

# A COSTLY LESSON

## *JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH*

by Doug Goins

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Let me ask you to think back to a time when you were lied to persuasively by someone you trusted, someone who insinuated their way into your heart, your life, perhaps even your pocketbook. Remember how you felt when the truth came out and you realized that you'd been conned?

I have a painful memory of that from my early years at PBC. An attractive middle-aged man, a very persuasive con man, as it turned out, made an appointment with me. He told me an entirely believable story about his wife and children and about financial hard times they were having. I was so taken in by it that I went to the bank and took \$250 out of our savings account to loan him. We couldn't afford that at the time, and then to my chagrin he never returned to pay me back at the time we had agreed upon.

Beyond my immediate feelings of gullibility and naiveté, however, I remember some conversations with older pastors on staff after this happened. My motives had been pure; I was trying to follow the Lord Jesus with generosity and an open heart. But dear men on staff like Bob Smith and Bob Roe asked me, "Why did you take him at face value? Why didn't you ask some of us for counsel? Why didn't you wait a day or two to work things out through the need fund, rather than feeling pressure to immediately meet the need personally?" I remember the toughest question of all, which Bob Smith asked me very gently: "Doug, did you pray about that before you did it?" You know, I hadn't. I learned some costly lessons from that embarrassing and frustrating experience.

Such lessons are part of the process of Christian growth, part of the reality of living in evil days, as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5, and part of the reality of living in the midst of a cosmic spiritual battle. Paul says that we are in a struggle between light and darkness. The days are evil, but even in the midst of that, we need to learn to "walk in love," to walk as children of light;" we need to learn "what is pleasing to the Lord." Trying to figure all that out is a process. The heart of Ephesians 5 is verses 15-17: "Be very careful [in light of the evil days we live in], then, how you live-not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."

Our story in Joshua 9 explores these everyday spiritual issues that all of us live with-truth and lies, gullibility and wisdom, deception and integrity, naiveté and discernment, and ultimately what it means to trust God through all of it. The big question that is going to come out of this passage is, can God can turn even the failures of deceit and gullibility into something good and productive? Can God take moral and spiritual failures and use them for his honor and glory?

In chapter 8 Israel celebrated a great victory at Ai. Then they had a wonderful time of worship and rest in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Ger'izim. Chapter 8 surveyed a rich time of spiritual blessing, refreshment, renewal, and spiritual life for Joshua and the nation of Israel. Look at the summary in 8:33: "And all Israel, sojourner as well as home born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Ger'izim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel."

**Blessings and battles come together**

Now in 9:1-2 we're going to see that there is opposition from a united force of Canaanite city-states:

**When 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, they gathered together with one accord to fight Joshua and Israel.**

These city-states were preparing to attack Israel even while the nation was gathered in worship before the Lord, reaffirming its commitment to the law. This Canaanite opposition had heard about the defeats of Jericho and Ai, and they weren't going to give up their land without a fight. They decided that it was time to go on the offensive and try to drive these Jewish invaders out of the land. Usually these Canaanite tribes fought each other, but when God's people arrived, these petty kings and their little nations united to oppose Israel. It's a common occurrence throughout political history for local rivalries to be set aside when there is a common enemy. It's also consistent throughout history that enemies unite with one another against God, against his people, and against his work in the world.

For ourselves, we need to remember that when we have an experience of great spiritual victory and blessing, we need to be especially prepared to confront the enemy. Remember, as I said in our study of chapter 7, like Canaan, the terrain of the Christian life is one of hills and valleys. It's as if every victory that we win in our own personal life is an invitation for a full-scale attack by our satanic enemy. Every time we as children of God step into an experience of blessing, we are on the verge of being assaulted by the enemy. Our blessings and our battles come in tandem, like hills and valleys.

One of the great joys and privileges of my life is preaching on Sunday mornings. This series has been a great blessing for me, but I must tell you that whenever I'm preaching, all hell breaks loose around me personally and relationally. I experience all kinds of distraction and at times demoralization. I confess that when I'm preaching, Sunday afternoons are a low point for me in terms of feeling effective. The enemy knows how to get to each one of us. If you're taking ground for the Lord, making things count for him, then the enemy will figure out a way to oppose you.

### **The danger of being deceived**

In chapter 10, which we'll look at next time, we're going to see how this confederacy of Canaanite armies comes against the nation. But here in chapter 9 we're going to see that they are not the only danger to Israel. At Gibeon, which is near Ai in the central Judean highlands, and which is the very next city that Israel is to take in their conquest, some members of a Hivite tribal group decide that they are going to disassociate themselves from their Hivite tribal loyalty and the Canaanite confederation. Instead of military force, they're going to use deceit against Israel. That opposition is introduced in verses 3-13. Look at their strategy:

**But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning, and went and made ready provisions, and took worn-out sacks upon their asses, 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 moldy. And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a far country; so now make a covenant with us." But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, "Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?" They said to Joshua, "We are your servants." And Joshua said to them, "Who are you? And where do you come from?" They said to him, "From a very far 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, Sihon the king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who dwelt in Ash'taroth. And 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 forth to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and moldy; these wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they are burst; and these garments and shoes of ours are worn out from the very long journey."**

We're going to see in the verses that follow that the Israelites were taken in by this deception. But as the rest of the story unfolds, it will become clear that the ruse didn't work for very long.

God recognized the ambivalence in these Gibeonites. They were people just like us who were concerned about their wives and children, their families, their homes, and their future. This Canaanite military force that was being formed had lobbied them to join it. Chapter 10 tells us that the leader was the king of Jerusalem, a man named Ado'ni-ze'dek. One of the reasons he wanted them in the alliance was their reputation as fighters: "...Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all its men were mighty [warriors]" (10:2). In spite of that, these Gibeonites somehow understood that to wage war against Israel would be disastrous.

The explanation they gave in 9:9-10 is something of a confession of faith, or at least a confession of an understanding of who God is. It's very similar to the confession that Rahab the harlot made to the spies in chapter 2, when she told them about the rumors of the God of Israel. Both Rahab and the Gibeonites used the Israelite covenant name for God, *Yahweh*. Both knew the history of Israel's deliverance through the exodus forty years earlier. Travelers along the caravan route had brought stories about these people living in the Sinai Peninsula all those years. And military intelligence, which was quite good in the ancient Near East, told them about the Israelites' movement along the east side of the Jordan River and the victories over the kings there. Then the Gibeonites heard the horror stories, to them, of how these people had wiped out Jericho and Ai. There was a growing fear that they were next. It was only twenty-five miles from Gilgal up into the hills to Gibeon. They were just waiting for the Israelites to move.

They would have known about God's law in Deuteronomy 20:16-18 that required Israel to destroy every city and every inhabitant of Canaan. In verse 24 the Gibeonites say they understood that: "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...."

The Gibeonites were somewhat like Rahab. She had opened her heart in faith to the God of Israel. In contrast, the Gibeonites merely acknowledged that God was there and his judgment was fearful to them. They were willing to do anything to save their necks. So they resorted to lying.

We all probably know from practical experience that a lie can be helpful. Adlai Stevenson said, "A lie is an abomination unto the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble." But deception will not work permanently. It didn't work for the Gibeonites, and it won't work today for one of us who, in Paul's words, are "trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:10). The rest of our story goes on to prove that. Because of their dishonesty the Gibeonites were not treated with the same graciousness that Rahab and her family were in being welcomed into the nation Israel.

At the same time, the Gibeonites were saved by the mercy and grace of God. Remember that Rahab herself was saved out of a condemned people who were under God's judgment, like all the rest of the Canaanites. We saw in chapter 8 when they were gathered at Shechem that there were sojourners or Gentiles who had been absorbed into the nation and who believed in God. So there was a place for Gentiles among that people. And beyond that, what I understand about God from all the Scriptures is that anyone who seeks him finds him. He says that of himself in Hebrews 11:6. He is open to anyone who desires his mercy, forgiveness, love, and grace.

But God does require honesty or guilelessness from those who seek him. The call for us is to commit ourselves to living transparently so that when we get in a jam, even if it's our own fault, we don't try to squirm out of it. We simply tell the truth and trust God with the consequences.

I worked under a pastor in southern California who had done his doctorate probably fifteen years before I knew him. Unfortunately, in the pressure to finish the work and get the degree, he chose to lift somebody else's doctoral dissertation that had been done forty years earlier on the east coast. That went undetected for fifteen years, until another student who was doing research in the age of computers did a word search and

pulled up these two dissertations, which were word-for-word the same. This pastor lost his church, his ordination, and all credibility in the Christian community, because he thought he could trust a lie to save him. It didn't work in the long run.

### **The spiritual issue behind impulsiveness**

The next two verses deal with another spiritual problem in this chapter: Israel's impulsiveness, naiveté, or gullibility, which really is a spiritual issue. Look at verses 14-15:

**So the men [of Israel] partook of their provisions, and did not ask direction from the LORD. 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.**

The issue is simple: Joshua and the leadership of Israel were guilty of gullibility. But at the root of it there was a spiritual issue. Joshua took the word of the Gibeonites at face value, assuming he knew everything he needed to know from them. Joshua basically trusted his own ability to evaluate the evidence. He took a common-sense approach. In biblical language, he was walking by sight and not by faith. He depended exclusively on his own senses and his own reason when he examined the provisions. He was guilty of over-confidence, the same over-confidence that was at work before the first battle for Ai. Then Joshua trusted the spies; now he trusted the Gibeonites, the other leaders, and his own judgment. He took things into his own hands.

But underneath all these aspects is the spiritual problem that we saw defined in verse 14: failure to ask God for his direction, for how he would be involved in the matter. Joshua neglected the most important Counselor. This happened after the great triumphs of Jericho and Ai and the tremendous time of worship at Shechem, where the word of God was central. There they sat under the reading of the word of God, but here nobody took the time to go back to the Lord and ask him what to do. Israel did everything they could here but pray.

There is another footnote, skipping down to verse 18: "...The leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel." This covenant oath was sworn in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But he had been totally left out of the decision-making process. In a sense, he was asked to be part of what they were doing without being asked for his opinion on it.

Remember what the New Testament says about finding out what God's will is in decision-making. James writes in 1:5, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." As men and women of God we're called to stay in constant contact with him, to seek his help in everything, and to be confident that he will help us figure out what we need to know. Allan Redpath writes: "It seems to take us a long time to learn the lesson that neglect of prayer always leads to trouble, and destroys the spirit of discernment. Neglect of prayer always suggests pride in our own judgment, which is fatal." The spiritual principle is that at its very root, gullibility is a deep spiritual problem, which we saw illustrated in my own experience with the con man I mentioned at the beginning.

### **Keeping a commitment**

Our final section, verses 16-27, addresses what it means to trust God through the disappointing experience of deception and gullibility. It will answer the big question that I asked earlier: Can God turn the failures of lying and naiveté into something good and productive? Can God take moral and spiritual failure and use them for his honor and glory? This section focuses on the sacredness of covenant oath. There are two things I want you to notice as we read the passage: the integrity demonstrated by the leaders of Israel, and the faltering but growing faith of the Gibeonites.

**At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them they heard that they were their neighbors, and that they dwelt among them. And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Be-er'oth, and Kir'iath-je'arim. But the people of Israel did not kill 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. 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. This we will do to them, and let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we swore to them." And the leaders said to them, "Let them live." So they became hewers of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, as the leaders had said of them.

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 always be slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God." 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: do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us." So he did 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 hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to continue to this day, in the place which he should choose.

This is an amazing story. Remember the old truism from Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Someone retitled this chapter, "We have met the enemy and he is our neighbor."

Joshua and the elders were put on the spot by the people when they discovered this deception of the Gibeonites and Joshua's gullibility. Verse 18 says that the people complained against their leaders. They had a right to do that. This leadership really did make a big mistake. But look at the response of Joshua and the rest of the leaders. They didn't rationalize, they just took the criticism. Neither did they repudiate this mutual defense treaty they had entered into with Gibeon. In essence they refused to cave in to the pressure from the people, even though it was well-intentioned.

Joshua said, "Here is what we did and why it has to stand. A covenant oath was made in the name of the LORD God of Israel." He had given his word, and he took it seriously. Perhaps Joshua could have bailed out because the Gibeonites had entered into this covenant under false pretenses. But he says, "This is about more than just us and Gibeon, it's about us and the God of covenant. It's his name that is at stake, his reputation and character." If they had nullified this commitment, what would that have said about the God they served, who cares very much about keeping oaths and maintaining covenants, about being loyal and faithful to relationships? The Scriptures warn us about taking an oath in the Lord's name and then breaking it, because violating the oath just compounds the problem. So instead of looking for loopholes, Joshua stood against the desires of the people of Israel, who wanted to cancel the treaty and wipe out Gibeon, Joshua said, "No, from now on, through Israel God will be the protector of these foreigners. A covenant is a covenant."

This story of Gibeon and Israel shows us how critical it is to keep our commitments even when it's difficult. The well-being of other people depends on it. For the people of Gibeon, how Israel would respond was a life-or-death matter. They said, "We're in your hands. Do what you think is right before the Lord." Israel kept their word, as we'll see in chapter 10, where Gibeon is attacked by people whom they betrayed; they had broken their political ties with this military alliance. Even beyond that, they had broken ties with their blood families. They were Hivites, and those Hivites stayed in the land for generations. These Gibeonites were cut off from their roots. They threw themselves on the mercy of Israel.

They did that because of fear, and because they sort of understood who God was and what he was doing. They lied in the process, but that's what pagans do. It's even what we Christians do sometimes when we're put in a corner. I believe a faltering, confused, growing faith in Israel's God drove the Gibeonites to all of it. I suggest that you read again verses 9, 10, 24, and 25 and observe their growing awareness of what it was that they were surrendering themselves to. It's true that their testimony was not as clear as Rahab's, but it is apparent that they did believe what they heard, and they were given life in the nation of Israel.

There were consequences of their sinful deception. They were assigned to menial labor. Now, what they were serving was the worship life of Israel, not the individual families. They were the hewers of wood and drawers

of water for "the congregation," "the altar of the Lord," or "the house of the Lord." A lot of wood was needed for the altar of sacrifice, and much water was needed for the ritual washings in the tabernacle and later on in the temple. It says that some of the Gibeonites worked hard to meet those daily needs of worship.

But over the years this menial activity on behalf of the worship of the living God gradually led to a place of religious honor for the Gibeonites in the nation of Israel. When the land was divided at the end of Joshua, Gibeon was one of the cities that was given to the line of Aaron. It became a special place where God was known. About four hundred years later David put the tabernacle at Gibeon. The altar and the priesthood were there. At least one of David's military advisors, his mighty men, was a Gibeonite. Much later, when the Jews returned to the land after the Babylonian captivity, there were Gibeonites among them. In Ezra and Nehemiah they were given an honorary title: the Nethinim, the "Given Ones," those who were given to assist the priesthood in ministry. Ezra, in his writings after the captivity, tells us that they were totally committed to the Lord and his house. Nehemiah says that there were Gibeonites involved in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the captivity. God blessed this people with life in the nation of Israel, and the nation was blessed by their presence and their contribution. They were the only ones, besides Rahab and her family, who were saved out of all of Canaan, the land that was under judgment.

As I studied this, I remembered hearing the conversion story of our friend Jaime Guerrero, who ministers in the Mexican prisons. Jaime was once a con man. He was a successful white-collar bank robber who made a lot of money dishonestly. He finally got caught and was serving a seventy-year prison term in Mexico. The Christians would come to the prisons and bring food, toiletries, clothing, and personal attention. He craved all of those things. He went along with them for personal gain, for what he could get out of them, just like the Gibeonites. Finally a pastor put him in a corner and led him in a prayer of salvation. He prayed this prayer, but he didn't mean it. His only motive was to keep getting the things he wanted. But, he says, "The Lord held me to the prayer." He became a great man of faith who has a phenomenal ministry all across the country of Mexico. God will work with the Jaime Guerreros, the Gibeonites, and people like us who don't exactly understand what we're getting into or what the process means, and use us for his honor and glory.

Can God turn the failures of lying and naiveté into something good and productive? Can God take moral and spiritual failures and use them for his honor and glory? The apostle Paul says in Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." We were chosen, elected, called out of the darkness of confusion. The redemptive love of God is awesome. The saving grace of Jesus Christ is incomparable. The providential care of God for us is amazing. He takes all our mistakes, our defeats, our sins, and he overrules them to his glory.

I remember times that I've been exposed before him, and all I could say was "Lord, I'm sorry. I've blundered. But, Lord, I do believe that you can heal, that you can restore the devastation that my sin has brought. And Lord, I refuse to allow satanic condemnation to keep me down. I will forget those things that lie behind me, and I will press on to what you divinely determine for me in the future." I've learned that the memory of the wrong I did, the sin I committed, the failure, is what drives me back to the cross every day for cleansing, forgiveness, and power. I've learned that the very sin that once bound me has turned into the blessing that regularly drives me to the Savior. Praise God that he does overrule our mistakes and our sins, even to cause the curse itself to be turned into a blessing, to make something beautiful out of something destructive.

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Catalog No. 4465  
Joshua 9:1-27  
Twelfth Message  
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March 24, 1996

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