The Gibeonite Deception: Facing the Consequences of Our Choices
(Joshua 9:1-27)
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The story of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 raises for Israel again the issue of how to deal with the people in the land. The people in the land are devoted to destruction. But there is Rahab and her family who are saved by faith in Yahweh. Now we have the Gibeonites who are saved by Israel’s oath to them.

The question is more than merely the presence of foreigners in Israel.¹ The question really is the concern for covenant faithfulness with regards to the people of the land.² In this thematic sense, Josh 8 is connected with Josh. 9. Josh. 8 speaks of renewing the covenant, while Josh. 9 deals with applying the terms of the covenant to people devoted to destruction.

Deut. 20:16-18 states that the Canaanites, including the Hivites or Gibeonites, are devoted for destruction. But the Gibeonites fooled the Israelites into believing that they were not people of the land. So the leaders of Israel made an oath that they will not destroy them. When the Israelite leaders discovered the Gibeonite deception, they could no longer destroy them because of their oath. Thus, their decision compromised their faithfulness to the covenant.

As we study this chapter, I hope and pray that we will learn that life’s choices carry with it life’s consequences. The choices we make bring either good or evil to our lives. The grace of God saves us from our bad choices. But we shall still reap what we sow.

We learn three important lessons from Israel’s choices in the Gibeonite deception.

The True Consequences of Sin (9:1-2)

After the Canaanite kings heard of the miraculous drying up of the Jordan, their hearts melted. After they heard of the Israelite victory over the powerful city of Jericho, they lost their courage. But now, in vv. 1-2, the six kings of the Canaanites are gathered together as one army to fight Israel. They formed a coalition to resist Joshua and Israel.

Why are they now emboldened in their resistance? What gave them such confidence to face Israel in battle? No doubt, it was because they saw how little Ai defeated mighty Israel in battle (Josh. 7). They heard how the Aiite men killed 36 of the Israelite men. They heard how the Aiites chased the Israelites as far as Shebarim and struck them there.

But the real reason for this military defeat is not because the Aiite army employed better military tactics in battle. The reason is not tactical, but theological. It is not because of the Aiites, but because of the Israelites. The people of Israel have sinned against Yahweh in Jericho. As Josh. 7 tells us, Achan stole the things devoted to Yahweh for destruction in Jericho. Hence, Israel broke the covenant.

As a result, Israel lost in the battle at Ai. The kings of the land became emboldened to resist Israel. Deut. 28:15, 25 says: “But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes . . . then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you . . . The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies.” The Israelite defeat at Ai is but an application of the curse upon them for breaking the covenant.

Thus, we see the consequence of sin in the nation’s life. If Achan had not sinned, Israel would have won over Ai. An Israelite victory would have discouraged the Canaanite kings. Israel would have possessed the land with less bloodshed.

¹ Butler, Joshua, 105.
² Howard, Joshua, 166.
But because of Achan’s sin, Israel lost the first battle at Ai. It vitalized the hearts of the six Canaanite kings. It prepared the stage for another round of bloodbath.

Likewise, when we choose to sin, there will be consequences of that sin in our lives and the lives of others. But such consequences could be prevented if only we will not allow sin to rule in our lives.

There is the story of a “four-year-old boy who was taken to the hospital after eating cocaine. What’s tragic is that the boy found the drug in his family refrigerator.

The child was taken to hospital by his mother with a high fever and a fast heart rate, and a drug screen determined he had indeed ingested cocaine.”

Do you think that you’re only hurting yourself with your sin? Sin always hurts you first, and then other people. Paul says, whatever we sow, we shall reap. If we sow to our sinful nature, we will from that nature reap corruption. But if we sow to the Spirit, we will reap from the Spirit eternal life (Gal. 5:7-8, ESV).

Therefore, walk by the Spirit, and do not satisfy the desires of the sinful nature. Every day, you make the choice whether to walk by the Spirit or to gratify the desires of the flesh. Choose to walk by the Spirit, and do not give an occasion for the things of the sinful nature.

Paul wrote,

“No the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . . And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:19-24).

The Tragedy of Ignoring God (9:3-15)

In Josh. 9:3-15, the narrator tells us that when the Gibeonites heard of what Israel had done to Jericho and Ai, they devised a deceptive plan. They took with them worn-out sacks for their donkeys and wineskins, worn-out patched sandals, and worn-out clothes. They also brought dry, stale food with them.

When they got to the Israelite camp at Gilgal, they said, “We have come from a far away place. We’d like you to make a treaty with us.” In v. 7, the Israelites said to the Gibeonites, “Perhaps you live in the land. We cannot make a peace treaty with you.” All the people of the land were devoted to destruction, including the Gibeonites (cf. Ex. 34:11-12; Deut 20:10-18).

Joshua asked them, “Who are you? Where do you come from?” They answered, “We’ve come from a far country because of the name of the LORD. We’ve heard all that he did in Egypt and to the two kings of the Amorites. So our country sent us as ambassadors to Israel. We are to say to the Israelites, ‘We are your servants. Make a treaty with us.’”

Then they showed their provisions and said, “Our bread was still warm when we departed, but it is now dry and brittle. These wineskins were new when we filled them, but now burst. These clothes and sandals are worn out from the very long journey.”

Then the men of Israel inspected the Gibeonite provisions. But the writer tells us one important thing in v. 14. The Israelites “did not ask counsel from the LORD” (v. 14). Literally, it reads, “but the mouth of Yahweh they have not asked.”

In ancient Near East, they made treaties by consulting and swearing before the gods. But the Israelites failed to consult the LORD. In other words, they ignored the LORD.

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4 Gibeon was a city about 5 miles (8 kms.) NW of Jerusalem. Howard, Joshua, 222.

5 Creach, Joshua, 85.
This failure to consult the LORD violates God's Word to Moses. In Num. 27:21, Joshua is to stand before Eleazar the priest. Eleazar shall then consult the LORD using the Urim. But the Israelites failed to consult the LORD through Eleazar. They made a decision without the LORD. They did it in their own wisdom and strength.

Thus, the sin of the leaders of Israel was not that they were gullible. The sin of the leaders was that they ignored the LORD. They did not ask the LORD for His decision and direction.6

The consequence of ignoring God was serious. They made a peace treaty with the Gibeonites. In effect, the peace treaty violated the covenant directive to destroy the people of the land.

Sad to say, we are good in asking the Lord for the things we want, but fail to ask Him for the things He wants. Jesus is Lord. The Lordship of Jesus takes priority over our lives.

James wrote, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ . . . So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:13-17).

Brethren, the right thing to do is to ask the advice of the Lord. Should I get into this job or invest in a business? Ask the counsel of the Lord. Should I say yes to this guy or girl? Ask the counsel of the Lord. Should we send a church-planter into this city? Ask the counsel of the Lord.

Do not ignore the Lord in every decision-making. Consult the Lord and you will succeed.

The Triumph of Grace (9:16-27)

This is my favorite part. The Gibeonite deception did not last long. At the end of three days, the Israelites discovered that the Gibeonites actually lived in the land. They turned out to be Canaanites after all. So they went to the Gibeonite cities but did not attack them. They could not attack them because of their oath to them.

The people of Israel complained against their leaders. It is not easy to be a leader. But if you are a leader, you bless more people. I was looking at Mylene with amazement during the ladies’ fellowship yesterday. What a blessing that she relays to others by her servant leadership. Every time she stands up there, people see her godly model. People are bound to imitate such leadership. When you stand up in front, you present a leadership model that will be followed by future leaders. You actually train future leaders today.

But expect people to complain about your decisions. The people of Israel said, “Why don’t we go up and destroy them. They are devoted to destruction.” But in vv. 19-20, the Israelites leaders explained that they have sworn an oath to the Gibeonites. They cannot touch them. So the Israelites made the Gibeonites to cut wood and draw water for them.

In ancient Israel, a covenant or treaty is a serious matter. It is sealed by an oath before Yahweh. To cancel an oath is to invite judgment from God. That is why in v. 21, the leaders said that they should let the Gibeonites live, lest they invite God’s wrath upon them.

The story does not stop there. In v. 22, Joshua asked the Gibeonites, “Why did you deceive us?” They answered in v. 24, “Because it was told to us that the LORD your God has commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land and to destroy all its inhabitants. So we greatly feared for our lives and did this thing.”

What did Joshua do with the Gibeonites? He saved them from certain death. Read with me please v. 26. “So he did this to them and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did not kill them” (v. 26).

Whenever you study the Bible, ask why the writer wrote the text. As you read these words in v. 26, think about why the narrator put it there. I think that the point of the writer is that even though the Law calls for the destruction of the people of the land, some people could still be saved. The people were correct. They must destroy the people of the land and thus remain faithful to the covenant. That

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6 Howard, Joshua, 226.
is the justice of God. But Joshua and the leaders saved the Gibeonites by their oath. That is the grace of God. Even though the justice of God calls for the destruction of the people of the land, the grace of God seeks the salvation of those who come to God. In including the story of the Gibeonites, I think that the writer is showing the triumph of the grace of God despite the justice of God.

Deut. 20:10-11, 15 says, “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably... then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. ... Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.”

The Israelites are to spare only people from far away cities. But they are to destroy the people of the nearby cities. The Gibeonites lived in the nearby cities of Canaan. They were candidates for destruction.

But the narrator here stresses that they were saved from destruction through an Israelite oath. Such is the triumph of divine grace. Just as the story of Rahab shows the possibility of salvation for a devoted thing, so the story of the Gibeonites shows the possibility of redemption for an object of destruction.

We see here God’s mercy for the Canaanites. God was merciful to them because the very Law of God that stipulates their destruction was simply not implemented.⁷

**Conclusion**

But it does not end there. Read v. 27. “But Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place that he should choose” (v. 27). The Gibeonites were assimilated into Israel. They did not only cut wood and draw water for Israel. They also became servants of the altar of the LORD.

It tells us that our God is not only a **merciful** God, but also a **missionary** God. He is a God who seeks the worship of all peoples. In the sovereign mercy of God, He moves people from a place of wrath to a place of mercy. In the missionary purpose of God, He converts deceivers into worshippers.

Such is the triumph of grace!

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⁷ Creach, Joshua, 88.