

## **Joshua: When God Makes Up for Our Stupidity**

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The people of God can do the most stupid things. There is a story of a man from Utah who married a woman after courting her in an AOL chatroom for six months. He proposed and she accepted. They met briefly, twice. The wedding took place in April 1996. Present at the ceremony in the Ritz Carlton Hotel were 70 guests. The wedding was said to have cost around \$10,000, but four years later, police inspectors called at the house because of credit card bills which the wife had run up, totaling some \$60,000, and the husband was told by the law enforcement officers who called at his house, to his great surprise, apparently, that his wife for four years standing was in fact a man. Now he wasn't the sharpest pencil in the world, so it appears, and there are questions which you are asking which I am not going to answer. My only point is to underline that people can do the most stupid things.

The book of Joshua is a book about prophecy. It's a history book, of course, but in the Jewish canon, it actually falls in the category of prophecy. And that because the book of Joshua is designed to teach us more than just history; it is designed to teach us moral and spiritual principles; principles of spiritual obedience. Joshua 9 teaches us a lesson about humility. Joshua, after conquering Ai the second time, after a defeat the first time, now comes across these Gibeonites. And it's a delicious story. It's both entertaining and tragic, the way in which these Gibeonites pull the wool over Joshua's naive eyes.

### **I. The naivete of God's people.**

I want us to see four things tonight. Firstly, I want us to see the naivete of God's people. The clue as to what's going on here lies in verse four, where we read that "they acted craftily," your pew Bible says, I believe. The NIV translates it using that beautiful word, a "ruse." It's exactly the same word that's used of Satan as he is first described in the opening verses of Genesis 3, where "the serpent acted craftily." The people of God will need God's power to conquer the land of Canaan, but they also need His wisdom.

It is interesting that the language that is used in this opening section of the chapter is not the same language as was used in chapters two and five, where

we read that “the Canaanites trembled because of the people of Israel.” Here, this is no longer the case. The opening verses of chapter nine seem to define for us a group of Canaanites who perhaps had been empowered by the defeat of Ai. They had begun to think that perhaps after all, they may have some possibility in defeating these Israelites in their attempt to conquer the land. Failure has ongoing consequences. The people of God have to retread ground that they should have taken a long time ago.

Now, you remember the story. The Gibeonites come, and somehow or other they have some old moldy bread and old sandals. Four times in the account we read that their provisions, their bread, their clothes, their sandals, their wineskins, were worn out. And they keep on repeating this phrase, “We've come from a very far country.” If they had come from that far a country, why would they need to covenant with the people of Israel? They were no threat to Israel, and Israel would be no threat to them. Actually, less you miss the point entirely, they're no further than 30 miles away. They're just north of Jerusalem. Had Joshua asked even the simplest of questions, he could have easily found out where they had come from.

Joshua begins to probe just a little, and seems satisfied with their answer in verse nine, that “your servants have come from a very far country,” and then these Gibeonites begin to say why it is that they have come: because they have heard of the fame of their God. What God had done in Egypt, what God had done to the two kings of Sihon and Og, before they ever came across the Jordan. You notice they say nothing about what God had done in Jericho and Ai, because having come from a far country, perhaps they wouldn't even have known about that. And the people of God sample their food. It's moldy.

And then in verse 15, they make a treaty of peace that ensures that the Gibeonites are spared. It's all very solemn, it's accompanied by oaths, it followed probably the pattern of ancient near eastern treaties with a preamble and stipulations and promises and curses if there was disobedience, violations of the stipulations of the covenant. It was a very solemn affair, and Israel, you understand, has been conned.

The first way in which we need to characterize this is to understand something of the spiritual gullibility that is taking place in this chapter. These men of God seem to have failed to appreciate and realize that past failure can weaken. They didn't seem to understand what Jesus was to say, that the children of light must be wiser than the children of the world. Because often the reverse is true, that the children of the world are wiser, and sharper, than the people of God. I thought of calling this sermon “Gullibles Travels.” Appearances, you see, can be very deceiving.

I read a magazine just a few months ago about a woman sitting in a parking lot, in her car, and holding her hand to the back of her head. Apparently, she had

been sitting in the car for over an hour, and a person comes up and taps on the window and says, "Is there something wrong?" She replies, "I've been shot in the back of my head, and I'm holding my hand so that my brains don't fall out." When the paramedics arrive, they discover that what actually had taken place was a Pillsbury biscuit can, in the backseat of the car in the heat, had exploded, and the top of the can had hit her head, and the dough had the same texture as what she thought was her brain. Things are not always as they seem to be. And you understand that the Gibeonites are not what they seem to be either.

We are not ignorant of Satan's devices. We can be taken in. Peter warns us, doesn't he, in I Peter 5, that "Satan is like a roaring lion, prowling about seeking whom he may devour." Christians need to be on the alert, Christians need to be wise, Christians need to be discerning, they need to be asking the right questions, they need to be cognizant of the stratagems of Satan. We need to be alert because we are living in enemy occupied territory.

They were taken in by pious talk. Isn't that interesting. It wasn't atheistic talk. They were taken in by the flattery. "We've heard of your God. We've heard of the great things He has done. We've heard of what He's done in Egypt, and to the two kings, Sihon and Og. And they failed to see through that external piety. They had all the right language, but all the wrong motives. You see, not only were Joshua and the elders gullible, they were also superficial. They were flattered by this talk, and Joshua sits down and he writes a treaty. He never seems to ask the question, he never seems to say to them, "Don't move an inch until I make sure that what you're saying is true."

The internet missionary church called "Greater Ministries International" or GMI, took in over 550 million dollars. That's a lot of dollars. And they took it in from over 27,000 people. They were told that their money would double in less than 18 months. Their security lay in the fact that they had discovered in Liberia, just 15 feet below the surface of the ground, 40 million dollars worth of gold. The money would circulate not by the US Post Office, but by the Holy Spirit. All 27,000 investors regarded themselves as Evangelicals. The head of GMI, if you're interested, is in Federal prison in the state of Florida today. Christians, you see, can be superficial.

## **II. The impatience of God's people.**

In addition to being gullible and naive, there is a more sober assessment of them in verse 14. "They did not inquire, they did not ask for, the counsel of the Lord." Now in what form did that counsel take shape? In the Old Testament, of course, there were the urim and thumin. The High Priest had these two, probably stones, maybe they were different shapes or colors, we're not absolutely sure what they looked like, and you would ask a question and the priest would bring out one or the other, and whichever one he brought out would give you the

answer. Is it a “yes” or is it a “no”? Is it this way or is it that way? The urim and thumin were a guaranteed form of guidance.

You know how difficult guidance is. Some of you are struggling with guidance, and you pray and pray and pray, and you’re still puzzled. You still don’t know what to do. And you ask wisdom from this person and that person and sometimes the wisdom can be in conflict. You know how difficult guidance can be.

Well, in Israel there was this infallible means of guidance, but they never consulted it. I can’t understand this. You see the extent of how they were taken in by the flattery of the Gibeonites. Oh Joshua, Joshua, how easily he was taken in.

And perhaps the most fateful error that they make is that within three days time, in verse 16, they apparently discover where the Gibeonites come from. And they come from 30 miles away. Actually, they come from just north of Yazoo City. That’s how close. Can you imagine the consternation, can you imagine. You know, it’s one of those moments. How in the world could they have been so impatient that it only took three days for them to discover this. We must wait for the providence of God to be in place, and then alone, are we to act. We must ask for the wisdom that God promises in His word, that “if any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God who giveth liberally and upbraideth not.”

Why is it that we drift outside of the will of God? Well, it’s simple. It’s so simple you want to pinch yourself. We drift outside of the will of God because, first of all, we make decisions without consulting Him, without taking those decisions and laying them before the feet of our God in prayer, asking Him to give us wisdom, to know whether this is right or wrong. To know whether this is the best way forward, or not. And we move outside of the will of God because we aren’t willing to wait for Him. You know how impatient we are as Christians. Because we want instant answers. Joshua wasn’t even willing to wait three days. And spiritual maturity calls for patience.

### **III. Joshua's integrity.**

There’s a third thing I want us to see, and that is the integrity of Joshua and the elders. And we need to focus now on the extraordinary thing that God helped Israel’s leaders to do. He enables Joshua and the leaders to receive the grace of integrity. And to take this sin on their chin. By upholding what they do now as a consequence of discovering the Gibeonites are, in fact, dwellers of Canaan, and ought to have been under the ban, they must now act in absolute integrity and they must now uphold the righteousness of almighty God. Despite the grumbling of the whole assembly, you note in verse 18, the leaders’ promise had been given, and a promise made must be a promise kept. So they keep their word to the Gibeonites, and they allow the Gibeonites to live because they are honor

bound to do so. They have entered into a solemn oath and covenant for good or ill, and they cannot go back on it.

Well, aren't some of you saying, "You know, as soon as Joshua hears that they had lied, the deal is off." There are dozens of lawyers in here who could get Joshua off this covenant. Some would not only get Joshua off, they would get Joshua reparations for emotional stress and character defamation. But Joshua must live with his error. He must live with the consequences of his actions. He refuses to take a stand that would multiply his sin. For Joshua had made a covenant, and it would only compound his error by breaching that covenant.

You understand, this is the stuff for books on ethics. You come across a book on ethics, and you look in the index for Joshua 9, and it isn't there, don't buy it. This is one of the test cases of ethics. No doubt, when we come to the ninth commandment, perhaps we will deal with it there. There are lots of questions here. Are there any instances, parallel to this, in which we are not bound to keep our word?

The great Prague reformer, John Hus, a wonderful, extraordinary man of courage, one of the great early reformers, in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, before the days of Luther and Calvin, when he was asked to come before the Council of Constance, he was given assurance by the emperor, Sigismund of Bohemia, that his life would be spared during that journey he would make. But as he traveled, he was apprehended and burned at the stake. Emperor Sigismund's words were, "Nobody needs to keep faith with a heretic." Joshua felt he needed to keep faith with a heretic. Joshua felt, and believed, that a word that had been given and a covenant that had been entered into, with all the solemnity of ancient near eastern covenants, is a covenant that must be kept.

Some of you know that all too well, of entering into a marriage covenant and discovering that your partner isn't all that they made themselves out to be. Or all that you hoped that they would be. But that marriage contract is still binding. And you pray for grace every single day and God will give you give you grace every day, to live in that covenant. Thirty years ago, Andre Rafery made what he thought was a great deal. He agreed to pay a 90-year-old woman in France 500 dollars a month for her apartment, until she died. And then when she died, the apartment would become his. It's not as strange a thing as it sounds. It's often done, especially if the owner of the apartment doesn't have children or relatives to hand that property on to. It's a nice means of income that she can use in her later days. The problem is that Mr. Rafery died in 1995, and the old lady has just celebrated her 120th birthday. Mr. Rafery's children are still paying the 500 dollars a month, and to this point, they have paid over 250,000 dollars for an apartment that is valued at less than half that amount. They had made a contract, and a contract made is a contract that has to be kept. And we need to bathe in that, that the Lord can help us live with our mistakes, in the context of the oceans of His forgiveness.

#### IV. The largeness of God's grace

There's one more thing, and that is the largeness of God's grace. What did God do for the Gibeonites? Rascals that they were, crafty as they were. Clever? Yes, clever as they were. Can you have some sympathy for them? Don't you feel for them a little? They would have been surely killed had they not attempted this ruse. And God made them to be servants to the Israelites for the rest of their days. Isn't that wonderful. He gives the Gibeonites grace despite their deceit. Their lives may well have been menial, but better to be a doorkeeper in the house of our God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. Later on, these Gibeonites will be serving before the altar of the Lord and in Nehemiah's day they will be there building the blessed Jerusalem. God was determined that nothing would stand in the way of the advancement of His purposes.

Which of us tonight has never been deceitful? Which of us has never, ever, been deceitful? Twisting the truth a little bit, trying to put on the facade, when the reality is altogether different. And here in Joshua 9, in this extraordinarily delicious story, don't you feel the grace of God, don't you see that the God that Joshua and the Israelites were serving, and our God, is a God who forgives deceivers. What a wonderful God He is. Let's pray together.

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