

Promises

Today I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about the Gibeonites. I imagine you've probably never heard of this particular group of people; they're part of a rather obscure Bible story, and they don't get discussed very often. However, I think they have something important to teach us. There is a lesson here that we very much need to learn.

The story begins in the days of Moses. The Lord told Moses that when the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan and conquered it, they were to completely annihilate all the nations that lived there. Israel was not allowed to make peace with any of them, or even leave any survivors:

Deuteronomy 20:16: "But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth:

17 But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee:

18 That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the Lord your God."

God knew that if the Israelites left any of the people of the land alive, those people would turn Israel away from God and into a life of paganism and wickedness. As we all know, God was exactly right: after Joshua died Israel stopped conquering the land, and the surviving Canaanites did indeed turn their heart away from God. This led to generations of discipline from God – and ultimately it led to Israel being cast out of the land of Canaan altogether.

Just to be clear, God did not say this just once. He repeated it over and over again. Israel was not allowed to make peace with any of the nations in the land of Canaan:

Deuteronomy 7:1: "When the Lord thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou;

2 And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them:

3 Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.

4 For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly."

Israel was *not* allowed to make peace with any of the nations of the land of Canaan. They were to destroy every last one of them. God was very clear about this and left no room for doubt. This was a commandment from the Lord.

So, armed with that commandment, Joshua began the conquest of the land of Canaan. The people of Israel marched up to the city of Jericho – a powerful city – and utterly destroyed it. They then marched up to Ai and destroyed that city as well. Israel was doing what God had commanded her to do.

Israel's victories caused the nations of the land of Canaan to become frightened. They realized that they were up against a powerful foe who served a powerful God. They remembered the plagues that the Lord had sent upon Egypt and how God had destroyed that country. They saw God dry up the Jordan river before the Israelites and they saw God destroy the walls of Jericho. They knew that there was no way they could fight against a God like that:

Joshua 5:1: "And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites, which were on the side of Jordan westward, and all the kings of the Canaanites, which were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of Jordan from before the children of Israel, until we were passed over; that their heart melted, neither was there spirit in them any more, because of the children of Israel."

Since Israel was so powerful and since Israel was clearly going to win, the Gibeonites came up with a plan. They decided to make peace with Israel. Now, the Gibeonites knew that Israel had no intention of making peace with any of the inhabitants of Canaan. Therefore, they decided to pretend that they were a faraway nation who had heard of Israel's greatness:

Joshua 9:3: "And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai,
4 They did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up;
5 And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy.
6 And they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us."

The Gibeonites were lying, of course. They weren't from a faraway country; they were from some cities right down the road. They took old provisions so it would look like they had been traveling for a long time. They wanted to trick Israel into signing a peace treaty with them – a treaty that Israel would never have agreed to if Israel knew who the Gibeonites really were.

Naturally, the Israelites were suspicious:

Joshua 9:7: "And the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us; and how shall we make a league with you?
8 And they said unto Joshua, We are thy servants. And Joshua said unto them, Who are ye? and from whence come ye?"

The Israelites wanted some proof that these Gibeonites were who they said they were. Could they prove that they were from a faraway land?

The Gibeonites insisted that they were telling the truth. They said reason they had come to Israel was because they had heard of the power and might of the Lord, and all the great things He had done:

Joshua 9:9: "And they said unto him, From a very far country thy servants are come because of the name of the Lord thy God: for we have heard the fame of him, and all

that he did in Egypt,

10 And all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites, that were beyond Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, which was at Ashtaroth.”

Notice that the Gibeonites insist that they were from a *very* far country. As proof of their claims they offered the evidence of their old provisions:

Joshua 9:11: “Wherefore our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spake to us, saying, Take victuals with you for the journey, and go to meet them, and say unto them, We are your servants: therefore now make ye a league with us.

12 This our bread we took hot for our provision out of our houses on the day we came forth to go unto you; but now, behold, it is dry, and it is mouldy:

13 And these bottles of wine, which we filled, were new; and, behold, they be rent: and these our garments and our shoes are become old by reason of the very long journey.”

The Gibeonites said that their bread was fresh when they started out, but their journey was so long that it became dry and moldy. They claimed that their garments and shoes were new when they started, but the journey wore them out. Of course, the Gibeonites were lying; they just packed old bread and old garments in order to trick the Israelites. The proof that they offered was not proof at all.

However, it was sufficient proof to fool the Israelites:

Joshua 9:14: “And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord.

15 And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation sware unto them.”

Joshua *could* have inquired of the Lord and asked Him what was really going on. Back in the days of the Old Testament, the high priest had access to something called the Urim and the Thummim. You could use these mysterious objects to ask God questions and get direct answers back. It was very much like being able to send God a letter and get a response back in the mail. We don't have those mysterious objects anymore, but Joshua had access to it in his day. Unfortunately, Joshua did not inquire of the Lord. Since he didn't ask God what was really going on, he was tricked into making peace with them. He agreed not to attack the Gibeonites.

So how long did it take Joshua to find out that he had been tricked? All of three days:

Joshua 9:16: “And it came to pass at the end of three days after they had made a league with them, that they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they dwelt among them.”

The Gibeonites were not from a faraway country; instead they lived among them, in the land of Canaan. They had lied. They had tricked the Israelites into making peace with them. They had obtained peace through a lie, and under false pretenses. It was all a trick.

So what do you suppose happened next? Yes, it's true that Israel made them a promise – but that was because they believed the lies of the Gibeonites. If Israel had known the truth they would never have agreed to that peace treaty. On top of that, God had commanded Israel to wipe out all of the

nations in the land of Canaan, and leave no survivors. Israel was not allowed to make peace with the Gibeonites and Israel did not want to make peace with the Gibeonites. The whole thing was a clear-cut case of fraud.

Therefore, surely, the treaty was null and void. Surely that meant that Israel did not have to abide by this treaty that had been fraudulently obtained. After all, the treaty actually violated one of the commandments of God! The treaty *had* to be null and void. God couldn't possibly expect Israel to keep that agreement, right? After all, it wouldn't be fair.

Yet that is not how Israel saw it. Thanks to this treaty, Israel now believed they had to spare the Gibeonites:

Joshua 9:17: “And the children of Israel journeyed, and came unto their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim.

18 And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes.”

When the Israelites came to their cities, they did not attack them. They left everyone alive because of the treaty that had been made. The Israelites weren't happy about this, of course; they knew that God required them to defeat everyone. But the princes of Israel were firm that the Gibeonites had to be left alone because of the oath they had made:

Joshua 9:19: “But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them.

20 This we will do to them; we will even let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we sware unto them.”

The leaders of Israel were convinced that if they wiped out the Gibeonites, wrath would come upon them from the Lord. They thought that God would be angry with them if they attacked the Gibeonites, and would actually punish them! They believed that God required them to keep their promise. Since they had sworn an oath, they had to keep that oath. Since they had told the Gibeonites they would not kill them, they had to spare them and leave them alive.

But surely the Israelites were wrong, right? There's no way that God would require them to keep a promise that they had been tricked into making. They surely must have misunderstood. After all, it wouldn't be fair to expect them to abide by these terms. They were tricked into it, and the situation wasn't what they thought. It was all completely unfair. Surely the leaders were wrong and God wanted them to break the treaty and defeat the Gibeonites. Right?

Well, let's take a look at what happened next and see if we can figure this out. After the Gibeonites made peace with Israel, the other nations in the land of Canaan became frightened. The Gibeonites were a powerful nation, and the fact that they made peace with Israel instead of attacking them scared everyone:

Joshua 10:1: “Now it came to pass, when Adonizedec king of Jerusalem had heard how Joshua had taken Ai, and had utterly destroyed it; as he had done to Jericho and her king, so he had done to Ai and her king; and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel, and were among them;

2 That they feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, as one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all the men thereof were mighty.”

The king of Jerusalem decided that the only logical course of action was to attack the Gibeonites. They could not allow Israel to have an ally that was that powerful. So Adonizedec gathered together a coalition to attack the Gibeonites:

Joshua 10:3: “Wherefore Adonizedec king of Jerusalem, sent unto Hoham king of Hebron, and unto Piram king of Jarmuth, and unto Japhia king of Lachish, and unto Debir king of Eglon, saying,

4 Come up unto me, and help me, that we may smite Gibeon: for it hath made peace with Joshua and with the children of Israel.

5 Therefore the five kings of the Amorites, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, the king of Eglon, gathered themselves together, and went up, they and all their hosts, and encamped before Gibeon, and made war against it.”

Five kings came against Gibeon, intent on destroying it. Now, this looks like a great opportunity, right? All Israel has to do is stand back and do nothing, and these kings will wipe out the Gibeonites. Israel doesn't have to do it herself; she can just let these kings wipe them out. After all, the Gibeonites were liars. They tricked Israel into that peace treaty. It wasn't like *Israel* was attacking them.

But that's not what Israel did. Israel believed that God would not approve of that. Generations later, King David tried that very same trick. When he committed adultery with Bathsheba and got her pregnant, he didn't kill her husband Uriah; instead he arranged for him to die in battle. But God was not pleased with David's trick, and cursed him for what he had done. God saw no difference between arranging for someone to die in battle, and killing them yourself.

This generation of Israelites understood that principle. They knew that they could not allow the Gibeonites to die in battle. Since they were allies, they had to go and protect them. When the Gibeonites called for help, Israel answered:

Joshua 10:6: “And the men of Gibeon sent unto Joshua to the camp to Gilgal, saying, Slack not thy hand from thy servants; come up to us quickly, and save us, and help us: for all the kings of the Amorites that dwell in the mountains are gathered together against us.

7 So Joshua ascended from Gilgal, he, and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valour.”

Now, what did God think of all this? When the Gibeonites asked for help and Joshua answered their call, was God on their side? Did God want Joshua to keep the promise he had made, and save the lives of people that God wanted dead? Surprisingly, the answer is *yes*. God promised to help Joshua save the Gibeonites:

Joshua 10:8: “And the Lord said unto Joshua, Fear them not: for I have delivered them into thine hand; there shall not a man of them stand before thee.”

What followed was a series of miraculous events. First, the armies of Israel made it to the scene

of the battle in a single night:

Joshua 10:9: “Joshua therefore came unto them suddenly, and went up from Gilgal all night.”

This becomes much more impressive when you realize that the Israelites were camped a three-days' journey away. Joshua and his men covered three days' worth of travel in just one night. They were moving *fast*! You would think that after running all night they would have been too exhausted to fight the next day, but the Lord gave them strength:

Joshua 10:10: “And the Lord discomfited them before Israel, and slew them with a great slaughter at Gibeon, and chased them along the way that goeth up to Bethhoron, and smote them to Azekah, and unto Makkedah.”

God did more than just strengthen Israel. The Lord actually fought on Israel's behalf by hurling great stones out of the sky at the enemy soldiers:

Joshua 10:11: “And it came to pass, as they fled from before Israel, and were in the going down to Bethhoron, that the Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto Azekah, and they died: they were more which died with hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword.”

God actually killed more of Gibeon's enemies than Israel did! Amazing, isn't it?

But that's not the end of the story. Despite killing enemy soldiers all day long, and despite the Lord's mighty help in throwing giant stones out of the sky to kill them, it still wasn't enough. At the end of the day Joshua asked the Lord to stop the sun from going down so that he could continue to defeat the enemies of Gibeon:

Joshua 10:12: “Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon.”

Let's pause a moment here and think about what is going on. God wanted all the nations of Canaan dead – *all* of them. This included the Gibeonites. God strictly commanded Israel to leave no survivors whatsoever. However, the Gibeonites tricked Israel into making peace with them. Israel did not want to make peace with any of the nations of the land; they were tricked into it through fraud and lies. Yet Israel kept that agreement. They spared the Gibeonites, and when the Gibeonites were attacked they came to their aid.

Israel is fighting a coalition of nations *who is trying to kill the Gibeonites*. Instead of cheering on this development, Israel is trying to save the Gibeonites because of an agreement they were tricked into making. Now Joshua is asking for God to *stop the sun from setting* so that he can finish defending the pagan, wicked Gibeonites!

That is quite a request, and is easily the biggest request that anyone ever made in the entire Old Testament. Joshua is making this request *on the behalf of the enemies of the Lord*, so that Israel can keep a promise that she made – a promise she never wanted to make, and never would have made if she had known the truth.

And so what did God do? He did exactly what Joshua asked. The Lord stopped the sun:

Joshua 10:13: “And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.

14 And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel.”

God actually stopped the sun from going down for about a whole day – probably around twelve hours. That's right: in order to help Israel in battle, *God stopped the sun*. It's astonishing that Joshua would even ask such a favor; who in their right mind would pray a prayer like that? It's even more astonishing that God would grant it, but He did. The battle was won, the five kings were killed, and the Gibeonites were saved.

This is all a rather astonishing story, but it leaves some questions. Did God truly want Israel to save the Gibeonites, or was something else going on? After all, the kings that God defeated on that miraculous day were all *Israel's* enemies too. They were kings that God wanted defeated so that He could give their land to Israel. Joshua 10:14 even says that the Lord was fighting “for Israel”. Maybe God was just using this as an opportunity to defeat some powerful nations that needed defeating anyway. How do we know that God truly did want Israel to keep the treaty with the Gibeonites? Is it possible that Israel was wrong to save them, and that God wanted Israel to break that promise and kill the Gibeonites all along?

The answer can be found centuries later, in 2 Samuel 21. There we find this amazing passage:

2 Samuel 21:1: “Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David enquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.

2 And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.)”

Here's what is going on. Israel had made peace with the Gibeonites back in the days of Joshua. After that, centuries passed. The days of the judges came and went, and Saul became king over Israel. Now, Saul had no part in the treaty with the Gibeonites; it was made long before he was born. Saul knew that the Gibeonites were not of Israel and he knew that they had tricked Israel into making peace with them. Therefore, Saul hunted them down and killed them. Saul wasn't able to massacre every last one of them, though; a few escaped. But he did his best to commit genocide against this entire group. He believed that Israel had been tricked and had a right to kill these people.

So what did God do in response? He gave Israel a chance to repent of this horrible thing that they had done, and when Israel failed to make it right God sent a famine upon the entire nation. That's right: God punished the nation of Israel for breaking their promise to the Gibeonites. They had promised not to kill them, and then centuries later they had turned around and broken that promise. God sent a famine upon the entire land, and God refused to lift the famine until justice was done and the Gibeonites were avenged.

I'm running out of time here, so I'm going to have to cut this short, but we have covered enough

ground to bring out several important points. First of all, God really *does* expect us to keep our promises. In fact, He requires it! Even if we were tricked into making the promise, and even if the promise was made under false pretenses, and even if the promise was unfair, and even if we would never have made the promise if we knew how things would turn out, God *still* requires us to keep our promises and do what we said we would do.

Now, this is a very difficult thing to do. The truth is that we would much rather find some excuse to *not* do what we said we would do. We would rather look for an escape clause of some kind. But God is not interested in that. God wants us to do exactly what we promised. In Psalm 15:1, the psalmist asks the question “who shall dwell in thy holy hill”? The answer is “those who keep their promises”:

Psalm 15:4: “In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the Lord. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.”

There can be no doubt that God expected Israel to keep the promise she had made with the Gibeonites. The fact that God punished Israel with years of famine when she broke that promise is really all the evidence we need. *God requires people to keep their promises and do what they say.* The promise might be unfair, and it might have been based on false pretenses. But you made the promise and you have to keep it.

Note that this applies to people *and* nations. Israel made a promise to the Gibeonites, and when Israel broke that promise Israel was punished. God punishes nations that do not keep their promises. This is a bad thing for the United States, because we break our promises on a regular basis. God *hates* that. He hates those who swear falsely. He hates it when someone says they will do something and then does not do it. He wants us to be people of our word – even when it costs us something. Even when we “swear to our own hurt”, God expects us to do what we said we would do.

Just in case we missed it, God repeated this warning again and again:

Deuteronomy 23:21: “When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee.”

Ecclesiastes 5:4: “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.”

Ecclesiastes 5:5: “Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.”

Now, you might be thinking that your promise wasn't some kind of Old Testament vow. It was just a promise, and that's different. You said something, it didn't work out, and that's just how it goes sometimes. But that is not how God sees it. Look at what Christ said in the book of Matthew:

Matthew 5:34: “But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

35 Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

36 Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair

white or black.

37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

It is not the fanciness of the oath that counts; it is the fact that you said you would do something. That is what Jesus is saying here. Did you make an agreement? Then you had better live up to it. You do not have to swear on a stack of Bibles in order for your promise to be binding. You do not have to say some magical words – like “I swear an oath by the Lord” – in order for your promise to be binding. A simple “yes” or “no” is all it takes.

Were you tricked? So was Israel. Was it done under false pretenses? The same thing happened to Israel. Was it grossly unfair? So was Israel's agreement with the Gibeonites. But God *still* required Israel to keep the promise she had made, in spite of all that, and God punished Israel severely when she broke that promise and went back on her word.

This raises an important question: how seriously do we take our promises? In this day and age many people treat their word very lightly, and think nothing about going back on what they said they would do. But God requires something more of us. If you do not intend on keeping your vows, and if you are not planning on doing what you said you would do, then do not make those vows in the first place. Do not make promises that you do not intend on keeping, for, as Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, God has no pleasure in fools. Do what you said you would do – or else you will have to answer to the Lord for it.

Remember, each of us will have to stand before God and give an account of our lives. We do not have a license to sin as we please. As Moses once warned the children of Israel, be sure your sin will find you out. God requires us to be people of our word – and that is something we should take to heart.