

“We Feared Greatly for Our Lives Because of You ”

The eighty-first in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 9:1-27; Galatians 3:15-29

Joshua was afraid that this would happen. After Israel’s stunning defeat at Ai, Joshua warned the people of Israel, “*for the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it [Israel’s defeat] and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name (Joshua 7:9)?*” Now that Israel has entered the heart of Canaan, the military situation will begin to change dramatically. Some of the Canaanite tribes (the Gibeonites) are terrified of Israel and simply lose the will to fight. But a number of Canaanite tribes begin to stiffen in their opposition to Israel’s conquest of the land. Before the debacle at Ai, Israel and Joshua called the shots and advanced upon objectives of their choosing. Now that the Canaanites had learned of Israel’s defeat by a vastly inferior foe at Ai, a number of tribes decide to band together in an attempt to organize a counteroffensive against the Israelite advance into Canaan. YHWH promised to create fear in the hearts of the Canaanites, but now the Canaanites seem to be strengthening in their resolve to fight back. What happened?

We are continuing our study of the Book of Joshua, which is part of a larger series, “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People.” Throughout this series, we have been tracing the story of God’s redemption of his people as it unfolds in biblical history. We’ve also been concentrating on the covenant of works and the covenant of grace and how God’s people relate to these two covenants.

Recall that when we left off last time at the end of Joshua chapter 8, the people of God were camped near the city of Shechem in the valley between Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal. Upon reaching Abraham’s and Jacob’s ancient home as instructed by Moses, the entire nation participated in a covenant renewal ceremony. As we read in Joshua 8:30-35, the people of God surrounded the ark of the covenant and the priests. As the people streamed up the slopes of Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal in what amounts to a natural amphitheater, higher up on the Mount Ebal, Israel’s priests offered burnt offerings for the people’s sins, as well as fellowship offerings to commemorate their covenant with YHWH.

The high point of the covenant renewal ceremony was when Joshua read to the assembled people (men women and children, plus all the sojourners in the land) all that was written in the law—including the covenant blessings and curses. We also read of how the priests conducted sacrifices on altar of uncut stones engraved with the words of the law. This was a declaration to the Canaanites that Israel was in covenant relationship with YHWH and therefore entitled to all the covenant blessings—including possession of the land—upon the condition of their obedience. But should Israel disobey the Lord’s commandments, those covenant curses spelled out in the law would come upon the entire nation. This entire ceremony was a testimony to the Canaanites that YHWH is the true and living God, and that this is his land to give to his people. The sacrifices offered on this altar also served to remind both the Israelites and the Canaanites that YHWH is a merciful God and that there was still time to repent before YHWH directs the armies of Israel to bring down his judgment upon all those in Canaan.

This covenant renewal service involving the entire nation is a great day in Israel’s history—a true high water mark of sorts—but from here on out, things begin to go down hill. As we move into chapters 9-11 of Joshua, we see that Israel no longer faces resistance from individual cities, but from a coalition of tribes. Suddenly, the Canaanites are fighting back.

As we now move into Joshua chapters 9-11, it immediately becomes clear that something dramatic has taken place throughout Canaan. No longer do the Canaanites just melt away because of their fear of YHWH and Israel. What is it that causes the change in the intensity of resistance they put up against Israel? The answer is simple. There has been sin in the camp of Israel. And that sin has consequences for the entire nation.

As we consider this change in circumstances and look for an explanation, we should remember that YHWH promised Israel that Canaanite courage would give way to fear, and that these Canaanite tribes would seek to avoid a confrontation with Israel. But now, something has changed. What happened? The reason for the change in the level of resistance on the part of the Canaanites is based upon what happened at Ai. Recall that Achan sinned against YHWH by keeping plunder from the city of Jericho when Israel was commanded not to do so. YHWH's curse not only fell upon Achan and his immediate family—they were all put to death—but the consequences of Achan's sin come upon the entire nation of Israel. The action of one man has impacted the well-being of all.

Throughout this section of Joshua, we see the principle of federal headship/representation. The covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is a national covenant. If one of the Israelites falls into sin, the covenant curses come down upon the whole nation. This may seem unfair and harsh to us, but remember that YHWH is absolutely holy and cannot even look upon sin. The blood of sacrificial animals cannot remove the guilt of sin. In fact, the sacrifices offered throughout the Old Testament provisionally turn aside God's anger only because these sacrifices point ahead to Christ, whose once for all, final sacrifice for sin, will turn aside God's wrath and anger toward their sin. While the animal sacrifices assuage God's anger against his people, they don't completely remove it—only Christ's death can do that.

YHWH does not remove his favor from Israel because of what Achan did. Joshua acted swiftly and punished Achan. Since there has been atonement made for the nation's sins at Mount Ebal, God will continue to bless his people. Nevertheless, the consequence of Achan's sin is real. Israel did suffer a humiliating defeat because of the covenant curse, and news of this humiliating defeat became common knowledge among the Canaanites. This gives us an explanation as to the meaning of verse 1. *“As soon as all the kings who were beyond the Jordan in the hill country and in the lowland all along the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, heard of this . . .”* Joshua never tells us exactly what it was that these kings heard, only that they received news which hardened them in their resolve to fight against Israel. This can only be the news that the tiny little city of Ai, was able to defeat Israel and rout 3,000 of Joshua's soldiers.

As we will see in the next chapter, the Canaanite tribes also learned that Israel eventually defeated the forces of Ai and Bethel and then wiped out their entire armies. They also heard that the citizens of Shechem had decided not to fight and were basically absorbed into Israel. They heard that Gibeon had made a peace-treaty with Israel. But the damage had been done. The Canaanites will not do as Shechem or Gibeon have done. They will worship and serve their own gods, not YHWH. When they learned that Israel could be defeated and that Israeli soldiers would break and run in the face of determined resistance, their own resistance dramatically stiffened. While these kings knew nothing about Achan's sin—which was the reason why YHWH allowed Israel to suffer this defeat—the Canaanites only knew that Israel had retreated before the men of Ai. If they banded together, their chances were much greater that the same thing could happen to Israel again. A mutual defense-treaty is the only hope of staving off defeat.

Before Achan's sin and Israel's defeat at Ai, the Canaanites seemed largely indifferent to the threat posed by Israel. The Canaanites hardly reacted when Jericho fell. It seemed as though they were paralyzed.

This was the result of the fear placed in their hearts by YHWH. But now the Canaanite tribes will fight back. These tribes know of Joshua's reputation—we read in Joshua 6:27 *“that So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.* While YHWH will give Israel the victory over these tribes, nevertheless, here we see how the consequences of the sin of one man impacts the entire nation. Instead of just melting away, the Canaanites will now put up a determined fight. Yes, Israel will possess most of the land, but the consequences Achan's sin becomes clear in verse 2. *“They [the kings mentioned in verse 1] gathered together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel.”* In this we already start to see the principle that “so-so” obedience won't cut it. It will take a perfect obedience to fulfill all righteousness, namely the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ to ensure victory over our two great enemies, sin and death.

What follows in Joshua 9:3-27, is the remarkable story of the Gibeonites, a people who see the power of God and who seek deliverance from YHWH, but who, in the process, deceive Israel and Joshua in order to gain their deliverance. Nevertheless, Joshua will spare them and the Gibeonites end up like Rahab, delivered from that wrath of God which is coming upon all Canaan.

While the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites had heard of Israel's defeat at Ai and began to plan a defense, another tribe greatly feared Israel and sought to make peace with them. In verse 3, we read, *“but when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai,”* they decided to join with Israel and become servants of YHWH, whom they acknowledge to be the true and living God. Gibeon, is a large city to the north of Jerusalem. Its men were known to be fierce warriors. It is not far from Ai and was part of that land to be given to the tribe of Benjamin as their portion of their inheritance from the Lord. The Gibeonites were of the people called Hivites (one of the tribes mentioned here as among those who would make war on Israel). Likely, this means the Gibeonites were part of that people (the Hivites) with whom Israel was to make no treaty, because this particular tribe was to be wiped out should they oppose God's purposes.¹

This explains the reason for the deception on the part of the Gibeonites, in attempting to make a treaty with their neighbor, Israel. Joshua describes this deception for us verses 4-5. Trying to appear as though they had come from a distant land, the Gibeonites, *“on their part acted with cunning and went and made ready provisions and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, with worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and crumbly.”* The Gibeonites greatly feared Israel, and wanted to make peace with them, even if it meant doing so through deceptive means.

Claiming to come from a distant county—not from the tribe of Hivites—we read in verse 6 that *“they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to [Joshua] and to the men of Israel, ‘We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us.’”* Since YHWH had forbidden Israel to make treaties with those tribes who were to be driven from the promised land (cf. Exodus 34:11-12; Deuteronomy 20:10-18), it is clear that the Gibeonites somehow knew enough about Israel's law to know that they must claim to be from a distant land so that these prohibitions against treaty making would not apply. How the Gibeonites knew this remains a mystery, but it does give us a sense of how YHWH's, Israel's and Joshua's reputations were widely known throughout the land. We also know that these people were terrified of YHWH and Israel, so much so they were willing to deceive Joshua by pretending to come from elsewhere if that's what it took to make covenant, and avoid destruction.

¹ Howard, Joshua, 223, 225.

And so these Gideonites come to Gilgal, which is that place where Israel built a monument to the Jordan River crossing and where they celebrated their first Passover in the promised land. This is also where the men of Israel were circumcised.² The Gibeonites arrive seeking to make a covenant with Israel. This covenant should be understood as something akin to a “peace treaty.” It was a typical suzerainty treaty, common in that period, with Israel promising to protect the people of Gibeon, in exchange for Gibeon’s loyalty to YHWH, and to Joshua as covenant mediator. As is typical of these covenants, there was a ratification meal (the discussion of provisions) and an oath of loyalty that the Gibeonites swore to Israel.³

But some of the Israelites were skeptical of the ruse. “*But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, ‘Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?’*” The fact that these men of Gibeon are specifically identified as Hivites, indicates the Israelites knew full-well that the Hivites were enemies and Israel was not allowed to make treaty with them. The Gibeonites knew this too and so they approached Joshua, feigning ignorance by referring to Joshua as their leader. “*They said to Joshua, ‘We are your servants.’*” But Joshua doesn’t bite at first. “*And Joshua said to them, ‘Who are you? And where do you come from?’*” He too was skeptical.

Fearing what might happen to them, the Gibeonites flat out lie about their identity. But as we read this account, see if these words have a familiar ring to them. “*They said to him, ‘From a very distant country your servants have come, because of the name of the LORD your God. For we have heard a report of him, 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 the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.’*” These are virtually the same words that Rahab had spoken to the Israeli spies in Joshua 2. This indicates that YHWH’s power was widely known throughout Canaan, that it was common knowledge that he had made a covenant with Israel, and that the land of Canaan was to be Israel’s inheritance. The Gibeonites lie, because they fear YHWH, Israel and Joshua, and they don’t want to be wiped out along with the rest of their Hivite kinsmen. To pull this off, they are willing to deceive Joshua and his men.

In verses 11-13, they continue their lie, taking the matter to an even greater level. “*So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, ‘Take provisions in your hand for the journey and go to meet them and say to them, ‘We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us.’ Here is our bread. It was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and crumbly. These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst. And these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey.’*” These men have gone to the greatest of lengths to deceive the Israelites. Surely, this is indicative of how great was the Gibeonite fear of the Lord.

But the Israelites were still skeptical of the story these men told and decided to check out the Gibeonite story for themselves. So we read in verse 14, “*So the [Israelite] men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the LORD.*” The LORD had given Joshua explicit instructions as to how to discern his will in cases such as this. According to Numbers 27:21, Joshua should have gone to Eleazar the high priest, who would in turn consult the LORD using the Urim, a part of his priestly Ephod, which

² Both Hess and Howard argue that this is another city by the same name, located closer to Gerazim. But it would seem likely to me, since Gilgal was the recognized center of Israel’s worship. See the discussion in: Hess, *Joshua*, 187; Howard, *Joshua*, 224.

³ Howard, *Joshua*, 219.

enabled the priest to determine the will of the LORD. Instead, Joshua's men physically examined the provisions these men presented, saw the provisions to be old and worn. Based upon this, they accepted their story as fact. But in actuality, the Israelites had been deceived, something that would not have happened, had they consulted the high priest. That the Gibeonites have successfully pulled this off, is now made clear in verse 15. *"And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them."*

It was not long before the Gibeonite ruse was uncovered. Just as the Gibeonites knew what was going on among the Israelites, so now the Israelites hear news from some unknown source revealing that the Gibeonites were not who they claimed to be. In verses 16-17, the extent of their deception becomes clear. *"At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, [the Israelites] heard that they [the Gibeonites] were their neighbors and that they lived among them. And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim."* These men were not from some distant land. These were Israel's neighbors!

According to verse 18, once the lie was discovered, the Israelites wanted to wipe the Gibeonites out. But as we see, this didn't happen. *"But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders."* Since Israel had made covenant with these men and sworn on their oath to protect them, the Israelites could not renege without sinning against the LORD. But the people of Israel were not happy about what had happened and they were angry with the leaders for not putting the Gibeonites to death (cf. verse 26).

The leaders of Israel reply to the people by explaining the binding nature of such covenants. *"But all the leaders said to all the congregation, 'We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.'" While the Gibeonites cannot be put to death because of this covenant—in 2 Samuel 21:1 we read that Israel faces a famine because Saul broke this treaty with the Gibeonites—there is an appropriate penalty. Since the Gibeonites represented themselves as servants, servants they will be. "This we will do to them: let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them." And the leaders said to them, 'Let them live.' So they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, just as the leaders had said of them."* The Gibeonites will be allowed to live. But they will be servants. They will carry water and cut firewood. This would not only honor the covenant, this is how the Gibeonites represented themselves. If they claimed to be servants, let them be servants!

Having realized that he had fallen for their deception, *"Joshua summoned them, and he said to them, 'Why did you deceive us, saying, 'We are very far from you,' when you dwell among us? Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.'" Joshua still does not understand why the Gibeonites have gone to such length to deceive him, when their actions require them to live a life of service "in the house of my God."*

The Gibeonite's motives are very clear. *"They answered Joshua, 'Because it was told to your servants for a certainty 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 from before you—so we feared greatly for our lives because of you and did this thing. And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it.'" Far better to be a lowly servant in the house of the Lord, than a dead Hivite.*

While the Israelites wanted to put them to death, Joshua will deliver the Gibeonites from his own angry people. *"So he did this to them and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did*

not kill them. 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.” The reference to the Gibeonites serving Israel at a place where the LORD chooses means that the Gibeonites will serve in the “House of Lord.” This refers to those places within Israel where there were places of worship: Gilgal, and then Shiloh, and then finally Jerusalem. By this decree, the Gibeonites were forbidden from entering any of the Canaanite places of worship, in keeping with the treaty they have made with Israel. This is the only time we read of Joshua—whose name means salvation—saving anyone. Despite Israel’s anger with their leaders because the Gibeonites were not destroyed, Joshua extends to them membership in the covenant, although the Gibeonites will be Israel’s servants.

Just as God had delivered a Canaanite prostitute (Rahab) and her family when she hid the Israeli spies, so now God spares the Gibeonites from his own hand of judgment and from the Israelites, even though they have deceived the leaders of Israel. In this, we see the grace of God in providing for the salvation of sinners. We also see that God’s covenant mercies extend beyond the borders of Israel. God will save all those who fear him and then call upon his name.

As we fast forward to our New Testament lesson and Paul’s words in Galatians 3, Paul reminds us that *“even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.”* While Paul probably doesn’t have the incident in Joshua 9 in mind when he writes these words, that is exactly the case. Joshua made a covenant with the Gibeonites. Once made, that covenant could not be broken even or annulled, even though the Gibeonites deceived him when they made the covenant.

Paul’s next point is an important one. *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”* Those Gibeonites who realized that YHWH was going to keep his promise made to Abraham wanted to be at peace with Israel. They knew that this land was Israel’s. They knew that YHWH was the Lord. When God made his national covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, the covenant of works was now published for all to see in the two tables of the law. But the land promise was tied to that earlier covenant God made with Abraham. The Gibeonites knew of this promise. They wanted to be part of it, even if it meant hauling water and cutting wood. They would gladly be servants in Israel if that’s what it took to spare them from judgment. Like I say, it is better to be a servant in the house of LORD, than to face God’s wrath in judgment. Although the Gibeonites lied to spare themselves, God was merciful to them. Those who believe the promise will be saved by Abraham’s offspring, Jesus.

In this we see that God’s covenant promises (even under this phase of redemptive history) were never limited to just Israel. God promises to deliver anyone who believes his promise and then calls upon his name. This is why Paul goes on to say in verses 26-29, *“for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* God’s covenant oath is sworn to his people. That oath is sworn in Christ’s blood and ratified to us in our baptism. Therefore, all those in Christ are heirs to the covenant promises made to Abraham. And even though the Gibeonites don’t see that the promise of the land will ultimately be realized in that heavenly city whose builder and architect is the Lord (as did Abraham), nevertheless, they greatly feared for their lives and sought to be at peace with YHWH and his people. They knew that YHWH is merciful and that his covenant promise can be trusted. Although they didn’t need to lie to enter into covenant with Israel, God is gracious and forgives the Gibeonites, sparing them from that wrath which is to come. And he will do the same for anyone who calls upon his name.