

Flattery & Faith

Joshua 9

The fallen human heart wants to think of sin only in terms of rule-breaking. There's the church lady who is scandalized if a member is caught stealing, but doesn't think anything of a long gossip session about the thief right there in the church foyer. Even describing God's commandments as "rules" gets away from His personal nature. The greatest commandment is to love God the Lord your God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In this passage Israel worships no golden calves, doesn't covet or take anything, and doesn't visibly break any of God's prohibitive commands. But they fail to pray.

Summary of the Text

While Israel renews the covenant at mounts Ebal and Gerizim, the kings west of the Jordan hear about the fall of Ai and gather to fight against them (vv. 1-2). The Gibeonites, however, are crafty, so they dress as envoys and come to Gilgal with old sacks, torn and mended wineskins, tattered sandals and garments, and dry and moldy food (vv. 3-5). They claim to be from a far country and ask to make a covenant (v. 6). The men of Israel realize the Gibeonites might live in this land, and they know they're forbidden from making covenants with its inhabitants (v. 7; Deut. 7:1-5, 20:10-18). The Gibeonites offer themselves in servitude, so Joshua asks them where they are from (v. 8). Gibeon is about 19 miles away, but they lie and say from a far country where they heard about Og and Bashan, pointing to their old provisions and clothing (vv. 9-13). The men of Israel take some of their provisions but fail to seek God's counsel; Joshua makes a covenant to let them live and the rulers of Israel swear an oath (vv. 14-15). Then three days later Israel hears that the Gibeonites live nearby and travel to their cities but don't attack them, which causes the congregation to complain against the rulers of Israel (vv. 16-18). The rulers say it would break their oath and invite God's wrath by whom they swore, and so the Gibeonites will be woodcutters and water carriers. (vv. 19-21). Joshua confronts the Gibeonites for their deceit and curses them to servitude, and they say they were clearly told that God gave the land to the Israelites and therefore were afraid for their lives (vv. 22-24). They entrust themselves into his hands to do with what he will with them (v. 25). Joshua keeps them from being executed and instead dedicates them to work for the people and the altar of Yahweh (vv. 26-27).

Walking by Sight

We are not told whether or not Israel knows the kings and peoples of Canaan are gathering together to fight (v.1). They certainly knew it was a possibility, and so the idea of allies from far away presents a welcome reprieve. The costumed Gibeonites really are impressed with what Israel did to Og and Bashan, and they don't mention Jericho and Ai since that just happened and would give them away. Were it not for verse 14, we might have thought Israel did acted reasonably: "Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD." Other than not consulting with almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, they did everything correctly: ask questions, express doubts, look for evidence, receive assurances of service and goods, and make provisional agreements. The apostle Paul tells us not to walk by sight. Walking by sight undermines true confidence: "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:5-7). And, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (Jms. 1:5). It's not *if* we will lack wisdom, but *when*. Joshua can't know in himself that the Gibeonites lie. But he could pray, and had he done so, he would have learned. You are supposed to know that you don't know and then to trust the one who does. The one who assumes he knows, controls, can deal with, and will live and prosper on his own apart from God isn't simply forgetful: "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment" (Prov. 18:1).

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Foolish Oaths

The reason for the Gibeonites' deception sounds similar to Rahab's reasons for hiding the spies: "From a very far country your servants have come, because of the name of the LORD your God; for we have heard of His fame, and all that He did in Egypt, and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan—to Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who was at Ashtaroth" (vv. 9-10; cf. 2:9-13). But in contrast to the Gibeonites, Rahab was honest and confessed faith: "the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, I beg you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness" (2:11-12). The Lord told Moses that Israel could make covenants with people outside the land, but not within it because "they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire" (Deut. 7:4-5). The culture of Canaan was downstream of its cult, of the worship of false gods. Israel's rulers should have prayed to figure out what to do with the Gibeonites and not made a covenant, but once they did they have to honor their oath (v. 19). The man who dwells in God's holy hill is "He who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps. 15:4). These rulers had let the people down but now they had to resist those same people in order to be faithful leaders. The first failure makes it harder to not do it again, especially when the people are calling for it. We should rarely take oaths ("I swear to God") and make our serious commitments after much prayer and the wisdom of a many counselors (Prov. 11:14). But however we get into it, so long as the oath it isn't sinful itself, then we should see it through. Joshua cuts the prayer corner at first, but this didn't excuse him from keeping his vow—a vow to deceitful Gibeonites. The Lord remained his audience and not what the sinful Hivites did or would do. Can you hear the blogs? "Joshua is guilty by his own compromise to these filthy Canaanites!"

Strong Hope

From the first, the Gibeonites offered themselves as servants (vv. 8, 11). Woodcutting and water-carrying is hard, menial work, but they became faithful servants and later are called the *Nethinim*, meaning "the given ones," who assist the priests at the tabernacle and later the temple (1 Chron. 9:2; Ezra 2:43). Over 500 Nethinim return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity to rebuild the walls and serve at the temple (Neh. 3:26; Ezra 8:20). Gibeon was a great city (10:2) and though the inhabitants didn't come to Yahweh in an honest way, and though Israel didn't deal with them wisely, both parties sought God's mercy and found it. Israel loved her enemies and God used it for good. So many of our stories are like this, starting off badly but blessed in repentance. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* that he prayed, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet!" John Newton became a Christian at 23 years old in 1748, but he didn't renounce the slave trade until years later. He wrote in his testimony, published the same year of his ordination in 1753, of why he didn't oppose it earlier: "Custom, example, and interest had blinded my eyes. I did it ignorantly, for I am sure had I thought of the slave trade then as I have thought of it since, no considerations would have induced me to continue in it." Newton first pastored in Olney, northwest of London, where William and Hannah Wilberforce often visited with their nephew William. Newton encouraged William Wilberforce's faith, and after he became a member of Parliament in 1780, advised him to continue serving the Lord there. In 1788 their public efforts took shape with Newton's writing and Wilberforce's legislating to abolish the slave trade, which finally came to fruition in 1807, a few months before Newton's death, and complete abolition in 1833, a month after the death of Wilberforce. Without prayer, we are easily flattered, led astray, and compromised. But by faith listening to God we will move mountains.