Joshua 9:1-27
Dealings with the Gibeonites

Review and Introduction

Perhaps you have heard the saying, "I wish I knew then what I know now." Perhaps you have said it yourself, I know I have. I have often thought that the sooner in life that you can say that the better. As our study of the book of Joshua continues this morning, we will find the Israelites thinking this very thought.

There have been many ups and downs in our account thus far. We have seen the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and the conquest of the border defenses at Jericho. We have seen the greedy sinfulness of one man result in the defeat of the Israelite army at Ai, an event that will continue to have repercussions for Israel, as we will see today. But we have also seen the Israelite people repentant, renewing their covenant with the Lord God of Israel as they prepared for the continued conquering of the land of promise.

In our passage this morning, there will be no battles. Instead diplomacy is the topic, and we will see how one particular people group in Cannan avoided destruction and, in doing so, created a situation that would trouble the Israelites for centuries. So let's begin.

The Setting

"[1]Now it came about when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan, in the hill country, the lowland, and on all the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, heard about it, [2] that they met together with one purpose, to fight with Joshua and with Israel" (v. 1-2).

The word had spread. The roads and pathways of Canaan were crowded with messengers traveling to their cities to tell their kings the news. But exactly what was it that these messengers were saying. In other words, what was the "it" that these people had heard? Because clearly, this time there was a different reaction to the news. Recall that in Joshua chapter 2 we learned that the news of the great works of the Lord had reached those in Jericho and, as Rahab told the spies,

> "[9]The terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have despaired because of you. . . . [11]we heard these reports, our hearts melted and no courage remained in anyone any longer" (Joshua 2:9, 11).

But here we see that the hearing of this particular news caused no one in Canaan to have a melted heart or to lack courage. As the peoples from the central highlands, the western foothills and the coast heard reports, these Canaanites were emboldened. Indeed, they "met together with one purpose, to fight with Joshua and with Israel" (v. 2). The cause of this renewed energy among the peoples of Canaan was the news of the Israelites' defeat at Ai. This is what the kings mentioned have heard. That was the reason for the alliance.

Here we see the contrast. No longer did the peoples of Canaan fear the Lord God and His mighty army that had miraculously crossed the Jordan River and sacked Jericho. No longer were they terrified to face the armies of the God Who had brought His people out of Israel and defeated the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. Israel was now seen as vulnerable. Their God did not seem as invincible as before to their pagan eyes.

This change was a further ramification of the sin of Achan that continued to haunt Israel. There is no surprise here. God had declared to His people,

> "[15]But it shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to be careful to follow all His commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. . . . [25]The LORD will cause you to be defeated by your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways from their presence, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth" (Deuteronomy 28:15, 25).

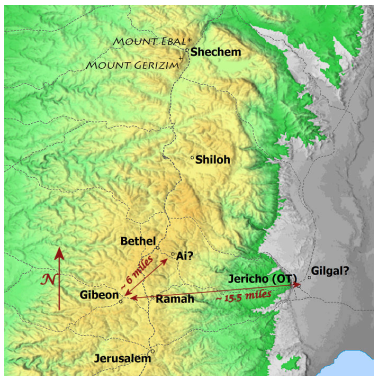
The Israelites had failed to obey the Lord and, though they had repented and renewed their covenant and commitment to obey the Lord, the consequences for their disobedience remained to be dealt with. The peoples of Cannan prepared for war. The conquest of the Land of Promise would not be so easy.

<u>The Gibeonite Deception</u>

One group, though, was not a part of the alliance to wage war against the Israelites. Not having faith that military means would prove effective, the Gibeonites chose a different strategy to avoid destruction.

"[3] The inhabitants of Gibeon also heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, [4] but they on their part acted craftily and went and took provisions for a journey, and took worn-out sacks on their donkeys, and wineskins that were worn out, split open, and patched, [5] and worn-out and patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes on themselves; and all the bread of their

provision was dry and had become crumbled. [6] And they went to Joshua at the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, 'We have come from a far country; now then, make a covenant with us.' [7] But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, 'Perhaps you are living within our land; how then are we to make a covenant with you?' [8] So they said to Joshua, 'We are your servants.' Then Joshua said to them, 'Who are you and where do you come from?' [9] They said to him, 'Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God; for we have heard the report about Him and all that He did in Egypt, [10] and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon and to Og king of Bashan who was in Ashtaroth. [11] So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spoke to us, saying, "Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go to meet them, and say to them, 'We are your servants; now then, make a covenant with us.'" [12] This bread of ours was hot when we took it for our provisions from our houses on the day that we left to come to you; but now behold, it is dry and has become crumbled. [13] And these wineskins which we filled were new, and behold, they are split open; and these clothes of ours and our sandals are worn out from the very long journey.' [14] So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not ask for the counsel of the LORD. [15] And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them" (v. 3-15).



Gibeon was a significant city about six miles northwest from Jerusalem. It is described as "a great city, like one of the royal cities . . . and all its men were mighty" (Joshua 10:2). It was also strategically important, since it was centrally located and served as the hub of many roads and trade routes. And, as we will see, it was the hub of a small confederation of smaller cities in the area. Today, the village is known as el-Jib.

Scripture tells us that the Gibeonites "acted craftily" (v. 4), and this word can describe either a positive or a negative quality. Consider the following examples,

> "To give prudence to the naive,
> To the youth knowledge and discretion" (Proverbs 1:4)
>
> "You naive ones, understand prudence;
> And, you fools, understand wisdom!" (Proverbs 8:5)
>
> "If, however, someone is enraged against his neighbor, so as to kill him in a cunning way, you are to take him even from My altar, to be put to death" (Exodus 21:14).

The word is used in the latter case in our account of the Gibeonites. Their act was cunning in the sense of being deceitful for their own selfish interests. They might have said the same kind of things that Rahab had said, but their motive was quite different, as we will see.

In terms of where these events occur, Scripture informs us that the Gibeonites "went to Joshua at the camp at Gilgal" (v. 6). It is unlikely that this is the same Gilgal previously mentioned near Jericho. If it is, that would have required the Israelites to have traveled back to the plains of the Jordan after having gained a foothold in the hill country, which would have been unwise from a military standpoint. It is most likely a different place with the same name, probably near Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim where the Israelites had recently renewed their covenant with the Lord, though we cannot be certain.

The delegation from Gibeon desired a covenant with Israel. As they tried to persuade Joshua and the other Israelites leaders, they used certain arguments and evidence that clearly demonstrated that the Gibeonites knew that the Israelites were to dispossess and exterminate those in Canaan. They also seemed to know that the Israelites were not allowed to make treaties with the inhabitants of Canaan (Exodus 23:31-33; 34:11-12; Deuteronomy 7:2). But they also seem to be aware of the fact that the Israelites could make peace with cities that were distant from them (Deuteronomy 20:10-18). This latter is a key text, since it served as the general blueprint for the conquest.

> "[10] When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. [11] And if it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and serve you. [12] However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. [13] When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. [14] However, the women, the children, the animals, and everything that is in the city, all of its spoils, you shall take as plunder for yourself; and you shall use the spoils of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you. [15] This is what you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby. [16] Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave anything that breathes alive. [17] Instead, you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, [18] so that they will not teach you to do all the same detestable practices of theirs which they have done for their gods, by which you would sin against the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 20:10-18).

So there was clearly a distinction between the way that Israel should treat those cities in Canaan and those from farther away. And that distinction is what the Gibeonites must have known, and they tried to make the most of it.

As an aside, ancient peoples went by different names, and in this case the Gibeonites were part of a larger group called the Hivites. They were probably related to the Hittites in what is today northern Turkey, as I will explain later. But these men, however called, knew what to say. Having claimed to be from a far country, and then having been challenged by Joshua to prove it, they began with supplication, "we are your servants" (v. 8).

In other words, the Gibeonites tried to diffuse the situation by acknowledging that they were willing to negotiate with the Israelites from a position of inferiority rather than equals. Joshua however, remained skeptical and asked the Gibeonite delegation for details, "who are you and where do you come from?" (v. 8). The emissaries from Gibeon were prepared for this, and they made their case. They had traveled this great distance, so they claimed, "because of the fame of the Lord your God" (v. 9). And to drive their point home that they were from a distant land the fame of which they spoke was "[9]the report of Him and all that He did in Egypt, [10] and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon and to Og king of Bashan who was in Ashtaroth" (v. 9-10).

Though subtle, their point was clear. They claimed to know only about the achievements of the Israelites from the more distant past and further afield. They said nothing of the conquest of Jericho and Ai. What they claimed to know had happened months, perhaps several months, earlier. That news had needed time to travel to the *distant* homeland of these Gibeonites. News of the recent conquests had not yet reached their *distant* land. The Gibeonites had wisely only mentioned events from outside Canaan and from longer ago, since those elements would be necessary to convince Joshua that they originated from far away.

The Gibeonites claimed, perhaps quite accurately, that their elders, and indeed all the people, had urged them on their mission. They had begged them to take what provisions could be spared and humbly present themselves to the leaders of the Israelites and ask for a covenant. And, to make their offer seem even more reasonable, again notice that they asked not to be treated as equals, but simply "to meet them and say to them, 'we are your servants'" (v. 11).

In addition to their assumed humility, and their realistic report of what they had heard, they also offered physical evidence to support their claims. "[12] This bread of ours was hot when we took it for our provisions from our houses on the day that we left to come to you; but now behold, it is dry and has become crumbled. [13] And these wineskins which we filled were new, and behold, they are split open; and these clothes of ours and our sandals are worn out from the very long journey" (v. 12-14).

Dried, crumbly bread, tattered wineskins, ragged clothes, and worn sandals, were presented as evidence of a long, arduous journey of many weeks and many miles. Straight-faced, the Gibeonites held their ground and, having made their case, the delegation from Gibeon waited for Joshua's answer. Joshua and the other leaders had listened carefully. They had even examined the evidence, "the men of Israel took some of their provisions" (v. 14), but there was one thing that Joshua and the leaders of Israel did not do. They "did not ask for the counsel of the Lord" (v. 14).

And this was to be the great error of judgment. Scripture is clear to not lay the blame solely at the feet of Joshua. None of the elders is reported as protesting that the Lord's will should be sought before entering into an alliance with these foreigners. No one even seems to have suggested that the Israelite leaders withdraw for a time to consult among themselves. There is no sense of time passing between verses fourteen and fifteen. They read as if they are a narrative of a single event. Joshua and the elders listened to the Gibeonites, they examined their evidence, and they made a treaty. "Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them" (v. 15).

As briefly as this is stated in Scripture, it reads like a typical suzerain-vassal treaty that was common in the ancient Near East. The format of these treaties follows a strict convention. There is the verbal agreement of leaders to make peace, then the sharing of a meal (which may be what v. 14 implies when it says that the Israelites took their provisions), and finally the formal taking of an oath. This was a common structure used by many nation states at the time. Essentially, the Gibeonites become vassals of the Israelites.

Before we move onto the consequences of this alliance, let us pause to consider some similarities, and some differences, with our recent accounts in Joshua. One obvious connection is with the account of Rahab. Like Rahab, the Gibeonites acknowledged the power of the Lord God of Israel. They, too, spoke of the reputation of the Lord, as did Rahab. Both expressed certainty that the Lord was powerful and gave Him credit for the victories of the Israelites. And, both the Gibeonites

and Rahab and her family hoped to escape destruction. There are even similarities with the language used in the covenant with Rahab.

> "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you" (Joshua 2:14).

To "let them live" (v. 15) is the same phraseology used for Rahab and her family at the destruction of Jericho.

But there is a difference between flattery and faith. Scripture gives no indication that the Gibeonites were changing their allegiance to the God of Israel. They were simply being pragmatic. It was more that the Gibeonites did not have faith in the Canaanite alliance that was about to make war on the Israelites, than that they had faith in the One, True, God.

Also, there are similarities with the account of Achan. Both Achan's sin and the encounter with the Gibeonites occurred after ceremonies of covenant renewal. In both cases Israel sinned without knowing it. But most importantly, as with the first attack on Ai, there was no inquiry of the Lord. It was not that Joshua was not skeptical, he asked the right questions, but he did not seek the Lord after he had heard the answer. Like the sin of Achan, that error in judgment was to have very long-term consequences for the people of Israel.

<u>The Gibeonites Exposed</u>

The next passage is divided into two sections. The first subsection is v. 16-21 in which Joshua learns that the Gibeonites have lied. The second subsection is v. 22-27 where Joshua confronts the Gibeonites. We will take each in turn.

"[16] However, it came about at the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were neighbors and that they were living within their land. [17] Then the sons of Israel set out and came to their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim. [18] But the sons of Israel did not attack them because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. And the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders. [19] But all the leaders said to the whole congregation, 'We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them. [20] This we will do to them, even let them live, so that wrath will not be on us because of the oath which we swore to them.' [21] So the leaders said to them, 'Let them live.' And they became gatherers of firewood and labor to draw water for the whole congregation, just as the leaders had spoken to them" (v. 16-21).

Scripture does not relate *how*, but it does relate *when* the Israelites learned that they had been deceived. "At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them" (v. 16), the Israelites learned that the most important detail that the Gibeonites had denied was, in fact, true. These people were living within their land. Note that the language implies that all of Canaan is already in the possession of the Israelites, even though that was not physically the case. But God had promised them the land, and it was theirs.

Upon hearing the news, Joshua ordered men to confirm the rumor. The "sons of Israel" (v. 17). went to four cities that they somehow must have known to be some loose confederation that sent the emissaries. All these cities, Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim were inhabited by those affiliated with the new alliance made between the Israelites and the Gibeonite emissaries. That the Israelites "did not strike them" (v. 18) indicates that this was a sizable force, and not merely a few men sent out to confirm the rumors. Since "the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel." (v. 18), each of these cities, and all of their inhabitants, were now under the protection of Israel.

This news was not received with gladness by the people of Israel. Rather, the people were angry. Indeed, "the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders" (v. 18). The grumbling was directed to the leaders in general and not only Joshua. The people were clearly aware that they could not destroy the Gibeonites as the Lord had commanded them. They must have understood the implications that the Land of Promise was now to be shared with these pagan Canaanites. Because of the ill-advised treaty, Israel had forfeited the opportunity to fully possess the Promised Land.

We must acknowledge the reason for the respect given by the Israelites to the treaty. They "had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel" (v. 18). This title first appears in Exodus 5:1 where Moses and Aaron identify God to Pharoah. In the book of Joshua and in some other historical accounts (1 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles) it is used within the context of God's faithfulness in keeping His covenant with Israel and the need for the Israelites to be faithful to the Lord.

Though they had made the treaty under false pretenses, the Israelites had sworn in the name of their God, and they were determined to honor that oath. "We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them" (v. 19). The phrase "we have sworn" is the key. To break the oath would incur the wrath of the Lord. To break the oath would damage the reputation of God.

Notice also, that the leaders made no attempts to justify themselves. They realized they had been fooled, but accepted the consequence of their foolishness. But Joshua and the other leaders did their best to make the best of this bad situation. They would let the Gibeonites live, that is they would honor the treaty, but they would also force the Gibeonites into a position of slavery. "They became gatherers of firewood and labor to draw water for the whole congregation" (v. 21).

These tasks were, apparently, often performed by aliens in Israel. In making a covenant at Moab, Moses declared,

> "[10]You stand today, all of you, before the LORD your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers, that is, all the men of Israel, [11]your little ones, your wives, and the stranger who is within your camps, from the one who gathers your firewood to the one who draws your water" (Deuteronomy 29:10-11).

Such menial tasks were performed by those outside of the covenant relationship with the Lord. These people might be protected, but they were not given a free ride.

Having discovered the truth about the Gibeonites, and having determined their fate, Joshua then called for a meeting with their leaders. This is the second subsection of the passage.

"[22] Then Joshua called for them and spoke to them, saying, 'Why have you deceived us, saying, "We are very far from you," when you are living within our land? [23] Now therefore, you are cursed, and you will never cease to be slaves, both gatherers of firewood and labor to draw water for the house of my God.' [24] So they answered Joshua and said, 'Since your servants were fully informed that the LORD your God had commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you, we feared greatly for our lives because of you, and did this thing. [25] And now behold, we are in your hands; do to us as it seems good and right in your sight to do.' [26]This he did to them, and saved them from the hands of the sons of Israel, and they did not kill them. [27] But on that day Joshua made them gatherers of firewood and labor to draw water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place which He would choose" (v. 22-27).

Joshua began with confrontation. He pointedly asked them why they had lied. And before waiting for an answer, Joshua explained what he and the other leaders had already determined to be the consequences of their behavior. The Gibeonites must have listened to Joshua with a great deal of fear. Yes, they had an understanding of Israelite ways and prophecies. Yes, they knew that Israel

was destined to conquer the land, but they may not have known that the Israelites could not go back on their oath.

Found out, the Gibeonites drop their facade and tell the truth. "Since your servants were fully informed that the LORD your God had commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you, we feared greatly for our lives because of you, and did this thing" (v. 24). They made no more excuses. They offered no other lies to cover up their first. They simply told Joshua that they had acted out of pure self-preservation.

The Gibeonites testified to knowing that the Lord would give the whole land to Israel. They accepted Joshua's decision that they were to become servants and used the word themselves. They acknowledged their dependence upon Israel. They were now at Israel's disposal, and Israel was now responsible for them. That is clear from the conclusion of the Gibeonite speech, "we are in your hands, do as it seems good and right in your sight" (v. 25). This was an admittance that they were at Joshua's mercy but there was also a subtle reminder that he was under the Law and must honor his oath.

Joshua kept his word. In doing so, Joshua is credited with having saved the Gibeonites. He delivered them from those Israelites who wanted to destroy them and instead put them to use. They were to serve both the community and the Lord.

There would come a time, a few hundred years later, when a king of Israel did not keep this oath. The failure to do so had terrible consequences.

> "[1]Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, "It is because of Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." [2]So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them (now the Gibeonites were not of the sons of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites, and the sons of Israel had made a covenant with them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the sons of Israel and Judah). [3]David said to the Gibeonites, "What should I do for you? And how can I make amends, so that you will bless the inheritance of the LORD?" [4]Then the Gibeonites said to him, "For us it is not a matter of silver or gold with Saul or his house, nor is it for us to put anyone to death in Israel." Nevertheless David said, "I will do for you whatever you say." [5]So they said to the king, "The man who destroyed us and who planned to eliminate us so that we would not exist within any border of Israel - [6]let seven men from his sons be given to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD." And the king said, "I will give them" . . .

> [9] Then he handed them over to the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, so that the seven of them fell together; and they were put to death in the first days of harvest at the beginning of barley harvest" (2 Samuel 21:1-6, 9).

Saul had forgotten, or chose to ignore, the promise to let the Gibeonites live. He violated that oath taken in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. And God would not allow that to go unpunished. The Lord visited a famine upon the land and, when David made inquiries, God revealed to him the cause of His displeasure. David sought out the Gibeonites in the hopes of making amends, and did whatever they asked. A promise made in the name of the Lord must not be taken lightly

The Gibeonites remained among the people of Israel for their entire history. They endured the time of the judges and enjoyed the benefits of the United Kingdom (though clearly Saul killed many of them), and no doubt they suffered during the times of the Divided Kingdom. Many were taken into exile, but even there, they endured. Among the first returning exiles there were 95 Gibeonites (Nehemiah 7:25).

<u>Takeaways</u>

And so we learn that the Israelites will not complete the conquest as God intended. I can think of three important lessons to take away from this passage. First, is that it is important to remember to seek the Lord even if we are certain of what we are doing. Too often, I think, we can make decisions that seem so obvious, but that turn out to be something that does not benefit us. Even when we think we are certain, we still ought to pause and ask the Lord for guidance. Remember the words of James,

> "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5)

Second, we must be careful when we make promises. Joshua and the leaders of Israel swore an oath to let the Gibeonites live among them, and they regretted it. Again, the words of Scripture are worth heeding,

> "[33] Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' [34] But I say to you, take no oath at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, nor by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. [36] Nor shall you take an oath by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. [37] But make sure your statement is, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil origin" (Matthew 5:33-37).

> "[13]Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' [14]Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. For you are just a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away. [15]Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that'" (James 4:13-15).

Finally, if we fail to do either of the former, and make an ill-advised promise because we did not seek the Lord, we must, nevertheless, honor that. We must live faithfully after we make mistakes. We cannot allow one bad decision to lead to another. And we can trust that God will give us the grace to do that very thing.