

# The Lord Fights for Israel

My limited ideas about God were shaped by my family: God cares about all



**Michael K. Olmsted**

people, he forgives our mistakes and helps us do better, and when we hurt he will be there for us. Finding God was not easy for me, but over my early life, God revealed himself to me even through uncertainty, conflicts, and friendships. Joshua is an

amazing testimony of how God worked in the lives of a people (Israel) who lived in a world that expected God to fit its ideas and deliver success. Sometimes it is a challenge to really see God through the filter of this world and our expectations.

This book is a powerful exposition of God's love and grace, but keep in mind that Jesus comes 1,300 years after this story. The Hebrew name for Jesus is *Yeshua*, which literally means "the Lord is salvation." It is a variation of the name Joshua. Joshua was a man of deep faith and a great leader, but he was not God's answer to the deepest need of every human heart. As we study the history of Israel we see God's unfolding love for more than a single group of people, moving from the oppression of slavery, to nationhood, to God's love for every person on earth. This book may challenge our comfortable ideas about God, our scientific certainties, and our theological comfort zones.

The Holy Spirit guided the inspiration of Scripture through the thinking and real life experiences of generations until Jesus appeared, as Hebrews 1:1-3 describes: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir to all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word." We may find satisfaction when God won all those battles in the Old Testament, but we need to focus on the greatest victory God won at the cross!

We join the story of Israel after the astonishing victory at Jericho. The Gibeonites understood they faced a similar annihilation and came up with a clever plan to make peace with Israel

(Joshua 9). They dressed so it appeared they had made a long journey, even used moldy provisions to fortify the deception, and formed an alliance with Israel. The Israelites figured out the lie, but the treaty was made before the Lord, so Joshua honored it with the provision the Gibeonites would serve as "hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and the altar of the Lord" (9:27).

The other Canaanite kings heard about Gibeon's successful trick of diplomacy, which aided Israel's longer strategy, and they joined together to war against Gibeon (vv. 3-5). The Gibeonites alerted Joshua, the army of Israel made a forced march from Gilgal to Gibeon and surprised the enemy. The battle was a rout, the combined armies of the Canaanites panicked, and God hurled huge hailstones from heaven on them so that "there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword (v. 11). In the confusion and subsequent victory, Joshua prays boldly to the Lord, "Sun stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the valley of Aijalon" (v. 12). God's answer? "The sun stood still and did not hurry to set for about a whole day" (v. 13).

As 21st Century Christians, how do we explain this? Was it a miracle? Was it the length of a full day? Did the earth stop turning? Was this a figure of speech, recognizing that in the span of a single day the inexperienced army of Israel defeated the coalition army of the Canaanites? Is this poetic phrasing meant to declare that Israel's God commands the world as well as the fate of those who would destroy God's chosen people? While you struggle to explain this momentous event, note that Joshua and the Israelites saw this as answered prayer: "for the Lord fought for Israel" (v. 14). Are not the victories of life the product of God's grace?

Step outside the arguments about this world-standing-still story and focus on the core message. Is the gift of prayer an automatic get-out-of-jail-free, a guarantee of success, or an open checkbook for what you want? Of course not! The author of Hebrews tells us to "come boldly before the throne of grace." (Hebrews 4:16). Jesus teaches that if we ask we will receive and

that a little faith can move mountains (Matthew 17:20). And, he says that our desire should be to pray for God's kingdom to come and for God's will to be done (Matt. 6:10). The Apostle James warns that when we pray out of our selfish desires those prayers go unanswered (James 4:5), but when our motivation is to honor God and see his glory become real to our world, then we will experience more than we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Faith may not see clearly how God will answer our prayer, but it will open our eyes to the ultimate expression of God's love and faithfulness to his children. You may debate the details of the sun standing still or the hailstones falling on Israel's enemy, but the message of this story is God's faithfulness to an obedient people who trusted him with their lives.

The idea that God hears our prayers continues to amaze me. In spite of my imperfections, uncertainties, and fears, God hears my struggles and needs – and he answers. A common phrase in my prayers is "I am not sure what to ask for ... Lord, I need your help, my world needs your grace, and I need your strength." Joshua wasn't asking God to make him look good in a bad situation. He was asking God to make his presence known in a daunting situation that would determine their future.

Forget about trying to get your life in perfect order before you pray; God knows what is going on. And, no, you don't have to explain everything to God, but be honest and trust God, because he really does love you. "Not my will, but thy will" is a good place to start with God. I suspect Joshua had a lot of questions when he prayed to God that critical day, but one thing he knew for certain was that Israel's success would not come from cunning and military superiority. Jesus, the second *Yeshua*, did not lead a military force against Rome or anyone else. His weapons were love and grace from the heart of God. This Savior calls us to be different in our thinking, values, and actions as we show the world a new way to live. Our battle begins with personal faith and a desire that the world should know Christ as we are blessed to know him. This is our calling as we serve God in every circumstance.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*