprung out of a promise that God had made personally to him, but also came at the end of a long track record of promises that God had already

fulfilled in his midst. We need a record of promise and that's why this book is so important. The first promise of God that we see in Scripture is to Eve in Genesis 3:15. The last promise of God we see in Scripture is in the next to the last verse in Revelation when he says, *"I am coming again soon"*. And in the middle of that we find promise after promise after promise, *"I will never leave you or forsake you"*, that *"in Christ you are a new creation"* that *"I am working all things together for the good of those who love me and are called according to my purposes"*, that *"in this world, you will have trouble but take heart, I have overcome the world"*, *"you are more than a conqueror in Christ"* and *"your faith can move mountains"*. Can we stand on the record of promises that God has made today?

I think it's also interesting when Joshua prayed sun stand still the Scripture tells us he prayed it loudly enough that all of Israel could hear. Why is that? Could it be that he wanted to give a gift to the next generation that Moses had given to him the beginning of a track record of seeing God fulfilling his promises. If we want to pray, sun stand still prayers, we need to stand on a record of promises of God.

Finally, we need a Tent of Meeting. Let me explain that. Again if we could turn back the clock to Exodus 33, we find that Moses Joshua's predecessor had set up a Tent of Meeting it's where he met with God. It's where the people of Israel would come if they needed a word from God or a decision from God or direction from God. And in verse 11, we read that God would meet with Moses face to face at the Tent of Meeting and then Moses would go back to the camp. But his young assistant, Joshua would stay at the Tent of Meeting. He would just linger there; he would just remain in that presence for a little bit longer. If we want to see a move of the presence of God in our world today, we have got to move ourselves into the presence of God every day. Public moves of God are always preceded by private moments of prayer. Sun stand still over Gibeon, moon stand still over Aijalon. That prayer did not come out of thin air. That prayer came after a man had spent a lifetime of seeking the presence of God and that gave him the confidence to pray to believe that the creator of the universe would alter the physics of his creation for one day. It was a brave prayer. It was a bold prayer. It was an audacious prayer. It was a fearless prayer. It's also an incredibly creative prayer. I mean Joshua didn't just get that promise from God and say, "Okay, well God help us, God, give us strength, God help us overpower our enemies". He prayed sun stand still. Who does that? I think it's somebody that's sat long enough with the creator of the universe to know that he is still wanting to do creative things. It comes from somebody that gets that twinkle in their eye and that mischief in their smile and that bounce in their step, when they dare to embrace a wild faith that shouts to the world God can do the impossible.

What is the most Creative prayer, you can pray today? We all need a Tent of Meeting. And some of you today need to come to a Tent of Meeting to encounter God face to face for the first time. If you are watching this weekend, you're part of one of those online campus experiences and you have never come to the place where you've made a decision to give it up to give your life to God, can I invite you to do that today? Would you take a moment and raise your hand in that online chat, because if we want to put a magnifying glass on a miracle of God, nothing compares to the moment that Jesus walked out of the tomb. And he did that to bring life and life abundantly to you. Jesus is the only human being and the

entire of human history that predicted his own death and resurrection and pulled it off, he is worth following today.

Now I want to invite the band to come back up because worship is another way that we magnify the greatness of God. It's another way that we recite the promises of God. It's another way that we seek the presence of God. But I also want to talk to those of you today that are desperately faith filled, boldly, creatively, praying, sun stand still prayers today and yet it feels like your world is spinning out of control. Where God isn't showing up the way you think he could, or should. I think those are the moments that we have to remember that the God that meets us in the valley of opposition is the same God who meets us in the valley of heartache, the same God that meets us in the valley of weeping that the God who slays giants in our midst also holds us with a fierce compassion when we feel totally defeated, that the same God who speaks life into dead bones breathes peace and comfort to the mourning heart in the funeral home. That the same God that will alter the physics of his created world to make the sun stand still will also sit with you and hold on to you tight and anchor you when your world is spinning out of control. And it's in those moments that we echo the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk when he said, *"I've heard all about you, God I'm filled with all by your amazing deeds. Renew them again in our day.*