



## LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS

*SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP*

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 Joshua 9:1-27  
 Twelfth Message  
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The book of Joshua tells the story of how the nation of Israel entered into the land of Canaan and defeated thirty-one kings in a seven-year campaign. For the most part, Joshua is a story of victory. It is the account of a mighty God who fought for his people and accomplished wonderful things on their behalf. And it is a story of faith tested in battle and of community worship. As we learned in earlier studies, these twin images of warfare and worship are wonderfully interwoven throughout this book.

But the story of Joshua is much more than an account of property annexed. We cannot draw parallels between Israel's adventures and, say, the Oklahoma Land Rush, the Lewis and Clark expedition or the expansion of the British Empire. For the Israelites, the land of Canaan was much more than a convenient place to settle down. Canaan was the holy land, the new Eden, the place where God dwelt and met with his people. Canaan was the land of the great King who was named Yahweh. The Israelites' entrance into this land had long been anticipated. Six hundred years before the events of this book, God promised this very land to Abraham. Although the Jews had been enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, and then had spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, they never forgot the promise of a land, an inheritance, a pledge that was repeated to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses.

Imagine being part of that generation that finally entered into the land. Imagine being among the two million people who crossed the flooded Jordan, shared the Passover, marched around the city of Jericho, and heard the word of God proclaimed at Mt. Ebal. What anticipation and excitement the nation and their leader must have felt as they prepared to receive their inheritance!

Do you know that as Christians, we, too, are part of a much anticipated and long promised event: the promise of a seed, the seed of Abraham and the seed of David? To us, the promise of "entering into the land" is realized when we enter into Christ and the Spirit-filled life. For us, the person of Joshua is fulfilled in Jesus. It is the Lord who accompanies us as we face enemies upon entering into the new Eden. We, too, are tested in battle and renewed in worship. Christ is the place where we dwell with God. We are his people, and he promises to be with us. So we take possession of the land in a spiritual but very real sense. As we contemplate our life in Christ, do we have the same anticipation and passion that we find in the book of Joshua? Do we want to be a part of the promise of God? If we answer yes, then this book is for us.

In these chapters we learn that while the land was given to Israel, it had to be entered into and its enemies defeated. Everything in the land was under the herem. It was devoted to God, and most of it was ordained for destruction. In the same way, our life in Christ is a gift given to us by

God, but certain enemies must be defeated by faith. The Canaanite nations represent the enemy of our flesh, that part of us that is devoted to destruction, because it is under the curse. Sometimes the enemy is easily recognized, but at other times he is quite cunning. This is the kind of foe that Israel is about to encounter as we resume our study in chapter 9 of Joshua.

The prologue to this story is found in the opening verses of the chapter:

**Now it came about when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan, in the hill country and in the lowland and on all the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, heard of it, that they gathered themselves together with one accord to fight with Joshua and with Israel.** (Judges 9:1-2, NASB)

After Joshua and the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan, the Lord delivered Jericho and Ai into their hands, and the kings of both of these cities were put to death. The Canaanite kings living in the lands south of Ai became so alarmed they sought to form a confederacy to defeat Israel. The tribes who inhabited the land no longer lived in fear of Israel. They had seen how the nation had tasted defeat at Ai, thus they know Israel was vulnerable. So instead of the "melted hearts" of Israel's enemies that we found in chapters 2 and 5, here we see a resolve on the part of these enemies to join forces. But, as David wrote in Psalm 2, "surely the nations plot in vain."

One tribe takes a different approach, however. The story of the Gibeonites is now related, in two scenes, beginning in verse 3:

**When the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they also acted craftily and set out as envoys, and took worn-out sacks on their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, and worn-out and patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and had become crumbled. And they went to Joshua to the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us." And the men of Israel said to the Hivites, "Perhaps you are living within our land; how then shall we make a covenant with you?" But they said to Joshua, "We are your servants." Then Joshua said to them, "Who are you, and where do you come from?" And they said to him, "Your servants have come from a very far country because of the fame of the Lord your God; for we have heard the 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, to Sihon king of Heshbon and to Og king of**

**Bashan who was at Ashtaroth. So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spoke to us, saying, "Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go to meet them and say to them, "We are your servants; now then, make a covenant with us. This our bread was warm when we took it for our provisions out of our houses on the day that we left to come to you; but now behold, it is dry and has become crumbled. And these wineskins which we filled were new, and behold, they are torn; and these our clothes and our sandals are worn out because of the very long journey." So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not ask for the counsel of 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 an oath to them. (9:3-15)**

Gibeon lay between Ai and Jerusalem, to the west of the Israelite camp. According to verse 17, the Gibeonites were Hivites, one of the sentenced nations who inhabited several other cities in the area.

In contrast to the confederacy and their spirit of resistance, the Gibeonites have a spirit of fear. Instead of getting ready for war they prepare for peace, employing a plan of deception in the process: they pretend to come from a far-off country. Everything they possess, sacks, wine-skins, sandals, garments, even their food, appears worn out, giving the impression that they have been on a long journey. According to Deut. 20:10-15, Israel could make peace with compliant cities which were far removed from them and therefore not part of the condemned nations which might pollute them.

"Crafty" is the word used to describe the actions of the Gibeonites. This word has both positive and negative connotations. Positively, it conveys the notion of being prudent. The prudent one does not vaunt his knowledge; he ignores an insult, acts with knowledge, looks where he is going, sees danger, acts appropriately, and is crowned with knowledge (see Prov. 14:18; 12:23; 13:16; 14:8, 15; 22:3; 27:12). But negatively, the word possesses the idea of a shrewdness that is contrary to the will of God. The word first occurs in Gen. 3:1, where the serpent is described as "more crafty than any beast of the field." Thus, the negative connotation applies here in chapter 9 of Joshua.

There is a certain similarity between the craftiness of the serpent and that of the Gibeonites. In each case they confused the mind by appealing to the senses. Eve was tempted by focusing on the tree, whose fruit was "good for food," a "delight to the eyes," and "desirable to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6). The Israelite leaders also were deceived through their senses. They focused on the Gibeonites' food, drink and clothing, man's most basic human needs, and responded emotionally, perhaps out of sympathy or guilt. I am reminded of the people we encounter at traffic islands, dressed in rags and worn-out sandals, holding a sign that says, "Will work for food." By all accounts, that can be a very successful enterprise.

The scheme certainly worked for the Gibeonites. They came to Gilgal and made their request for a covenant. Questioned by the leaders and elders of Israel, they express a desire to become servants of the nation. Then they are questioned by Joshua. The evidence of the worn-out food, clothing and drink is further enhanced by their flattering speech. They make reference to the fame of the God

of Israel who has defeated kings and done miracles. While their speech is true, it is uttered under false pretenses. Joshua and the men of Israel ask the right questions, but they did not ask God—literally, "they did not ask the mouth of the Lord." Joshua makes peace with the Gibeonites and establishes a covenant allowing them to live; and the leaders of Israel swear an oath to preserve their lives.

The Gibeonites represent a mixed response to the gospel. Basically, we could say that there are three responses to the good news. We can fight against it, like the Canaanite confederacy; we can opt for peaceful co-existence, without submitting ourselves to it, like the Gibeonites; or we can fully embrace the new covenant in Christ, as Rahab did. The Gibeonites stand in stark contrast to Rahab. She proclaimed complete surrender to the God of Israel and joined forces with his people. Like Rahab, the Gibeonites had full knowledge of Israel and her God. They were aware of God's command to Israel to destroy all the inhabitants of Canaan. They feared God greatly but, unlike Rahab, they did not submit to him, choosing instead to rely on their own cunning. They wanted to win God as an ally, but not as Lord of their lives.

When we are confronted with the kingdom of God, which group do we identify with, the confederacy, the Gibeonites, or Rahab? Sadly, many who say they are Christians identify with the lukewarmness of the Gibeonites: they are neither hot nor cold. They want to live in the land; they want to be at peace with God and the church; they want the protection that the name of Yahweh offers. But they don't want to be totally separate from the world. They don't want to stand out. They don't want to burn their bridges. They want their own identity and their own city. They don't war against Christ, but they don't completely abandon themselves to him, either. They desire peaceful co-existence, not life-changing transformation. Here we could say that when the church opts for peaceful co-existence with the world, it loses all of its spiritual power and vitality.

A man approached Jesus one day and asked him what he would have to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him,

"You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But at these words his face fell and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property" (Mark 10:19-22).

As we begin a new year we might ask ourselves if we are willing to come to God honestly, without pretense or disguise, making no attempt to bargain with him. Are we willing to confess that we are dead without him? Will we surrender all and identify ourselves totally with him?

Now the deception of the Gibeonites is revealed. Verse 16:

**And it came about at the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were neighbors and that they were living within their land. Then the sons of Israel set out and came to their cities on the third day. Now their cities were**

**Gibeon and Chephirah and Beeroth and Kiriath-jearim. And the sons of Israel did not strike them because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord the God of Israel. And the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders. But all the leaders said to the whole congregation, "We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them. This we will do to them, even let them live, lest wrath be upon us for 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 the whole congregation, just as the leaders had spoken to them.**

**Then Joshua called for them and spoke to them, saying, "Why have you deceived us, saying, 'We are very far from you,' when you are living within our land? Now therefore, you are cursed, and you shall never cease being slaves, both hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God." So they answered Joshua and said, "Because it was certainly told your servants 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 before you; therefore we feared greatly for our lives because of you, and have done this thing. And now behold, we are in your hands; do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us." Thus he did to them, and delivered them from the hands of the sons 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 this day, in the place which He would choose. (9:16-27)**

This second scene parallels the first. In the first scene, the Gibeonites come to Israel; in the second, Israel comes to Gibeon. As in the first scene, the leaders of Israel have a part to play, this time with their own people. And, as in the first scene, Joshua asks a question of the Gibeonites; he receives a response, and makes a decision.

Three days after the covenant was made, Israel learned of the deception. It took them another three days to make the seventeen-mile journey from Gilgal to Gibeon. The cities listed were strategically located, controlling the approach to Jerusalem from the north and west.

When the people discover the facts, they want to kill the Gibeonites, a tribe that God had ordered to be annihilated. They feared the consequences of disobedience. And then the congregation grumbled against the leaders. The word for "grumble" is the same word that was used of Israel's complaining in the desert (Exod. 15:24; Num. 14:2, 36). Some things never change.

But, the leaders of Israel stand united. They refuse to go back on the oath they swore by the name of Yahweh. Three times in three successive verses (18, 19, 20) this oath is mentioned. They do not want to be under the curse of God. They had seen God's wrath at Ai and they do not want to experience it again. Even though the congregation is not happy, they decide to follow the example of their leaders.

When Joshua questions the Gibeonites, they respond truthfully. They admit that they were afraid and say they were just trying to save their own skins. They leave it in Joshua's hands to do what is "good and right"—a crafty

way of putting Joshua on notice: was he a man who honored his word? Joshua reaffirms his oath, but he curses the Gibeonites as God cursed the serpent in the garden and Noah cursed Canaan (Gen. 9:25). The Gibeonites would forever be slaves. Three times we are told they would be hewers of wood and drawers of water—wood cutters and water carriers. Verse 27 says that this service would extend to the "altar of the Lord." While their lives would be spared, they would be reduced to a position of permanent serfdom, not allies and equals of Israel. Rahab became part of the people of God, but not the Gibeonites. One consequence of this arrangement, however, is that henceforth there would be a Canaanite enclave in Israel's midst, something that is expressly forbidden in Deuteronomy 7.

So what does this ancient story have to say to us today? The key to the text is seen in the repeated use of the words "to swear an oath" (used four times), and "to cut a covenant" (used five times). Swearing an oath is a serious matter! Swearing an oath is a pledge to faithfully keep one's word. In the Ancient Near East, an oath appealed to the name of a deity, and the oath-taker invoked a curse upon himself in the event that he broke his oath. In this case, Joshua and the leaders swore an oath, giving their word by the name of Yahweh, to let the Gibeonites live. Essentially, the oath took the same form and content as the oath given to Rahab and her family. The spies in chapter 2 swore "our life for yours," but on this occasion with the Gibeonites, the oath was given under false pretenses.

We have to look to the story of David to learn the importance of the covenant made that day. In 2 Samuel 21, we see how Saul's intolerance of non-Israelites living in the land led to the slaughter of many Gibeonites. Later, they in turn demanded revenge on the house of Saul. Since they would not accept money in payment for the blood that had been shed, David finally yielded up seven of Saul's sons, whom the Gibeonites promptly hanged, sparing only Mephibosheth.

This story in Joshua is a great lesson for us about integrity and keeping our word. As Christians, we must by the power of God confront and defeat our spiritual enemies. Some of these enemies are quite obvious, but others of them are very deceptive. Like Israel, we can be duped into making treaties and covenants. We give our word, establishing partnerships that we should never have entered into. Like Israel, we rely on our senses. We fail to take the time to ask God and listen to his word. We rush in and "lean on our own understanding." When things seem obvious and facile, perhaps that is when we need to be most cautious.

However, when we give our word, when we swear an oath we are called to be faithful, even if we have entered into a partnership as a result of deception by the other party. Our first response may be to bail out. We were taken advantage of, we say, so we are free to go back on our word. If that is our response we need to know that God takes these things much more seriously. Our promises are not so much about us as they are about God. Our name is attached to his name. As Christians, when we give our word the name of God is at stake. God is not worried about our name, he is concerned about his name.

This truth is so important it makes God's top ten list:

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in

vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exod. 20:7).

So serious is oath-taking, Jesus’ advice is, don’t do it:

“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil” (Matt. 5:33-37).

This is an important word for how we engage in business. If we make agreements, sign contracts and enter into partnerships only to learn later that other parties to the contract did not represent themselves honestly, our first response may be to bail out of the agreement, but we must remember that success or failure, the bottom line, is less important than the fact that the name of God is at stake.

And it is an excellent word for married couples. Perhaps your spouse does not share your faith. You believed he or she was a Christian, perhaps he or she even claimed to believe in Jesus, but later you found that to be untrue. Your immediate response might be to bail out of the arrangement, but we must remember that when we make a vow, our happiness and our rights are secondary matters. It is the name of God that is at stake.

This is an important word for how we follow through with our neighbors in our communities and how we honor our word with family members who have deceived us. And for parents it is a critical word. Do we keep our word to our children?

“Many a man proclaims his own loyalty,  
But who can find a trustworthy man?” (Prov. 20:6).

Swearing an oath reflects the nature and character of God. God made a covenant with the human race. He swore an oath. He gave his word. He said, in effect, “I know you are sinners. I know how deceptive your heart is, but I will give you life. I will give a salvation that is not based on your righteousness, but on my righteousness. All you have to do is believe in my covenant.” And God has been faithful to his word. No matter how badly mankind has acted, God has honored his word and he will continue to honor it. This is the story of the Bible: God keeping his word. This is the story of redemption. God would have his children act in the same way.

The last word about the Gibeonites is found in the book of Nehemiah. There we read that “Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah” (Neh. 3:7) helped Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. When we pledge our word, we may never know what effect fulfilling our promises may have. Our loyalty to our word can have the same redemptive value as God’s loyalty to his word. That business partner we are yoked to may come to Christ through our testimony. That unbelieving spouse may be won to Christ through our faithfulness to God’s word. It may take a long time and it may cost us dearly. We may have to fight for years the temptation to bail out. We may never see the day of our vindication. The supremely important question, however, is, will we allow God to have his way with us?

As we enter into our life in Christ, God calls us to be people of integrity who honor our word. May God grant us the grace to be faithful Joshuas.

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