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FLY YOUR PLANE
Joshua 9

Ben Carpenter has muscular dystrophy and can only move around in his electric wheel chair. On the afternoon of June 6, 2007 he was crossing a street at the corner of Red Arrow Highway and Hazen Street in the town of Paw Paw, Michigan. He was not able to get all the way across the street before the light changed. Unfortunately he was crossing in front of a large semi-truck and the driver did not seem him in front of his huge rig. When the light turned green the driver gave the truck some gas and it started forward. Somehow, when the massive vehicle struck Ben's wheelchair it caused it to turn facing in the direction the truck was going and the handles in the back of the chair got wedged in the front of the truck. Ben was wearing a seat belt so he was held in his chair as the truck propelled his chair with him in it forward. Oblivious to the presence of Ben the truck driver accelerated to 50 miles per hour. Frantic observers called 911 and waved their arms, trying to get the driver's attention. Two off duty police officers began pursuing the truck. Behind the truck on the road were two parallel lines that marked where the wheelchair's rubber tires were being worn off. It was not designed to roll 50 miles per hour down a highway. Thankfully the driver reached his destination and pulled to a stop in a parking lot. He was shocked to find a terrified Ben Carpenter still attached to the front of his truck.

Do you ever feel like that's sort of what is happening to you? You are being hurtled through life and you can't stop it because it is out of your control? There is a lot less that I control in the world than I would like. In fact, I control a miniscule amount of what happens. We hate the idea of being controlled by someone or something. Today I want to set you free from being controlled by other people. We have a freedom that is delightful and life giving if we will only exercise it, but it starts with being set free of being controlled by other people. You will see what I mean as we study an incident out of Joshua 9.

THE INCIDENT

THE GIBEONITES PULLED A CON

In the previous chapters Israel had conquered two cities in its campaign to conquer the land of Canaan. It was now apparent to everyone in Canaan that they were going to have to deal with Israel. They were a fact of life that Canaanites could not ignore. There are some things that happen in life that you may not like but have no choice about. Aging, for instance, is one of them. I was thinking about this recently

one morning when I walked outside to get the newspaper. I realized that this is a sign that I am old. Who gets the newspaper and reads it anymore? Only old people. I started thinking about signs that you are old. If you have a land line in your home, you're probably old. If you're proud of the fact that you are on Facebook and happy that you can post pictures of your grandchildren there, you are probably old. If you are not sure what Instagram is but assume it is some way to send a telegram really fast you're old. If you've ever actually sent a telegram you're really old. Anyway, aging happens to us and we can't avoid it. It is an unpleasant fact of life. That's how the Israelis were for the people of Canaan. They were invading the territory and had not just defeated two cities, they had annihilated them. Their intentions were clear. They were not just fighting for some territory, they appeared to be intent on wiping out the indigenous populace. The people of Gibeon, an area not far from Jerusalem, were confronted with this unpleasant reality and had to find a way to deal with it.

Some of the tribes in the area banded together to try to fight against the invading Hebrew tribe. But one group, those from the city of Gibeon, came up with a unique approach to dealing with the invaders. They realized that trying to fight the Israelis was a losing proposition. If they chose that option they were going to lose big and be destroyed. In verse 24 you can see the conclusion they had come to. They told Joshua, "Your servants were clearly told how the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you. So we feared for our lives because of you."

Israel wasn't open to negotiation so the Gibeonites' only options were either to try to fight off Israel or to flee. But if they fought they'd be destroyed and running away meant leaving their homes and possibly starving in some wilderness some place. They came up with ingenious alternative. They had to trick Israel into a treaty they would never have accepted had they known who the people of Gibeon really were.

The plan was clever. They put together a delegation to go meet with Joshua and the Israeli leaders. They equipped them with old, patched clothes and sandals to make it look like they had been on the road for months. They made sure their food supplies were moldy and running short, looking again like the remnants of a months long journey. When Joshua asked them who they were they told him they were from far away, saying in verses 12-13, "This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey."

Long ago when I was fresh out of college I lived in an apartment in Long Beach with 3 other single guys. One night we got a call from a pastor at one of my roommates' church. He had a guy with him who needed a place to stay for a couple of nights. The fellow was moving to Long Beach and needed some help in his transition. The pastor wanted to know if he could stay with us for a while. We agreed so he brought him over. That was more than 35 years ago but I still remember his name. It was Dennis Robertson. That night we talked with him briefly. He was from Oceanside. He was trying to turn his life around. He had a story to tell about his life and how he wanted to get it straightened out. We were all sympathetic and encouraging.

The next day while we were all out he robbed us blind. He stole everything in the place that had even a remote chance of being of value and a few things that were of no value at all. He was a con man. The police came and finger printed the place as well as took a report but we knew they would do nothing about it. I was wrong. A week later we got a call to come to the police department. They had us separately look at mug shots. I picked him out immediately. I asked the detective how they knew to include his picture in the mug shots. He said, "He just got out of prison 3 weeks ago for pulling the exact same scam. He's so dumb he used the same alias he did previously. When I saw the name Dennis Robertson I immediately knew who it was." I asked if he thought they'd ever get him. He said, "Sure. Like I said, he's so dumb he'll get stopped for some trivial offense and they'll check for warrants. He'll get caught." I thought, "Great. I got scammed by a dumb criminal. How dumb does that make me?" Dennis, or whatever his real name was, conned me and my roommates in an effort to steal from us. The men of Gibeon pulled a con on Joshua, only they weren't try to steal, they were try to save their skins.

Israel, of course, did not have our modern communication and information systems. They couldn't Google the men to check where they were really from. They couldn't call someone from the area to find out if they knew of them. They couldn't do any research to verify their claims, couldn't do a background check. They only had one way to discover whether they were being told the truth and that was to "inquire of the Lord" according to verse 14. How they would have done that we don't know, but apparently that was a possibility. It was an option they failed to avail themselves of. They bought the Gibeonite story hook, line and sinker. Verse 15 says, "Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath."

ISRAEL KEPT THEIR PROMISE

Three days after they signed the treaty with Gibeon someone told the Israelis the truth. We don't know who clued them in, but someone informed them that they'd been snookered by the Gibeonites. Those guys weren't from some distant land hundreds of miles away. They lived right down the street. Gibeon was actually only a few miles from Jerusalem. When the Israelis sent people to check out this report they learned that it was totally true, much to their chagrin.

The people of Israel were upset and grumbled against the leadership because they knew that God had told them to clean house. They were not to set up alliances with Canaanite people. But look at how the leaders responded in verse 19. "We have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel and we cannot touch them now." By all human calculations they had every right to void the deal. If you enter an agreement, a contract, with another party but discover that that party misrepresented the facts, you have the right to cancel the deal. You have no obligation to honor a contract that was entered fraudulently. So Israel could have said, "You lied to us, so we're not honoring this deal. And since you lied to us we know that we can't trust you, so as Inigo Montoya said Count Rugen in *The Princess Bride*, prepare to die."

The Israeli leaders, however, said, "Yes, they lied, but we gave our word. We promised. In fact, we promised with an oath by our God. If we now renege on that promise, even if humanly justified, it might say that God might renege on his word. He might not keep his promise. Therefore we will keep our word even though we don't have to do so."

In Joshua 10 you get a picture of how seriously they took this. Look at verses 3-4. "Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem appealed to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish and Debir king of Eglon. 'Come up and help me attack Gibeon,' he said, 'because it has made peace with Joshua and the Israelites.'" So because they made an alliance with Israel Gibeon was attacked by a coalition of 5 Amorite tribes. They had gone from the hot water of the threat of Israel to the frying pan of the 5 tribe Amorite coalition.

What could they do? Verse 6 says, "The Gibeonites then sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal: 'Do not abandon your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us!'" Joshua could have just ignored the plea or responded slowly enough to get there too late. That way he would not have attacked the Gibeonites, but he would have let the Amorite coalition solve the Gibeonite problem for him. But he didn't

do that. Verse 7 says “Joshua marched up from Gilgal with his entire army, including all the best fighting men.” Joshua honored the promise he had made. He fought in Gibeon’s defense and routed the Amorites.

APPLICATION

There are two thoughts that we can take from this story and apply to our lives.

ASK BEFORE YOU LEAP

Joshua and the leaders of Israel made a mistake. They did not “inquire of the Lord” before acting on the request they received from the delegation from Gibeon. They failed to consider what God wanted them to do. We can do the same thing. I think I’m not the only one who has the problem of just reacting or acting without pausing to ask what God would want in a given situation. Or even worse, we convince ourselves that God wants us to do something mainly because it is what we want to do. We label our will God’s will.

We don’t know exactly how Joshua asked the Lord what he wanted them to do. Whatever it was, we don’t have quite the same facility today. The Lord somehow clearly communicated with Joshua in ways that he doesn’t typically do today. However, we can still ask what God wants in any situation. The primary way we do that is by asking what God has already said about it in his word.

Last week Laurie and I caught some of a standup comedy show by Bill Cosby. In his show he talked about how he and his wife went out to dinner at an Italian restaurant that had a bakery attached. After they ordered he excused himself to go to the restroom. Only he didn’t go to the restroom. He went to the bakery and bought some chocolate chip cookies. He ate two of them. When he returned to their table his wife asked, “Where did you go?” He described the ensuing conversation as being like a fencing match. They got out their verbal swords that they use to try to score points on the other one. He said “I told you, I went to the restroom.” She said “the restroom is this way and you went that way.” He tried to cover up. “The restroom for the regular people is this way but they have a restroom for stars that way.” She didn’t buy it. “You went to the bakery and ate a cookie.” He said, “I did not eat a cookie.” That was technically true. He didn’t eat a cookie. He ate two cookies. The problem is we all know what he means when he describes the conversation as a verbal fencing match. Somewhere in there God’s people should stop the fencing and ask, “what would God have me do in this conversation?”

Ask the Lord before you act. Consult his instructions. Years ago in another ministry I came up with an outside the box idea for the church and presented it to the leaders. They initially responded positively, but we said, "Let's pray about it." At our next meeting one of the leaders said, "This is a bad idea and we absolutely should not do it." He laid out some biblical reasons for his position. I didn't have any good arguments to counter his reasons, and his idea won the day. We did not implement my idea. Within less than a year it became obvious that had we implemented my idea it would have been a disaster. What saved us from that mistake was that we stopped and one of us in particular inquired of the Lord.

When Laurie and I were engaged I was finishing school and did not have a job lined up for when I graduated. You can imagine how happy that made Laurie's parents. Their daughter was marrying some guy who would be out of work by the wedding day. Not long after that I met with a church in the L.A. area that offered me a job. Whew, I wouldn't be penniless and unemployed. But before I responded Laurie and I prayed about it. The day I was to give the church my answer we had lunch together and talked about it. For no discernible reason both of us felt like we shouldn't take the position. It felt stupid. I was saying no to the only job opportunity I had. Both of us will tell you to this day that it was the right choice.

However, more pressing is the need to ask God how he would have us choose day in and day out. How do we spend our time, how do we use our money, how do we relate to impatient and insensitive people, how do we love our spouses? I have seen many Christians relate to each other, even in marriage, in ways they know absolutely to be contrary to God's will. When do you stop and say, "What does God want? That is what I will do!" If you don't you are making a grave mistake.

DON'T LET OTHERS FLY THE PLANE

Though you would never know it from talking to him, our son-in-law, Michael, is quite the jet jockey. He was number one in his flight training, so he got his pick of aircraft type. He chose the most advanced fighter jet the Marines flew at the time, the F-18 Hornet. The aircraft the Marines fly are two seat airplanes. Seated behind him in his plane was a wizzo (WSO), a weapons systems officer. Because it is a fighter jet they had to practice many radical maneuvers that they would use in an aerial dog fight. Such moves can and do cause some serious motion sickness for the wizzo because he doesn't control and often cannot anticipate what happens. There's a huge difference between flying the plane and being the helpless passenger in the back. I asked Michael if that would be a problem for him in his next assignment as a flight instructor because he will be the guy in the rear seat while his students fly the aircraft. He admitted it would be a factor.

I mention this because we all do something strange when it comes to flying the airplane that is our life. We give up the controls to someone else, and often those people jerk us around in maneuvers that make us sick. Let me explain what I mean. A significant point in this story is that Israel did not make choices in how they would act on the basis of what someone else did. They made their choice on the basis of what would most honor God. That was what was most important to them and it was the determining factor. The Gibeonites were dishonest and deceitful in their dealings with Israel. But Joshua and the other leaders of the nation did not decide what they should do based on what the Gibeonites did. They decided on the basis of what God wanted them to do and nothing else.

Unfortunately we all have a tendency to hand over the controls of our lives to other people. We tend to choose how we act toward them on the basis of how they act toward us. If they are kind, respectful, even loving toward us, then we return those same kinds of actions. But if they are mean, uncaring, or indifferent toward us, then we tend to reflect similar behavior toward them. When we do that we are not following the example of Israel in this story. We are basing what we do not by what kind of person God has called us to be or by what will bring him the most glory, but on the basis of giving back to them whatever they have given to us. So their actions and attitudes are determining our actions and attitudes.

Unfortunately I can give you all sorts of examples of this. Recently at home Laurie and I had been discussing something that we weren't sure about so I said, "I'll just use your phone to look it up." She has an I-phone, so I touched the little icon that activates the web browser. Normally it opens on the Google web site. Only this time that didn't happen. It went to a different web site that neither of us recognized. She said, "What did you do?" The implication, of course, was that I had done something that changed things on her phone. I said, "I didn't do anything. I just touched the web browser icon." She insisted that I had done something else. I insisted I had not. Then she said, "Well you must have done something to foul it up." She was blaming me and it wasn't my fault. I noticed that my tone of voice became harder, my voice level a bit louder as inside the emotion was building. I was feeling indignant and defensive and that was taking over. That was not a big deal. We didn't have a knock down, drag out fight over it. We just kind of let it go and moved on. Actually, come to think of it, we never really resolved that. She still thinks I caused the problem and I still insist on my innocence. But the bigger issue there is that my response was being dictated by what she was doing and saying, not by the Spirit of Christ, the Word of God, and my own desire to glorify him in all that I do. How does God want me to relate to my wife? He wants me to treat her

with kindness, patience, gentleness and love. He wants me to do that at all times, regardless of what she does! I should choose that, even if I feel she's blaming me for something that is not my fault.

I recently told you the story of our travails with our car and the smog test it flunked. Jeff Anstett came to our rescue and it turned out that the car didn't need a single repair. It passed a second test without us spending a dime on it. Before that the state had me over a barrel. They claimed we needed to replace our catalytic converter, which would have cost well over \$1000. The guy at the smog test station knew the converter wasn't the problem and told me so. Our mechanic knew it wasn't the problem. I knew it wasn't the problem, but the guy I talked to from the state bureaucracy insisted I had to replace the stinking converter. He was uncaring and unbending, a classic case of bureaucratic power being wielded without an ounce of common sense or concern. My response was, "that guy really made me mad." Hold on. He was stupid, uncaring, more than a little pompous, but he didn't *make* me do anything. He didn't threaten my family unless I got mad. He didn't put a gun to my head and tell me I had better get mad or else. He didn't make me get mad. I chose that. I wanted to shift the blame for my resentment of him onto him. I am a victim here so I am justified in what I think and do. In so doing I let his poor behavior dictate my choices. I need to see that he didn't make me do anything. I chose my attitude, for I could have opted to respond with patience, kindness, grace, humility and love instead of anger.

We live in a fallen world full of fallen and broken people. John wrote in 1 John 5:19, "the whole world is under the control of the evil one." We forget that at times. Satan is behind the scenes pulling levers, switching switches, pushing buttons, manipulating people and events. So we need to remember that most of the time the one who is dictating how people behave is Satan! We want people to be kind, patient, thoughtful, forgiving, tolerant, accepting and loving toward us. Do you think that's how they're going to be if they are fallen people being manipulated by Satan? Clearly they are not going to operate as God would have them live. So if we let other people's misdeeds dictate our behavior what will we be like? We will be doing exactly what Satan wants us to do.

The Scripture calls on us to live as God wants us to live regardless of what other people do or don't do. In Matthew 5:38 Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" Isn't that exactly what I am describing? You give back to people exactly what they give you. They knock your tooth out, then you knock their tooth out. Jesus went on in verse 39 to say, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, then turn to

him the other also.” In verses 43-44 he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’”

In Romans 12:14 Paul wrote, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” He went on in verse 17 to say, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” In verse 21 he said, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” The message consistently is, “don’t let other people dictate your behavior. God calls you to be patient, kind, loving, forgiving to everyone, so do that regardless of what they do.”

Look at an example in Philippians 1:15-18. Paul was imprisoned, unable to pursue his calling by traveling around planting churches. While in that awful situation he wrote that “some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.” Some people were preaching Christ to try to compete with Paul and to undercut him in ministry. How galling! He had every right to fight back, to attack them, to undercut them and show what crummy people they were. But look at what he says in verse 18, “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

He refused to let the disgusting attitudes and actions of other people determine his own attitude or actions. Maybe they were jealous, spiteful, ambitious people thinking only about how they could knock him down a few pegs. Paul’s response was simply, “Hey as long as they preach Christ I could care less.”

In Romans 3:3-4 Paul wrote, “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written, ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.’” In other words, God is faithful to what he has promised regardless of what people do. Our unfaithfulness does not sway him from being rock steady in his character. And that is what we are to be. Others may have no faith in God, they may mock those who have faith, they may be unkind, cruel, unloving, unforgiving, harsh or indifferent toward us. But we are to let their actions and attitudes bounce off us the way a BB fired out of a pellet gun would just bounce off the armor of a tank. As the tank would move forward on its intended path without being even slightly affected by that BB, so we are to move

on our way toward being what God wants us to be and doing what he wants us to do regardless of the BB's that people fire at us.

Fred Shuttlesworth was an African American Baptist pastor in the 1950's. He ministered in Birmingham, Alabama and was one of Martin Luther King's most important allies. In 1956 Pastor Shuttlesworth announced he was going to ride on the city's segregated buses in defiance of the city's racist laws. On Christmas night, the night before the planned protest, his house was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. In her account of the civil rights campaign in Birmingham entitled *Carry Me Home*, Diane McWhorter says the attack occurred late at night so Shuttlesworth was in bed asleep. Neighbors and police running toward the smoking ruins of his house were sure he was dead. Amazingly he came out totally unscathed. He told everyone there, "The Lord has protected me. I am not injured." A few months later he took his daughter to enroll at an all white school. An angry mob attacked him with brass knuckles, wooden clubs and chains. He was taken to the hospital where it was discovered he had only minor injuries. That night he announced from the pulpit of his church that he only had forgiveness for his attackers. Later Shuttlesworth was arrested because of his protests against the unjust laws. McWhorter wrote about what happened, "The officer who took Shuttlesworth to jail struck him, kicked him...called him a monkey, and then goaded him, 'Why don't you hit me?' Shuttlesworth replied, 'Because I love you.'"

Fred Shuttlesworth was committed to obeying God, to following Jesus, regardless of what anyone else did to him. That is what we see in the people of Israel in Joshua 9, and it is what we are called to do. Do not hand over the controls of your life to someone else to let them fly the plane. Do not let them dictate how you respond and how you act. Choose to do what God has called you to do regardless of what others do.