

“Storyline: Why?”

Joshua 6 and 7

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First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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It's not a magazine that I usually reference in a sermon. There's a reason for that. *Slate* is an online magazine with a very clear political agenda, and it usually doesn't have much to do with God. Except this week, it did.

For this week David Plotz, the editor of *Slate* wrote a column. The column was titled, “Good Book: What I learned from reading the entire Bible.” And here is part of what he wrote.

“Should you read the Bible? You probably haven't. A century ago, most well-educated Americans knew the Bible deeply. Today, biblical illiteracy is practically universal ... My mother and my brother, professors of literature and the best-read people I've ever met, have not done much more than skim Genesis and Exodus.”

He continues. “Maybe it doesn't make sense for most of us to read the whole Bible. After all, there are so many difficult, repellent, confusing, and boring passages. Why not skip them and cherry-pick the best bits? Well after spending a year with the good book, I've become a full-on Bible thumper. Everyone should read it—all of it! In fact, the less you believe, the more you should read. Let me explain why, in part, by telling you how reading the whole Bible has changed me.

While reading the Bible, I often felt as if I had finally lifted a veil from my eyes. I learned that I hadn't known the true nature of God's conflict with Job, which is the “ur-text” of all subsequent discussions of obedience and faith. I realized I was ignorant of the story of Ruth. I was unaware of the radical theology of Ecclesiastes, the source of so many of our ideas about the good life. I didn't know who Jezebel was, or why we loathe her, or why she's the painted lady, or even that she was married to Ahab.

Not to sound like a theocratic crank, but I'm actually shocked that students aren't compelled to read huge chunks of the Bible in high school and college, the way they must read Shakespeare or the Constitution or Mark Twain. That's my intellectual defense of Bible reading. Now a more personal one.

As a lax, non-Hebrew-speaking Jew, I spent my first 35 years “roboting” through religious rituals and incomprehensible prayers, honoring inexplicable holidays. None of it meant anything to me. Now it does.”

The column continues, and I wish I could tell you that it finishes with a confession of faith. But it doesn’t. So all I can say is what David Plotz says in the end.

“Perhaps” he says, “Perhaps I am closer to God in the sense that the Bible has put me on high alert. I came to the Bible hoping to be inspired and awed. I have been, sometimes. But mostly I’ve ended up in a yearlong argument with God ... Yet the argument itself represents a kind of belief, because it commits me to engage with God.”

Now I don’t know David Plotz personally, but I do know this, as one who has argued with God, he’s in good company. After all, Abraham argued with God in Genesis. Moses argued with God in Exodus. And this morning, in the book that bears his name Joshua argues with God too.

“Sovereign Lord,” he says, “why did you bring us across the Jordan river if you’re going to let the Amorites kill us?” It’s a comment intended to start an argument. It’s a complaint, the first part of a “prayer of lament.” And the prayer of lament that begins with a complaint is one of the most common forms of prayer in the Bible.

The Psalms are full of complaints. Take Psalm 10:1 for example. “Why do you stand afar off? Why do you hide in times of trouble?” David prays. The Book of Job is full of complaints too. Job 13:24 says “Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy?” And Jesus utters his complaint too, in the cry of on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

So you see complaints are common in the Bible and so is their opening question: Why? Why God? Why has this happened? Why did you do this? Why didn’t you prevent it? Why did you allow it? Why have you acted in a way that I cannot understand or reconcile with your character? Why?

Have you ever wondered why when it comes to God? And if you have, have you ever repressed your thoughts? Have you ever felt like it was somehow wrong to ask why? Well if you have then there’s something you need to know.

As far as we know a prayer of complaint is a prayer that God never refuses to hear. In fact, quite the opposite, its occurrence over and over again in the Scriptures

seems intentional, as though God is encouraging us to understand. We're supposed to make use of it.

John Huffman is a Presbyterian pastor from Newport Beach California. And in his commentary on Joshua 7 he writes, "We need to remind ourselves of the importance of giving vent to our feelings as we talk to God, of throwing ourselves prostrate on the floor or a bed, or pounding our fists in anguish. When there's been some terrible reversal, some awful defeat, some life-threatening situation, God doesn't expect us to be stoic or to pretend it isn't there."

He's got it right you know. And Psalm 62:8 affirms it, "Trust in God" the Psalm says, "at all times ... pour out your hearts to Him." We are meant, you see, to understand. God is never afraid of our questions, or even our accusations. To trust in God at all times means to trust that He wants to hear us speak to Him even when the only thing we want to do is ask Him "Why?" over and over again in as many ways as we can think to ask.

That's what Joshua discovered following the defeat of Israel at Ai. After Jericho it had all looked so easy. Ai was just a small town not a city. So he sent 3000 men to conquer it but they returned defeated. And Joshua 7:6 says Joshua and "the leaders of Israel tore their clothing in dismay." They "threw dust on their heads and bowed down facing the Ark of the Lord until evening." Then in frustration that God didn't even seem to notice them, Joshua gave vent to his feelings.

He "cried out" Scripture says. He poured out his complaint against God in a series of questions, questions that sound a lot like accusations. Lord, why did you bring across the Jordan, if you were only going to let the Amorites kill us? Wouldn't it have been better for us to stay on the other side? How can I encourage Israel to fight anyone now that they've fled and been defeated by people they were supposed to conquer? And last but not least there's Joshua's question to God about His character. "And what can you do Lord to save the honor of your name?"

But notice this and notice it well; at no point does God interrupt. At no point does He intervene and tell Joshua to be quiet. At no point does God reject any of his questions even when they turn into accusations. Instead, God simply lets Joshua pour them all out. He lets him pour out all his thoughts, all his emotions, all his raw disappointment and dismay and anger. God simply lets him pour it all out to Him in a complaint, in a prayer of lament.

So people of God please realize this truth, God will never interrupt you either. He will never tell you to be quiet. He will never ask you to repress your thoughts or your feelings. Just the opposite! For when you or I pray a lament, like a close friend, God will simply listen to us. He will allow us to vent all our words and emotions in His presence without ever asking us to stop.

But when you've expressed all your emotions, the hurt, the anger, the pain, the disappointment; when you've asked all your questions of God, and made all your accusations; learn a lesson from Joshua. Don't walk away! Don't walk away from God after that. You've complained to Him. You've started an argument with Him. Now give God the opportunity to respond to you. And realize that the response you receive may not be the one you expected.

“But the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Get up, why are you lying on your face like this? Israel has sinned and broken my covenant. They have stolen the things that I have commanded to be set apart for me.’”

In Joshua's mind the argument was pretty powerful. God had promised Israel He would fight for them and help them conquer all the cities in the Land he had given to them to possess. But it hadn't happened at Ai. Therefore God must have broken His promise, either He was unwilling or unable to keep it.

The problem is Joshua wasn't aware of all the facts. He hadn't even considered the possibility that the promise wasn't broken by God. It was broken by a man who was part of God's people. But as is sometimes the case when we start an argument with God, somewhere down the road, when God finally speaks, we slowly become aware of something, some fact, some piece of the puzzle we hadn't even considered.

John Maxwell is a nationally recognized Christian speaker who lives in San Diego, and he likes to tell this story.

“At San Diego Padres baseball games, between innings sometimes they put a picture up on the score board. The picture is really a puzzle. It shows the outline of a baseball player. But you have to try and guess who the player is.

Then they begin to fill in the puzzle. They put in the first piece, and it's usually a little piece, something like a baseball cap. And nobody can figure out who it is when they see the first piece, or even the second or the third.

But as the pieces continue to come together, the expressions on people's faces start to change. They begin to buzz. They lean over to the person sitting next to them and start to tell them what they now can see, because now they've got enough pieces of the puzzle to see it. And eventually everyone recognizes who the player is."

"I'm here to tell you," John says "that when it comes to God's work in our lives or our world, we usually get only one or two pieces of the puzzle. Many of the things that happen to you and many of the things that happen to me make us just shake our heads and say, "I don't understand God. I don't understand this right now. I probably won't understand why you've done it until I see more of the pieces of the puzzle and that may take a long time."

In the meantime my friends there is something you can do. Don't walk away from God. Pray out all your questions to Him but don't walk away from Him. Wait for Him. Wait for Him to show you all the pieces of the puzzle.

Let's pray ...