



"One ought never to turn one's back on a threatened danger and try to run away from it. If you do that, you will double the danger. But if you meet it promptly and without flinching, you will reduce the danger by half."

—Winston S. Churchill

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Joshua and the Gibeonites (Part Two)

In Part One, we began considering the Gibeonites, the people of a large city in what would become the land of Benjamin, who misrepresented themselves to Joshua and the Israelites for the sake of a covenant of [peace](#). Israel's leaders failed to do their due diligence verifying the Gibeonites' claim, and they became a protected people in Israel.

As the story unfolds, the Israelites discover the Gibeonites' deception, yet the oath they swore tied their hands:

And it happened at the end of three days, after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were their neighbors who dwelt near them. Then the children of Israel journeyed and came to their cities on [the third day](#). Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kirjath Jearim. But the children of Israel did not attack them, because the rulers of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD [God](#) of Israel. And all the congregation complained against the rulers. Then all the rulers said to all the

congregation, "We have sworn to them by the LORD God of Israel; now therefore, we may not touch them. This we will do to them: We will let them live, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath which we swore to them." And the rulers said to them, "Let them live, but let them be woodcutters and water carriers for all the congregation, as the rulers had promised them." ([Joshua 9:16-21](#))

The Israelites, fearing God's wrath if they reneged on the agreement, make the Gibeonites their slaves. The Gibeonites, consigned to cut wood and carry water, have no hope of freedom. We use a similar saying even today: If somebody "carries water" for a person of higher rank, it indicates the watercarrier is a servant—his life is not his own. The agreement spared the Gibeonites' lives but also significantly constrained them.

Verse 14 is the critical point in this story: "Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD." The Gibeonites' subterfuge succeeded because Israel, apparently even Joshua, did not seek God's counsel. They knew His will overall, which was to drive the people completely out of the land. But Israel's leaders failed to check in with God when this decision came before them, and in time, that failure cost them dearly. This error is particularly surprising regarding Joshua, who was a very faithful leader. This incident appears to be a low point in an otherwise outstanding record of following God.

The Bible contains no record of the Israelites, even after discovering the deception, either repenting of missing the mark or [seeking God](#) about what to do. Israel's hands may have been tied, but God's certainly were not. As verse 22 indicates, Joshua and the Israelites were more upset over the Gibeonites' deception than about their own mistake of failing to seek God. They had the means to avoid this deception, to see through the disguises, but instead, they acted on their own understanding ([Proverbs 3:5](#)). Despite thinking that they controlled the Gibeonites, they were still susceptible to their deceptive influence, and over time, it resulted in idolatry. The Gibeonites may have been mere water carriers, but their influence helped topple the nation.

What were the fruits—the effects—of this incident? The account in Joshua 9 records what the Gibeonites reaped. They had life but not fulfillment. Paul has good reason to link [sin](#) with slavery. A sinner is a slave of sin ([Romans 6: 16](#)), a state the Gibeonites experienced literally.

In not guarding against deception with God's help, Joshua and the Israelite leaders established a precedent that unwittingly unleashed a great calamity on their nation. What had been an absolute, divine imperative to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan now included an exception, turning aside God's clear command.

The fruit, however, took time to ripen and spoil. After this lapse, Joshua faithfully destroyed every other city and nation he came against, not showing them any mercy, just as God had said. The problem began after Joshua died. For a time, the Israelites continued their conquest of the land, but cracks began to develop in their resolve. Nobody could stand against them, but after a while, they just abandoned the conquest, despite God's assurance of victory.

To compound the problem, even among the peoples they *did* conquer, the Israelites did not finish the job God gave them. Instead, they leaned on Joshua's exception and opted to enslave the descendants of Canaan rather than drive them out. They chose mercy when, in this matter, God had said not to show mercy. Yet Israel could point to Joshua's regrettable precedent and say, "Well, he did it, and it worked out."

Except it did not work out—not over the long term. The fruit of being deceived and allowing evil to endure was horrible, but there was no going back. The very thing God had warned Israel about, time and again, came to pass:

Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods. ([Judges 3:5-6](#))

Israel had a perpetual problem with recognizing evil and taking appropriate action. Their apostasy began with the Hivites from Gibeon, and in time, the leaven slowly spread.

The Gibeonites left their mark on Israel's history in another wretched incident involving Saul, which later ensnared David ([II Samuel 21:1-14](#)). During his reign, Saul sinned by not destroying the Amalekites as God had instructed. Through Samuel, God told Saul that He would strip the kingdom from him. In his misguided zeal, Saul then started waging war on the non-Israelites in the land, apparently trying to earn his way back into God's favor.

During his rampage, he massacred some Gibeonites. He likely justified it as doing God's will, but it was really his own will—he had not sought God either. Although he was apparently trying to make up for Joshua's stumble, it was not his job to do. His bloody and futile spasm of violence is an example of super-righteousness ([Ecclesiastes 7:16](#)): He tried to impress and thus manipulate God through his work of conquest, thinking God might reward him for his "righteousness." However, self-interest drove Saul rather than God's direction.

Years later, when David was king, God cursed the land with a severe famine because of the slaughter. It took David three years to wake up and realize something was wrong. But as with everyone else involved with the Gibeonites, he also failed to seek God. Instead, he placated the Gibeonites by hanging some of Saul's descendants. Contrary to God's law, David made sons bear the guilt of their father. The famine ended sometime later, and even though the Gibeonites were satisfied, the Bible does not indicate that God was pleased with the solution.

There is no such thing as a little sin, or in this case, a little deception. The Gibeonites' instinct for self-preservation enslaved them, and Israel's failure to seek out the truth resulted in a corrosive precedent, creating a spiritual snare that sprang on Israel exactly as God predicted. Those failures became stumbling blocks for Israel's kings as they responded with self-interest and bloodshed rather than seeking God.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Why Did God Command Israel to Go to War?](#)

by David C. Grabbe

The "God of the Old Testament" receives a great deal of criticism from some quarters because, allegedly, He makes statements that contradict New Testament teaching, and He also seems cruel, especially toward non-Israelites. Examining a question that brings both of these criticisms into play, David Grabbe argues that God's command for Israel to execute total war on the Canaanites has a rational—and yes, Christian—explanation.

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