

Promises

In today's lesson I'd like to look at the Gibeonites. It's possible you've never heard about this particular group of people. They're part of an obscure Bible story and they don't get discussed very often. However, they have something important to teach us. There's a lesson here we need to learn.

The story begins in the time of Moses. God 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 wasn't allowed to make peace with any of them, or even leave any survivors:

Deuteronomy 20:16-18: “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: 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: 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.”

There are several reasons why God did this. First of all, these were *very* wicked people. The Lord is longsuffering and gives nations a chance to repent, but if a nation continues in sin then God will ultimately judge it. Throughout history God has destroyed many nations because of their wickedness – and *especially* for violence and shedding innocent blood. In Genesis 15:13-16 the Lord gave the Amorites 400 years. This means He wanted four centuries to destroy that nation! Specifically, He waited until their iniquity was “full”. Once the Amorites were

utterly depraved and completely evil, He commanded that all of them be wiped out. The nations that God wanted Israel to destroy were extremely vile.

Second, God knew that the violent and murderous pagans of Canaan would tempt Israel to leave Him and engage in idolatry – and that's exactly what happened. When the Israelites made peace with the inhabitants of Canaan, they stopped worshiping God and started worshiping idols. This included *burning their children alive as human sacrifices* (Jeremiah 7:31). Since the Israelites made peace with Canaan instead of destroying it, God ultimately sent His judgment against Israel and exiled them from the land. The people of Israel refused to destroy Canaan, and that ultimately led to their own destruction.

Finally, the Bible tells us that there were giants in the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:33). The giants were the result of a physical union between human women and demons (Genesis 6:4). Giants weren't human beings at all; instead they were powerful creatures who were utterly evil and depraved. There was no reason to spare any of them because they never should have existed in the first place! Israel should have wiped them out without hesitation – but they didn't. (If they had then David wouldn't have had to face the giant Goliath centuries later.)

God repeatedly told Israel that they weren't allowed to make peace with any of the nations in Canaan:

Deuteronomy 7:1-4: “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; 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: 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. 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 required 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.

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

Israel's victories caused the nations of Canaan to become frightened. They realized they were facing a powerful foe who served a mighty God. The nations remembered the plagues that God had sent upon Egypt and how He had destroyed that country. They had seen God dry up the Jordan river before the Israelites, and they knew that God destroyed the walls of Jericho. The nations realized there was no way they could win 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 powerful and 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 distant nation who had heard of Israel's greatness:

Joshua 9:3-6: “And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai, They did work wilyly, 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; And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy. 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. They weren't from a faraway country; instead they were from right down the road. They brought old provisions with them 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 they knew who the Gibeonites really were.

Naturally, the Israelites were suspicious:

Joshua 9:7-8: “And the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us; and how shall we make a league with you? 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 the Gibeonites were who they claimed to be. Could they prove that they were from a faraway land?

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

Joshua 9:9-10: “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, 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.”

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

Joshua 9:11-13: “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. 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: 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 their garments and shoes were new when

they started, but their journey wore them out. Of course, the Gibeonites were lying. They packed old bread and old garments to trick the Israelites. The proof that they offered wasn't proof at all.

However, it was sufficient to fool the Israelites:

Joshua 9:14-15: “And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord. 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. In the days of the Old Testament the High Priest had access to something called the Urim and the Thummim. He could use these mysterious objects to ask God questions and get direct answers. It was 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 them in his day. Unfortunately Joshua didn't inquire of the Lord. Since he didn't ask God what was going on, he was tricked into making peace with them. He agreed to not attack the Gibeonites.

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 weren't from a faraway country at all. Instead they lived in the land of Canaan. They had lied! They tricked the Israelites into making peace with them. They had obtained peace through a lie.

So what do you suppose happened next? It's true that

Israel made a promise, but that was because they believed the lies of the Gibeonites. If Israel had known the truth they never would have agreed to that peace treaty. On top of that, God had commanded Israel to wipe out all the nations in Canaan and leave no survivors. Israel wasn't allowed to make peace with the Gibeonites and Israel didn't want to make peace with the Gibeonites. The whole thing was a clear-cut case of fraud.

Surely the treaty was null and void. Surely that meant Israel didn't have to abide by this treaty which had been fraudulently obtained. After all, the treaty violated one of God's direct orders! The treaty *had* to be void. God couldn't possibly expect Israel to keep that agreement, right? That wouldn't be fair.

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

Joshua 9:17-18: “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. 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 didn't attack them. They left everyone alive because of the treaty. The Israelites weren't happy about this. They knew God required them to defeat everyone. But the princes of Israel insisted that the Gibeonites had to be left alone because of the oath they had made:

Joshua 9:19-20: “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. 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 then wrath would come upon them from the Lord. They thought God would be angry with them if they attacked the Gibeonites and would punish them! They believed God required them to keep their promise. Since they had sworn an oath they had to keep it. Since had told the Gibeonites they wouldn't kill them they had to spare them.

But surely the Israelites were wrong, right? There's no way God would require them to keep a promise they had been tricked into making. They surely must have misunderstood. After all, it wouldn't be fair to expect them to abide by those terms. They were tricked into it and the situation wasn't what they thought. 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. After the Gibeonites made peace with Israel, the other nations in the land became frightened. The Gibeonites were a powerful nation and the fact that they made peace with Israel instead of attacking them scared everyone:

Joshua 10:1-2: “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; 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 couldn't allow Israel to have an ally that powerful. Adonizedec formed a coalition to attack the Gibeonites:

Joshua 10:3-5: “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, 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. 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 in order to destroy it. This looks like a great opportunity, right? All Israel had to do was stand back and do nothing and these kings would wipe out the Gibeonites for them. Israel didn't have to do it herself! After all, the Gibeonites were liars. They tricked Israel into that peace treaty. It wasn't *Israel* who was attacking them.

But that's not what Israel did. Israel believed that God wouldn't 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 personally kill her husband Uriah. Instead he arranged for him to die in battle. God wasn't pleased with what David had done and punished him for it. 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 they couldn't allow the Gibeonites to die in battle. Since they were allies they had to protect them. When the Gibeonites called for help, Israel answered:

Joshua 10:6-7: “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. So Joshua ascended from Gilgal, he, and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valour.”

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 three days away. Joshua and his men covered three days' worth of travel in just one night. They were moving *fast!* You might 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 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 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 and think about what's going on. God wanted all the nations of Canaan dead – *all* of them. This included the Gibeonites. God commanded Israel to leave no survivors. However, the Gibeonites tricked Israel into making peace with them. Israel didn't want to make peace with any of the

nations of the land; they were tricked into this treaty through fraud. Yet Israel kept the agreement. They spared the Gibeonites, and when the Gibeonites were attacked they came to their aid.

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

That's quite a request. It's easily the biggest request that's recorded in the entire Old Testament. Joshua was making this request *on behalf of the enemies of the Lord* so that Israel could keep a promise that she never would have made if she had known the truth.

What did God do? He did exactly what Joshua asked. The Lord stopped the sun in the sky:

Joshua 10:13-14: “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 hastened not to go down about a whole day. 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 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. In the end the battle was won, the five kings were killed, and the Gibeonites were saved.

This is an 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 *Israel's* enemies too. They were kings that God wanted defeated so He could give their land to Israel. Joshua 10:14 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 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 21:1-2: “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. 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's going on. Israel had made peace with the Gibeonites 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 had tricked Israel into making peace, so it seems that he hunted them down and killed them. However, Saul wasn't able to massacre all of them; a few escaped. But he did his best to commit genocide against them. Apparently he believed that Israel had been tricked, and that gave him the right to kill all of them.

What did God do in response? He gave Israel a chance to repent of this horrible thing they had done, and when Israel failed

to make it right God sent a famine upon the 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 turned around and broke their promise. God sent a famine upon them and refused to lift it until justice was done and the Gibeonites were avenged.

As we can see, God really *does* expect us to keep our promises. 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.

This is a very difficult thing to do. It's much easier to find some excuse to *not* do what we said we would do. Many people would look for an escape clause of some kind. But God's not interested in that. He 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 the nation of Israel to keep that treaty with the Gibeonites. The fact that God punished Israel with years of famine when Saul broke that promise is 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 since you made the promise you have to keep it.

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 don't keep their promises! God hates those who swear falsely. He hates it when people say

they'll do something and then don't do it. He commands us to be people of our word – even when it costs us something. 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.”

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

Matthew 5:34-37: “But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

It's not the fanciness of the oath that counts! It's the fact that *you said you would do something*. That's what Jesus is saying here. Did you make an agreement? Then you had better live up to it. You don't have to swear on a stack of Bibles for your promise to be binding! You don't have to say some magical words 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 that promise, and God punished Israel severely when Saul broke that promise.

How seriously do we take our promises? In our day 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 don't intend on keeping your vows, and if you're not planning on doing what you said you would do, then don't make those vows in the first place. Don't make promises that you aren't going to keep, for God has no pleasure in fools. Do what you said you would do – or else you'll have to answer to the Lord for it.

One day each of us will have to stand before God and give an account of our lives. We don't have a license to do as we please! As Moses once warned the children of Israel, be sure your sin will find you out (Numbers 32:23). God requires us to be people of our word – and that's something we should take to heart.