

Joshua 9, The Treaty With Gibeon

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Overview

The lessons for us in this section concern both Israel and the Gibeonites.

Concerning Israel:

- Throughout we see Israel's concern to obey the Lord; they have learned from Achan that God's instructions are not to be tampered with.
- But they fail once again to seek the Lord's face for specific guidance in each situation. They have not learned the lesson of the Captain of the Lord's Host, the important truth that we need BOTH the Scriptures AND the Spirit of God to make wise decisions.

Concerning the Gibeonites: we see their unusual understanding in the law of God, and their zeal to do whatever they can to deliver themselves. God will bring his own elect to himself, even through the weakness of his people.

This entire story presumes a detailed understanding of what Bruce Waltke used to call, "Israel's Foreign Policy." We begin by reviewing it.

Deut. 20:10-18, Israel's Foreign Policy

Distant nations may enter into treaty with Israel and become servants to them.

Nearby nations must be completely destroyed, to avoid spiritual contamination. Cf. Deut. 7:1-5.

1-2, General Response of the Nations in the Land

The kings are described in two ways.

Geographically: a useful passage to review three main regions of the country. The only one not mentioned is "the plain," the Arabah, which is the Jordan valley, considered as being now firmly in Israel's control.

- "the hills," lit. "the mountain," the backbone of the country.
- "the valleys," lit. "the Shephelah." A region of chalky hills extending south from the Valley of Ayalon to the bottom of the top sheet, and the geology continues to Beersheba. Forms a buffer zone between the other two regions mentioned. Not very fertile. Philistines pushing up into it; Israel pushing down.
- "all the coasts of the great sea," the coastal plain.

Ethnically, these are six of the "seven nations." References to the "seven nations" begin in Deut. 7:1, which includes the Gergashites second. Joshua mentions them in 3:10, but in different order; also 24:11 in final summary of the conquest. Why are the Gergashites omitted in 9:1 (and in Deut. 20:17)? Maybe they are just a minority group. *For a while I thought that the Gergashites might be the inhabitants of Gibeon, but 11:18 says that the Gibeonites were Hivites. 2 Sam. 21:2 calls them Amorites, perhaps in a more general sense, as in Gen 15:16. The Gergashites are omitted in Deut. 20:17 (definition of nations "near"), Josh 9:1; 12:8; but 24:11 includes them in*

those who “fought against” Israel, and they are part of God’s grant to Abraham in Gen 15:21. It is noteworthy that Nehemiah’s accounting in 9:8 omits the Hivites.

Their response to Israel: united opposition to Israel; preparation for war.

3-27, Response of the Gibeonites

The Gibeonite response is phrased as an explicit contrast with that of the other kings: “But as for the inhabitants of Gibeon, when they heard . . .” The six nations heard and prepared for battle. Gibeon heard and sought to sue for peace.

4-6a, Preparation

The wiliness mentioned in v.3 is not in pretending to be ambassadors; they were indeed ambassadors. It is in the worn-out appearance of their accoutrements. The purpose of equipping themselves so shabbily is clear when they speak to the Israelites in the next paragraph.

Note that Israel has returned to Gilgal after conquering Ai. Their camp is still down in the Jordan valley.

6b-15, Negotiations with Israel

Note the different groups with whom they speak; the “men of Israel” in general, Joshua, and finally the princes of the nation.

6b-13, Interrogation

6b introduces their claim, addressed first to the whole crowd: “We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us.” Finally we understand why they carry unrealistically worn out equipment. Somehow they have learned the contents of Deut. 20:10-18, and are trying to use its one exception to preserve themselves. *Application:* How diligent the Gibeonites are to search out the law of God! When God puts his fear into someone’s heart, you do not have to twist their arm to bring them to faith. We just need to make the Scriptures available, and the Spirit will work. Conversely, one must wonder about the genuineness of the Spirit’s work in those who claim to be believers but are not diligent in searching out the Scriptures.

7, the men of Israel worry about their place of residence. *Application:* Here and subsequently we will see how zealous Israel is to obey the Lord. Apparently the execution of Achan had a great effect on all of them.

8a, the Gibeonites then turn their attention directly to Joshua and surrender to him.

8b, his question explores the same concern that the men of Israel had. Perhaps you are really local. In that case we can’t spare you.

9-13, their speech. It all pours out at once; this is their only chance to get their message across.

- The very first words respond to the concern of Israel: “from a very far country.”
- Their last words, in 12-13, support this deception. They claim that their worn-out equipment was brand-new when they set out.

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- Between these two deceptions is the truth: They (like Rahab) have heard of what the Lord did, they fear him, and are come to submit to Joshua and Israel.

14-15b, The Threefold Response

Israel ought to have questioned the evidence of their equipment. According to Deut. 8:4; 29:5, Israel had not experienced such wastage during their journey in the wilderness. But the nation was completely fooled by their deception. Three successive verses record different steps in the agreement between the two parties. The narrator wants us to understand how formal and solemn this agreement was.

14, the men of Israel broke bread with them. A shared meal in Scripture is a consistent picture of peace and harmony, a part of the covenant ceremony.

- Gen. 26:27-31, Isaac and Abimelech
- 2 Sam. 3:12-20, David and Abner (the former general over Saul's army)
- Exod 24:1-11, God with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai

15, Joshua made peace in the form of establishing a formal covenant.

16, the princes of the nation swore in agreement to it, ratifying the agreement drawn up by Joshua and obliging the tribes they represent to adhere to it. According to v.19, this oath was in the name of the Lord God, so that they cannot violate it without breaking the third commandment.

Analysis

Three points are worth noting here.

- 1) Israel has disobeyed God's instruction in Deut. 20 not to make peace with the inhabitants of the land. The narrator's footnote at the end of v.14 shows that he disapproves of what they have done. The seriousness of this offense is underscored in two later parallels.
 - a) Saul spares Agag in 1 Sam. 15, in violation of Samuel's explicit instructions to devote them to the Lord (*xerem*, v.3). As a result, God takes the kingdom away from him.
 - b) Ahab spares Ben-Hadad in 1 Kings 20:26-42. He is condemned by a prophet, even though he had even less explicit instruction than Israel had concerning the Hivites, or than Saul had concerning Agag. Ahab "cut a covenant" with Ben-Hadad (20:34), just as Joshua did (9:15), and Ben-Hadad is said to be under the *xerem* (20:42), as the Hivites were.
- 2) Where did Israel go wrong? She certainly tried to obey the Scriptures. But the narrator in v.14 tells us she should have done something else in addition: she should have asked counsel of the Lord. She still does not understand the lesson of the Captain of the Lord's Host, that God's people must seek his face in every decision. In modern terms, they consulted Scripture (Deut. 20) but not the Spirit! The passage is an eloquent example of the inadequacy of Scripture without the direct personal direction of the Lord in our lives.
- 3) At the same time, as the sequel shows, God honors the initiative of the Gibeonites and does not punish Israel for sparing them, just as he honors the faith of Rahab and does not punish the spies for sparing her. His warnings of judgment are always conditional. Jer. 18:7,8. And

we shall see that the consequences of this particular lapse on Israel's part, coming as it does through carelessness rather than high hand, are contained.

16, Discovery

The first law of lying is that it will be discovered. "The truth will out." Only God can make things so by speaking; for the rest of us, speech is constrained by reality, and if we violate that rule, reality will invalidate our speech. God hates "a lying tongue," Prov. 6:17.

How were the Gibeonites discovered? We don't know. Maybe one of them slipped up and said something unguarded. Perhaps Rahab and her family heard them speaking and recognized their dialect, or even (given her profession) recognized individuals among them. The means is not important; what the Spirit has recorded for us is the result. Achan lied and was discovered. Prov. 12: 19, "The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue [is] but for a moment."

17-27, Rectification

17, Verification

As in the case of Achan, verbal report alone is not sufficient; justice demands concrete verification. So the children of Israel travel to see just how far off their cities are, and on the third day they reach them, just over the crest of the mountains.

18-21a, Decision

Three noteworthy aspects to their decision:

18a, 19-20, The princes honor their oath.

18a, 19-20, the princes honor their oath and do not slay the Gibeonites. There is considerable discussion among the commentators about whether Israel was bound to honor this oath, since it was obtained under false pretenses.

- As we have seen, it was unquestionably wrong for Israel to spare a nation whom God had destined to utter destruction, per Deut. 20.
- Yet 2 Sam. 21:1-6 shows that God himself held Israel to this oath throughout their history. Having made the solemn oath, they must uphold it, in spite of the consequences. Psa. 15:4. So their behavior here is appropriate.

Application: When you rush ahead without the Lord's direction, you have to live with the consequences. Most direct application may be in the case of marriage. If you marry an unbeliever, or even a believer without seeking the Lord's direction, you may find yourself locked in a union that is to your spiritual or even physical harm. You must honor the union, but it is far better to be sure of the Lord's direction BEFORE entering it!

Addendum: Israel's sin here is not the high-handed rebellion of Saul or Ahab. Their questions show that they were actually trying to follow Deut. 20, but they assumed that Scripture was sufficient without the direction of the Spirit as well. In the particular case of the Gibeonites, the long-run consequences are not in fact grievous, as we shall see.

18b, The people are concerned.

“All the congregation murmured against the princes.” How often they murmured godlessly during the wilderness wanderings, motivated by fleshly lusts and lack of trust in the Lord. Now their concern is motivated by the knowledge of what God commanded them to do with the inhabitants of the land, and their fear of the judgment he might bring. Their values and ambitions have changed greatly, since seeing the judgment on Achan. How wonderful it would be if God would grant our nation such a zeal for God’s law.

21, The princes adopt a contingency plan.

The syntax is problematical; AV is probably wrong in rendering 21b as part of the princes’ speech. It is better taken as summary of the next section. But then the princes’ speech is cut short. The Syriac may be correct in having the clause twice, once on the lips of the princes and again as a summary of what happened.

Recall that the motive for destroying the Canaanites is to avoid spiritual contamination through intermarriage. The princes reason that since they can no longer destroy these cities, at least they can force them into an inferior social status that will make marriages with them undesirable and reduce the force of their spiritual influence. So they plan to assign them a role of perpetual servitude “to all the congregation.” Joshua goes one step further and directly attaches them to the house of God, v.23, perhaps in an attempt to convert them before they can do any spiritual damage.

22-27, Execution of the Decision

22-25, Interrogation and Sentence

Joshua calls them up on their deception with a two-point question. They respond point by point.

22, 24, Their Motive: Fear of God’s Judgment.—Joshua asks, “Why have you beguiled us,” pretending to come from far off? Answer: We heard that the Lord your God had condemned those nearby. They have through some mechanism learned of God’s coming judgment, and in fear of that judgment seek to escape it. Compare Noah in Heb. 11:7, “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” Other nations had the same intelligence they did, but did not believe in the sovereign power of Israel’s God and felt that they could meet the threat by force of arms. Gibeon realized there was no escape but by submission.

23,25, Their Destiny: Abject Servitude.—Joshua proclaims a curse on them, that will take the form of perpetual servitude. None of them will ever be excepted from this role. Thus any Israelite who marries with them will subject his or her descendants to perpetual servitude. Answer: That’s fine. Whatever you say, as long as we are spared the wrath of the Lord.

Application.—The twofold attitude that the Gibeonites manifest is a concise picture of the attitude of heart that comes upon us when the Spirit of God draws us to salvation: a desire to escape God’s wrath and a willingness to do whatever is required.

- Compare the multitude on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:37, “pricked in their hearts” with fear and asking, “What shall we do?”

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- Or the Philippian Jailor in Acts 16:29,30, “trembling” with fear and asking, “What must I do to be saved?”
- These two aspects of our attitude are captured in the titles by which we describe Jesus Christ. He is our “Lord” (indicating our willingness to do whatever he requires), and our “Savior” (indicating our dependence on him to deliver us from the wrath of God that we deserve).

26-27, Performance

As Joshua has commanded and as they have accepted, they become a permanent servant class “to the congregation,” and more specifically attached “to the altar of the Lord.”

Sequel

In Israel’s later history, we learn of a special class of people, the *nethinim*. The name means “the given ones,” those who have been given or dedicated to some purpose.

1 Chr 9:2, one of four categories of the population before the captivity: Israelites, priests, Levites, and Nethinim. Cf. emphasis on Gibeon in v.35.

The same four categories appear in the roster of those who returned with Zerubbabel in Ezra 2:

- People of Israel, 2-35
- Priests, 36-39
- Levites, 40-42 (including singers and porters)
- Nethinim, 43-58

Probably, the Nethinim are the descendants of the Gibeonites, who continued to be a special servant class to the temple throughout Israel’s history. As Joshua intended, they thus have been integrated into the worship of the Lord, rather than (like other Canaanite tribes) pulling Israel away from the Lord. Though Israel was careless in making a treaty with them, they were not being rebellious, and the Lord protects them from the worst possible consequences of their oversight.

Application: So we should be encouraged that the Lord will protect our interests if we are faithful to our commitments, even if we have not made them as wisely as we ought. This should not encourage us to carelessness, but it should encourage us in trusting in the Lord even when we err.