

WHEN YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL**JOSHUA 10 & 11**

I have a deadly disease. Shocked? Well, you probably have the very same deadly disease. Just to lower the drama a bit, this is a spiritual disease. Most of us here today are afflicted by the spiritual disease of believing in a very small God. We don't really expect or anticipate much from God. Someone has suggested that we tend to have a pocket-sized Jesus who we pull out occasionally to help us with little, every day stuff – like praying for a good parking place at the grocery store. Yes, we believe God is there. But God is there to be prayed to if we need His assistance. God is there watching over the world in a kind of benign, detached way. God is there to welcome me into Heaven when I die. But a God who is big enough to dominate your life and mine every day all day long? Not so much.... Is there a downside to having a little, small God? Yes. You live life anxiously and with lots of frustration. You never experience the miraculous or the supernatural. Your everyday experience of God is a non-event. Most of us have settled for a very little God, while the God of the Bible is so big the universe cannot contain Him. He's so great we can't begin to understand Him and so powerful that nothing and no one can stand in His way. Earlier today we sang about the mighty power of God and how great God is. Do you really believe what you sang? Have you ever experienced His might and greatness? More importantly, do you live each and every day differently because of how big God is?

Today we continue to explore the spiritual principles found in the Old Testament book of Joshua. Get what you've been given. Just as God delivered the people of Israel out of literal slavery in the land of Egypt, He has saved you and me from slavery to sin, death and the devil. Just as God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land of Canaan, He offers you and me a rich spiritual inheritance – an abundant spiritual life here on Earth full of God's blessing and adventure. Just as Israel had to actually invade Canaan and conquer cities, defeat enemy armies, and surmount obstacles, so you and I need to conquer and defeat spiritual enemies and obstacles along life's journey. Just as Israel had to get what had been given to it as a nation, so you and I have to get what's been given to us in and through Jesus. We must claim it... enter into it... possess it.

The God we've been reading about in the book of Joshua is anything but small. This is a picture of a very active, powerful and mighty God. He pushes back the waters of the Jordan River at flood stage. He demolishes the mighty walls of the fortress city of Jericho. He leads His people into battle and assures victory. There's nothing little about this God! I believe we find in these great stories a remedy for the deadly spiritual disease of a small God. It's suggested in our text for today – Joshua 10 and 11. Let's read just the first fifteen verses of chapter 10 now. The first remedy for the disease of small thinking about God is found in that passage.

EXPECT A MIRACLE.

What's happening here? The Canaanites were very much aware of Israel's successful invasion into their territory – and they were plenty scared. Jericho and its mighty walls had fallen. Other key cities had been destroyed or taken. Then one group of

Canaanites, the Gibeonites, had surrendered and made a peace treaty with Israel. Five Canaanite kings believed strength was found in numbers so they formed a coalition and attacked Gibeon as a kind of punishment for surrendering to Israel. A very strange strategy, if you ask me, and it backfired on them! The army of Israel rushed to Gibeon's defense and with God's help annihilated this army of five Canaanite kings.

What we just read describes a miracle. As this army fled before the army of Israel, God rained down huge hailstones upon it. More enemy soldiers were killed by these Heaven-sent hailstones than by the Israelites. Then, as the sun began to set, Joshua made maybe the most unusual prayer request recorded in the Bible. He asked God to grant Israel and its army an extension of sunlight so that it could finish the job of pursuing and destroying the army of these five Canaanite kings. Maybe this was the beginning of day light savings time! Seriously, it baffles me why some people have some great philosophical or intellectual problem believing the miracles recorded in the Bible. We are surrounded by the miraculous every day. The Earth revolves around the sun, seasons change with clock-like regularity, crops grow in response to rain and sun, and children are conceived and grow inside a mother's womb. Yes, we understand more about these events than we do the miracles recorded in the Bible, but so much of what we take for granted is just as hard to explain. If the same God who created the sun, put it in its place and allows it to function in such a marvelous way to provide us with light and warmth, why is it a problem to believe that He could alter or change the pattern of the sun for one day? Why is that such a problem?

Our God is mighty, powerful, and capable of the miraculous and supernatural all of the time at every level of life. Think with me about this truth on a personal level. No one can ever become a child of God – a follower of Jesus – except for a miracle of grace. Getting baptized, attending a church, and being a moral, upright person all help and encourage spiritual life, but none of those create spiritual life. Only God can take a rebellious, self-centered, sin-dominated person who is ignorant of God and change him or her from the inside out. How does God transform that person into someone who wants to know God, love God, and serve God? I preach about it often. I invite others to experience it. But I don't fully understand it. And I wonder today if that miracle has truly happened in your life. Have you ever received forgiveness of your sins through Jesus, God's gift of eternal life and the knowledge that you are changed forever and that your life can never be the same?

Clearly, Joshua expected a miracle. He asked God for a miracle and got it! The setting of the sun was delayed just long enough to wipe out Israel's enemies. The longer I live, the more I'm convinced that there are issues, circumstances, situations and problems in my life and in the lives of others that only God miraculous power can ever solve. More and more I have to expect a miracle! One of the joys of being a pastor is being able to witness so many wonderful miracles in the lives of people. It's a miracle when someone surrenders his or her life to Jesus as Savior and Lord. It's a miracle when someone is released from the grip of alcohol or drugs. It's a miracle to see a marriage healed and restored. It's a miracle to see broken relationships in families and among friends fixed up. It's a miracle to see someone released from a bitter resentment and gain the

supernatural power to forgive. It's a miracle to see God provide in times of financial lack. It's a miracle to see God grant peace and rest in the midst of stressful circumstances. We need to expect, pray for and then look forward to seeing God break through into people's lives. We need ask for and then expect a miracle more often in our lives and in the lives of others!

Churches can settle for a small God, too. We spend a lot of time planning around her. We have a lot of dedicated people here who love to serve the Lord. We have some incredible financial givers who help to keep our ministry going. Planning, dedication, money – God can and does use all of that and more. But there's some stuff only God can do in a church! As a church, we need to ask for and then expect God to do the miraculous in our church and through our church. I think you know that's never an invitation to just relax, fold our hands, take a nap and let God do it all. After all, Joshua and the army of Israel had to go out and attack these enemies. Nevertheless, God's miraculous power allowed them to accomplish so much more than they ever could have accomplished in their own strength. At the end of the day, it's only God's power and God's blessing that is the ultimate cause of any spiritual success.

Brothers and sisters, our church continues to be in need of revitalization and turnaround. Many good, worthwhile things are being done in our midst for which I praise God. I believe God can and will do greater things in and through us in the future. But we need to provide God with a platform on which to operate, so to speak. We need expectant, ready hearts that say to God, "Come, Lord Jesus, do a great work in us and through us! Yes, help us to do everything that You want us to do. But even more importantly, Lord Jesus, come and do in us and through us what only You can do! Lord, we need, we ask for and we expect a miracle, because You're an awesome, mighty, and great God." Here's a second remedy for the disease of having too small of a God...

ANTICIPATE A FIGHT.

There will always be a certain kind of tension in your life with God. On the one hand, some people literally expect God to do everything for them and end up as spiritual failures. On the other hand, some people try to do everything in their own strength and also end up as spiritual failures. Keeping the right perspective - which recognizes a certain kind of tension – can be seen in Joshua himself. He is totally, deeply, utterly, and humbly depending on God to go before the army of Israel and prepare the way. And God did indeed do just that. He divides the waters of the Jordan River so the people of Israel can cross over into Canaan on dry ground. He brings down the mighty walls of Jericho. He puts fear and terror into the hearts of the Canaanite people. But we also see Joshua doing lots of stuff. He listens obediently to God's every instruction. He leads the army of Israel into battle at the Lord's direction. He destroys the enemy at the Lord's command. He leads Israel to get what they've been given by the Lord.

Do you see the tension? Yes, Joshua expected a miracle from God. But, Joshua also anticipated having to fight himself. There's a whole lot of fighting in the book of Joshua! These two chapters describe military campaigns all over the land of Canaan – battles

waged and won by Joshua and the army of Israel. We discover that even though God had given them the land, Israel still had to fight – and fight hard for every square inch of the Promised Land. Let me read 11:16-18 just now to help us gain that perspective. When you read the book of Joshua, it's easy to conclude that all these battles and victories happened in a couple of weeks. Bible scholars tell us, however, that Joshua 10 and 11 – just these two chapters – compress in summary form what actually took place in some seven years of fighting. There's the irony. There's the tension. Yes, Canaan was a gift from God to His people, Israel. But it was a gift that had to be fought for, won and possessed.

You and I live with the very same tension spiritually. Yes, a wonderful, victorious spiritual life is available to every child of God as His gift. But it's a gift that has to be fought for, won and possessed. It's given, but getting it is not automatic. You may be aware of how often this imagery of warfare, battles and fighting turns up over in the New Testament as well. For instance, Paul, the great Christian leader, wrote these words, "We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ." (2 Cor 10:3-5 NLT) In yet another place, Paul talks about fighting a spiritual battle against the devil, "...God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels." (Eph 6:10-12 MSG) If you want a big God and if you want to experience a big God in this life, anticipate a fight – anticipate lots of fights along life's journey.

I love the insight that a man by the name of Bob gave to his friend, Riley, who had just become a follower of Jesus. They were off hunting ducks together and Riley was telling Bob some of his personal difficulties in remaining true to his new commitment to follow Jesus. Apparently, some of Riley's old friends were trying hard to drag him back into some of his old, sinful lifestyle choices. They ridiculed him for spending so much time with someone like Bob who they thought was a religious fanatic. Riley asked a question probably all of us have asked, "Bob, why am I having so much trouble?" At the time, the two men were behind a duck blind and here's how Bob explained it to Riley. "I'll tell you why. A couple of ducks fly over and you shoot. You kill one and injure the other one. They both fall into the lake. What do you do? You go over and pick up the ducks, right? But which one do you go after first?" Riley replied, "Well, that's easy. I go after the injured one first. The dead one isn't going anywhere!" Bob explained, "That's the way it is with the devil. He goes after injured Christians. He's not going to waste his time with someone who is spiritually dead. But the moment you give your life to Jesus, you had better get ready. The devil is going to come after you. He will chase, oppose you and make it hard on you."

I've mentioned before the three great enemies each of us fight against constantly in this life: the world – this mass of sinful, evil values, priorities, attitudes and behaviors that dominate people and our culture; my “flesh” or my own sinful nature that is so prone to resisting God at every turn; and the devil – this supernatural, personal being who can tempt and defeat you if you don't know how to resist him. The Canaanites were essentially defeated before Israel ever set foot in Canaan. God saw to that. Now, Israel still had to go into the land, fight against and defeat those Canaanites. But victory was assured as long as Israel depended upon, trusted in and obeyed the Lord. Here's the spiritual parallel. Our three great spiritual enemies - the world, our sinful nature and the devil were essentially defeated when Jesus died on a cross and was raised from the dead three days later. Now, we still have to fight against and defeat those spiritual enemies every day. But our ultimate victory is assured as long as we, too, depend upon, trust in and obey the Lord.

Again, the truth is just as applicable to a local church as it is to an individual follower of Jesus. How many of you want to see a great, big God working miracles in and through KRBC? How many of you want to see our church become a powerful force for the Kingdom of God in Northland and beyond Northland? How many of you long to see people saved, disciplined and enjoying the kind of spiritual life that Jesus has promised largely because of the ministry of this church? Well and good. Me, too! Then, anticipate a knock-down, drag out fight every day! Expect the devil to mount significant opposition at every critical moment. Anticipate his efforts to discourage us, divide us, distract us and trip us up along the way. If we're going to be a turnaround church, we are going to have to fight and fight hard. Expecting a miracle and anticipating a fight are both a part of experiencing a great, big God. Let me mention quickly a third remedy to the spiritual disease of a small God.

ENJOY A REST.

I love the last verse of Joshua 11. “So Joshua took control of the entire land, just as the LORD had instructed Moses. He gave it to the people of Israel as their special possession, dividing the land among the tribes. So the land finally had rest from war.” (Jos 11:23 NLT) Was all the fighting over even after the first seven years? By no means. Two chapters later, God says to Joshua, “...‘You are very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.’” (Josh 13:1 NIV) The battle continued on, but in the midst of the struggle, God gave His people rest.

I believe there's a wonderful parallel to your life and mine right there. Just as with the people of Israel, God gives you and me a rest to enjoy. This rest isn't inactivity, or laziness, but instead resting in God's strength and ability as we do whatever He leads us to do. Again, Paul, the great Christian leader, experienced that kind of spiritual rest right in the midst of an incredibly busy and often conflicted ministry, “For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” (Ph 4:13 NLT) Maybe it's a little like boarding a plane in the midst of rain, fog and clouds and then as the plane ascends upwards suddenly it bursts out from the cloud cover. Now the sun and the blue sky are everywhere to be seen and enjoyed. The restful follower of Jesus is not a person who

has no storms in his or her life. That's not possible this side of Heaven! No, the restful follower of Jesus is simply the person who – because of Jesus – lives his or her life above the storms.

What does it mean to enter into and enjoy this place of spiritual rest in your life? I appreciate the perspective of Thomas Merton when he said, "Give me humility, in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride, which is the heaviest of burdens." It's a place of humility before the Lord and trust in the Lord. It's a place of total confidence in Jesus rather than in yourself. It's the ability to put those feelings of anxiety, despair and defeat about our issues in life into the proper perspective. It's the willingness to come back to the Lord and say to Him, "Lord, I blew it. My actions or my attitudes were wrong. Please forgive me." Spiritual rest means you stop trying to do what only God can do and yet you're obediently available to do anything He wants you to do. God once said something wonderful to Moses, Joshua's mentor, when the armies of Egypt were bearing down on the people of Israel as they approached the Red Sea. "... 'Don't be afraid. Just stand still and watch the LORD rescue you today.... The LORD himself will fight for you. Just stay calm." (Ex 14:13-14 NLT) That's the kind of rest I'm talking about today: the "be still and know that I am God" kind of rest. Spiritual rest is learning how to lean hard into Jesus every day and enjoy His victory right in the midst of the battles we are fighting.

I will never be a long distance runner. I have neither the desire nor the aptitude! But I do have enormous respect verging on awe for those who practice any kind of distance running. From what I've been told – certainly not from any personal experience - it's common for long distance runners to "hit the wall" as they push themselves past their comfort level. Long distance runner Dick Beardsley described it as the feeling of an elephant jumping out of a tree onto his shoulders and making him carry that elephant the rest of the way. Hitting the wall is a very real physical condition. Once carbohydrates and hydration are diminished, the body wants to stop. The body burns out of energy and becomes so tired it can't go forward. At the Boston Marathon, some 27,000 runners begin the annual 26-mile, 385-yard mass run from suburban Hopkinton to Boston. But perhaps up to 40 percent of those optimistic, determined souls will slam into a sudden sensation of overwhelming, can't-do-this fatigue several miles (typically about five) before they get a chance to experience the glory of crossing the finish line. What is true for your body is true of your soul. Spiritually speaking, sometimes we also hit the wall. We feel like an elephant has jumped on our back. We hit that can't-do-this spiritual fatigue. Life is very much like an endurance race in which we all will at some point "hit the wall" and want to quit. We all need to learn how to rest spiritually – to be still and know that God is God.

Is your God too small today? Chances are, He is. We all need a new, fresh vision of God's immensity and greatness. When you have a big God, you live life expecting a miracle. When you have a big God, you live life anticipating a fight. When you have a big God, you enter into His rest and enjoy it.