

The Lord's Southern Campaign

JOSHUA 10:1-43; EPHESIANS 1:19-23

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Congregation of Christ: Today's text includes one of the most disputed events in the Bible. This is the event popularly known as "the sun stood still" during the Battle of Gibeon between Israel and the Amorites. Did the sun – and moon – really stop in the course that God established for them? We will consider this today.

As we've studied the Book of Joshua, we're now at the beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land. After the Israelites miraculously crossed the Jordan River on dry ground, they set their main camp at Gilgal. Then they marched on to the first city to conquer: mighty, fortified Jericho. The Lord destroyed the great wall, and then Israel destroyed the whole city, including all its inhabitants, livestock, and possessions, as God commanded them.

But there was a problem with their next target, the small city of Ai. A man named Achan hoarded some plunder inside his tent, violating God's command. This incurred God's wrath on the whole nation, so Israel suffered a humiliating defeat when they attacked Ai. Israel's complete destruction was only averted only when Achan confessed, and his whole household destroyed. God then handed the city of Ai to the Israelites. But the damage had been done. Other cities in Canaan now saw that the mighty Israelites can be defeated in battle.

Still, the Hivites of Gibeon and three other cities, with their mighty warriors, feared Israel. They believed that the God of Israel is giving the whole land of Canaan to Israel. So they deceived Israel into making a peace treaty with them. Now, Canaan is cut in the middle, separating the north from the south. So in Chapter 10, we read that when Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard this, he gathered together four other kings in a coalition against Israel.

"The Lord was Fighting for Israel"

Adoni-zedek wanted to punish the Hivites as traitors who allied with the enemy. He gathered a powerful army of four other Amorite kings, marched to Gibeon and laid siege to it.

In the Ancient Near East, treaties between kings were common. Some treaties were drawn up among equals to honor each other's boundaries and to maintain profitable trade relations. There were also treaties between a superior king and a lesser king. The lesser king is in the service of the greater king, while the greater king protects the lesser king from his enemies. In the case between Israel and Gibeon, Israel is the greater power and Gibeon is the lesser power in a mutual defense pact. Therefore, when Gibeon was attacked by the Amorite kings, Israel was obligated to keep their part of the treaty to defend Gibeon.

So Gibeon called for help in defending itself against the Amorite coalition. And Joshua honored his treaty with the Gibeonites, as he did even after learning that the Gibeonites deceived him. As he gathered his forces, the Lord assured him again of victory, *"Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you"* (verse 8). He marched his army about 20 miles uphill from Gilgal all night, and surprised the Amorites probably before dawn.

Though Joshua is a brilliant military commander, his brilliance was from God. God alone gets the glory and praise, even when Joshua surprised the Amorites at an unexpected time of attack. We see this in verses 10-11, where it was the Lord who *“threw them into confusion.”* Israel dealt them a big blow and chased the remnants from Beth-horon to Makkedah. And it was also the Lord who threw down large hailstones, *“There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword.”* The writer’s emphasis on the narrative is that the Lord, the Divine Warrior, again *“was fighting for Israel”* (verse 14). Israel was only his means to punish the rebellious Amorites.

“The Lord Listened to a Man”

What follows in verses 12-14 is one of the most disputed passages in Scripture:

At that time Joshua spoke to the LORD in the day when the LORD gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel,

“Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.” And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies.

Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.

Is this event literal or figurative? For atheists and skeptics, these three verses are proof-positive that the Bible is unreliable. They scoff, saying, “How can the sun and moon stand still without causing major disturbances on earth and the solar system?” Christopher Hitchens, a well-known atheist, comments, “the Old Testament is riddled with dreams and with astrology, the sun standing still so that Joshua can complete his massacre at a site that has never been located.” This is typical twisting of facts. The sun standing still has nothing to do with astrology, but with astronomy. Astrology deals with fortune-telling based on the positions of celestial bodies. This event deals with astronomy, the scientific study of planets, stars and other celestial bodies. And Gibeon, as we mentioned last Sunday, has been discovered as the ancient site of present-day el-Jib.

Before Copernicus discovered in the 16th century that the earth revolved around the sun, all Christians conceded the literalness of the event. Martin Luther criticized Copernicus, saying, “I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth.” Today, there are several theories presented by Christian interpreters as to what really happened in verses 12-14. I’ll mention just a few with brief nontechnical details.

Because we now know that the earth revolves around the sun, the most popular view today is that the earth stopped rotating on its axis, so that the sun and the moon appeared to stand still. The writer described this phenomenon as it appeared to them, much like we still speak today of the “rising” and “setting” of the sun. But according to scientists, how can this not cause catastrophic disasters on earth? The answer is that it is nothing for Almighty God to prevent disasters from happening. Though God promised that the natural course of nature

will continue until the end (Gen 8:22), he sometimes intervenes for the benefit of his people, as during the crossings of the Red Sea and the Jordan River.

Other interpreters theorize that the day of the battle of Gibeon just seemed long, not really long. We often say we had a “long day,” when the day has been difficult or boring. Still others say that the Hebrew words for “stood still” and “stopped” really means “darkened,” so there was a total solar eclipse for many hours, which again, is impossible. So these two theories are far from convincing.

The most interesting interpretation is the “silence” theory, which is another “darkness” theory. The problem in the narrative is the hailstorm and sunshine. In a huge hailstorm the sun couldn’t possibly have been seen. The Hebrew word for “stand still” means “to be dumb, silent, or still.” At first glance, the *movement* of the sun and moon is the subject. But can it be that the writer is talking about the *shining* of both? The sun did not stop moving, but it stopped shining because of the hailstorm. Also, the same word for “stopped” is used figuratively in Habakkuk 3:11, where we read that the sun and moon “stood still” when the light of God’s arrows and spear flashed by. The light of the sun and moon is no match for God’s glory.

Joshua’s prayer would make sense when, after his troops marched 20 miles uphill all night and then started fighting, the sun rose and the heat started bearing down upon his weary troops. The coolness of a darkened sun coupled with a big hailstorm would bring them much needed relief. Therefore, Joshua’s prayer must have been about early morning when the sun was east of Gibeon and the moon was west of Ajalon (see map). It would be too early for Joshua to pray to extend the day. And it wouldn’t help his troops if the sun continued shining for another 12-24 hot hours. The big hurdle for this view to overcome is that the sun did not set for about a whole day, which probably means sunrise to sunset.

We must not promptly dismiss this event as fictitious, figurative or an exaggeration. For there have been discoveries of tales in many ancient cultures of a long day in the Near East, a long night in North and South America, and a long sunrise in the Pacific.

Whatever happened that day, whether the earth stopped rotating, or the sun darkened because of the hailstorm, we must not doubt the miraculous reality of this event. The writer glorified God in saying that Joshua spoke to the Lord, asking him to make the sun and the moon do his bidding. And God did, doing even more by sending a great hailstorm. The power of God the Divine Warrior was such that the hailstorm killed more Amorites than the Israelite fighters did. It was truly a day to remember, *“There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel”* (verse 14). It was even more astonishing because God listened to the voice of a man in fighting for Israel!

“All Things Under the Lord’s Feet”

The rest of the chapter, verses 28-43, tell us about the total defeat of the Amorites and the conquest of the rest of southern Canaan. The five Amorite kings fled and hid in the cave of Makkedah. So Joshua’s men sealed the entrance to the cave with large stones and placed some guards before it. When the battle was over, Joshua and his men returned to the cave

and took the five kings outside. What was done next was common to ancient Near East warfare. Joshua and his generals would put their feet on the necks of the defeated kings. This was not a barbaric act, but as a sign that the defeated kings and their cities are now under the yoke of the conquerors.

From Makkedah, Israel defeated the cities of Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron and Debir to complete the southern Canaan campaign. The accounts of these conquests follow the same pattern, as written in verse 40, *“So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the LORD God of Israel commanded.”* Some critics say that this total destruction of the Canaanites cannot be true because we read in Judges Chapter 1 that the Israelites did not drive out all the Canaanites from the land. This is true because verse 20 says that the few who were left escaped back to their fortified cities. So the writer is only saying that everyone that Israel found in the cities and battlefields were killed.

At the end of the chapter, the writer concludes the narrative with another praise to the Lord for the successful southern campaign, *“And Joshua captured all these kings and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel.”*

Dear friends, this ancient chapter in Joshua has many parallels in the New Testament, and therefore also has applications for us today.

First, we find hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’s promise that he will return and conquer all his enemies. In Psalm 2, we read, *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed”* (verses 1-2). But God in heaven laughs at them, for he has sent his Anointed Son Jesus Christ to *“break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel”* (verse 9).

As Joshua and the Israelites put their feet on the necks of the Amorite kings, he was a preview of Jesus, the Greater Joshua, putting his feet on the necks of unbelievers, scoffers, persecutors and murderers. God says to his ascended Son, *“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”* (Heb 1:13). Even you, dear Christians, will be doing the same to God’s enemies, *“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet”* (Rom 16:20).

Second, the terrible destruction of rebellious cities in southern Canaan will be nothing compared with the terror of Christ’s return. No one will dare fight against the Divine Warrior, nor even speak a word against him. Do not believe those who teach that there will be a final rebellion against God, for we read in Revelation 6:15-17 that all mankind will be in terror, hiding in caves like the defeated Amorite kings,

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

Like the Amorite kings, all the rebellious people of the world will not be saved from God's wrath by hiding in caves and rocks.

Third, we are not to think that we are fighting our own battles. For it is Christ who fights for us against sin, temptations and sufferings. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us strength in our most difficult days, when we think that all is lost and hopeless.

Fourth, we are not to discount the miraculous and supernatural in Scripture. For God is the Creator, and all nature works at his command, even Joshua's "long day." We are to be in awe of Jesus himself, who commanded even the wind and the waves to obey him. When Jesus was buried, the Romans sealed his cave tomb with a rock and posted guards at the entrance. But unlike the Amorite kings, the rock and the guards could not prevent him from rising from the dead and escaping the cave unnoticed.

Fifth, we do not fight with swords, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"* (Eph 6:12). Ours is not a physical battle like Joshua's, but spiritual, against sin and temptations from Satan.

Finally, in all our spiritual battles, we must give glory and praise to our Triune God: to God the Father who created us and elected us for salvation; to Christ who accomplished all that his Father required of him in his perfect life, atoning sacrifice on the cross, and glorious resurrection from the dead; and to the Spirit who fights for us against sin and temptations daily, renewing our hearts and minds, giving us hope in the return of our Divine Warrior.