

## “THE GIBEONITE DECEPTION”

Joshua 9:3-15

After forty years of wilderness wanderings, the Israelites, led by Joshua, finally entered the Promised Land to conquer and possess it. Cities fell, kings fled, nations trembled—not because of Israel’s size or strength or military prowess, but because of Israel’s God. As Joshua later reminded the Israelites: **“You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the LORD your God who fought for you,”** Joshua 23:3.

And the victories were overwhelming. Mighty Jericho was destroyed; then Ai; then five Amorite armies—a battle in which God made the sun stand still; then the cities of Libnah, Lachish, Eglan, Hebron, Debir, until thirty-one kings and thirty-one Canaanite armies were utterly annihilated.

Yet, amid these victories, a single incident occurred which would impact the Israelites for the next four centuries; from the time of Joshua to the time of King David and King Solomon. This event was the so-called **Gibeonite Deception**.

Gibeon—the name means “hill city”—was built on a hill six miles northwest of Jerusalem. During the reigns of David and Solomon, the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle resided in Gibeon. In fact, we’re told in 1 Kings 3:4 that Gibeon **“was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.”** Gibeon was also the place where God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, **“Ask for whatever you want Me to give you,”** 1 Kings 4:5. And Solomon famously asked for wisdom.

However, despite its rich history, Gibeon should have had a much shorter history; indeed, should have been destroyed when the Israelites entered Canaan. The original inhabitants of Gibeon were of Amorite and Hivite descent; and as such, fell under the condemnation of Deuteronomy 7. Moses commanded the Israelites: **“When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy,”** Deuteronomy 7:1-2.

Yet, the Israelites did make a treaty with the Gibeonites; not knowingly, but carelessly. Posing as ambassadors from a distant land, the Gibeonites sought a peace

treaty with Israel. To lend credibility to their lie, the Gibeonites wore tattered clothing and old sandals, and carried patched wineskins and dry, moldy bread—evidence, they claimed, of having made a long journey. They told Joshua: **“This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey,”** Joshua 9:12-13.

Amazingly, though Joshua was at first suspicious of these strangers—in fact, said to them in Joshua 9:7, **“But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?”**—eventually, he and the other Israelites were fooled by the Gibeonite Deception and agreed to a peace treaty.

Three days later, when the Israelites discovered the deception, they could no longer right the wrong. They had made a solemn covenant in the name of the LORD their God, and therefore could not annul the treaty without dishonoring God. And as a result of this treaty, the Israelites were forced to protect the Gibeonites instead of destroying them.

Are there lessons for us in the Gibeonite Deception? Yes, and important ones too. Paul wrote, **“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope,”** Romans 15:4. Accordingly, the Gibeonite Deception was recorded for our learning too; in particular, to teach us the importance of seeking God’s counsel in every aspect of our lives. Consider the following.

**First, Joshua should have sought God’s counsel when dealing with the Gibeonites;** especially given his initial wariness of the strangers who came seeking peace. Unfortunately, he did not ask God. And whatever Joshua’s reasoning—whether he simply forgot to ask God or considered the matter too trivial to bother God—the outcome was the same: ongoing, troublesome consequences.

We may think, “Yes, well, that’s true. There were ongoing troublesome consequences. But we can’t blame Joshua for being deceived. After all, the Gibeonite Deception was cleverly planned, from lies to costumes to props. Joshua had no idea that the strangers allegedly from a distant country were in fact neighbors from nearby Gibeon. He simply didn’t know.” That’s correct. Joshua did not know. But this is precisely why he should have asked God.

You and I don’t know everything either, though we often think otherwise; and at times even assume that we know a situation better than God. But we don’t. Yes, God has given us intelligence and reasoning. Still, we aren’t omniscient, are we? God is.

Our insights are not always correct, are they? God's are. We can't see one microsecond into the future, can we? God can. Indeed, God sees the end from the beginning.

And so the Bible urges us to **“find out what pleases the Lord,”** Ephesians 5:10; and in Proverbs 3:5 to **“trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.”**

How do we seek the Lord's will? One way, of course, is through prayer. The psalmist prayed: **“Show me Your ways, O LORD, teach me Your paths; guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Savior, and my hope is in You all day long,”** Psalm 25:4-5. And so we pray: “Heavenly Father, help me make the right choice or right decision. Show me the path You want me to take. Lead me in Your truth. Grant me wisdom, prudence, discernment.” As in one of our hymns: “Oh, that the Lord would guide my ways to keep His statutes still! Oh, that my God would grant me grace to know and do His will!” LH 416:1.

Yet, in practice, are we so different from Joshua? Even as Christians, how often do we inquire of the Lord, especially in the most important and pressing matters of life: salvation, relationships, careers, families, ministries; how to admonish or encourage; how to forgive; how to witness to unbelievers; how to face sickness, marital troubles, the death of a loved one?

I can't speak for you. However, speaking of myself—even as a pastor, I still forget to inquire of the Lord. Sometimes, I'm halfway through writing a sermon or Bible class material or a Spokesman article before I realize that I failed to ask God for His guidance and counsel and wisdom. Without God's counsel, of what worth are my words and sermons?

Another obvious way in which we seek God's counsel is through His holy word. Ultimately, this is one of the reasons why God gave us His word; so that we do not have to speculate about what is right and wrong, what is helpful and harmful, what God wants or does not want. In the Bible God tells us these things Himself. **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path,”** Psalm 119:105. And again, **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,”** 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

**Second, Joshua's failure to inquire of God resulted in four hundred years of consequences.** Dear friends, think about that. One ill-advised decision, and four centuries of consequences. What type of consequences? Ultimately, war, blood, pain, loss, grief, death, and even a famine. Let me explain.

Almost immediately, as a result of that deceptive peace treaty, the Israelites were required to protect the Gibeonites from five Amorite armies. And much later in Israelite history, because of the same treaty—by then four hundred years old—King David was forced to kill seven sons of King Saul due to Saul’s bloody persecution of the Gibeonites. In fact, until David avenged the Gibeonites, God sent famine on the land of Israel. When David rightly asked God about the famine, God told him: **“It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death.”** 2 Samuel 21:1.

Decisions have consequences: some large, others small; some good, others bad; some intended, others unwanted; some foreseeable, others unknowable until considerable time has passed. But decisions always have consequences. And all of us know this from personal experience.

“Oh, how different my life would be today if only I had;” or conversely, “if only I had not.” How would you complete these sentences? “Oh, how different my life would be if only I had taken that job. If only I hadn’t left the ministry. If only I had paid more attention to my spouse. If only I hadn’t surrendered to that temptation.” Perhaps the real sentence should be: “How different my life would be if I had only sought the wisdom of God.” Yes, our decisions have consequences. And there are as many applications of this principle as there are decisions to be made. But for the sake of discussion and time, let me suggest these two: marriage and church.

Consider marriage; that blessed union which God intended to be the foundation of human society and the loving environment in which to have, provide for, and instruct children. Because of the preciousness and seriousness of this institution, God intended it to be a lifelong commitment. **“Therefore,”** said Jesus, **“what God has joined together, let man not separate,”** Matthew 19:6.

Yet today, society disparages and grossly distorts marriage. Sadly, the view many have of relationships is the view which comes from TV programs like the Bachelor and the Bachelorette—where the lesson is “meet up, hook up, and if things don’t work out, give up.”

Frankly, I wonder how many Christians actually seek God’s direction when choosing a spouse. “God, is this the right person? Is this the person You want me to have?” And if they don’t ask, shouldn’t they? I remember asking, “Lord, please let me marry this woman.” I don’t recall asking, “Lord, is this the right woman?” If I had asked, perhaps the consequences would have been different.

For when a marriage fails, the consequences can be disastrous. Financial consequences. Emotional consequences. And most of all, the consequences of divorce

on children. Regrettably, here I'm something of an unwilling expert. I've experienced the consequences of divorce from almost every conceivable angle. My parent's divorce. My own unwanted divorce. The divorce of siblings, friends, and fellow Christians. I witnessed the consequences of divorce as a child; and then, to my horror, I witnessed the consequences of divorce in my own children.

To people who treat divorce indifferently—no harm, no foul, no big deal, I say this: Open the family photo album and remove your favorite photograph of your children. Then, grasping the photograph on either side, rip it in two. Rip it right down the middle. Because this is what often happens to children whose parents divorce. So tell me, for a Christian, whether contemplating entering a marriage or ending a marriage, shouldn't the first step be to inquire of God?

Then, church. Sometimes we convince ourselves that hearing the word of God and attending church are not all that important; that dedication to our career is more beneficial long-term than dedication to our God. Nonsense, of course. But here too the results of such a decision can be devastating. I know.

You've likely never heard a pastor say this before. But after leaving the ministry in 1987—what a poor decision that was; and no, I did not consult God; after experiencing job losses, divorce, custody battles, financial struggles, and a truckload of other heartaches; I stopped going to church. I stopped pursuing the advice of Scripture and the comfort of fellow Christians. And I almost lost my faith; and perhaps would have, had it not been for the grace of God. Paul said: **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst”** 1 Timothy 1:15. And I can identify with every word he wrote.

So, I ask you, dear Christian: Is attending church important? Is the hearing of God's Word critical to your life and faith and decisions? Wait. I have an idea. Let's turn to Scripture and inquire of God. He is the one who said, **“but only one thing is needed,”** Luke 10:42; and again in Luke 11:28, **“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”**

Surely, one of the many blessings of attending church together is encourage each other based on the word of God; as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:16-17, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”**

**Finally, even Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, was fooled by the Gibeonite Deception;** by the lies and the costumes—tattered clothes, old shoes,

cracked wineskins, moldy bread. Yet, he would never have been deceived had he inquired of God. And the same is true of us.

Deception is all around us. The world with its glamour and glittering promises is a deceiver. The devil is a deceiver and a seducer, an insidious enemy whose desire is to destroy our faith in Jesus Christ by spouting lies and twisting truths—who, according to the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:14, ‘masquerades as an angel of light.’ In other words, the devil appears as a ‘good guy’ with ‘good advice’.

And as sinful human beings, we have an amazing capacity to deceive ourselves into thinking right is wrong and wrong is right; that a little worldliness has no impact on our godliness; that God cares nothing about the thoughts, words, and deeds of His children so long as they attend worship services on Sunday mornings.

In addition, false teachers are everywhere, even in the Christian Church; even in the Lutheran Church—and to such an extent that the ELCA was pursuing a full reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church, while making preparations to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

Now, more than ever, we need to ask God’s counsel and immerse ourselves in God’s word, so that we are not deceived by the devil, the world, or our own sinful nature; but rather, remain steadfast in God’s truth. As John wrote in his First Epistle: **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world,”** 1 John 4:1.

So, the Gibeonite Deception and its all-important lesson: Seek God’s advice in everything you do. For He has promised to give it. James wrote, **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him,”** James 1:5.

When you and I make important decisions and undertake new endeavors, may we remember these words of the hymnist: “With the Lord begin thy task, Jesus will direct it; for His aid and counsel ask, Jesus will perfect it. Every morn with Jesus rise, and when day is ended, in His name then close thine eyes; be to Him commended.” LH 540:1.