

Joshua 8-9: The Fall of Ai and the Salvation of Gibeon

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After the great victory at Jericho Israel had great momentum in their quest to conquer Canaan, but gloom and despair replaced their confidence after the defeat at Ai. God had put a ban on looting, but Achan had stolen gold and silver and put it in his tent. Therefore God had allowed Israel to suffer the defeat at the hands of the inferior forces of Ai. Nevertheless, Achan's crime was judged, restitution was made, and Israel's favor with God was restored. Now in Joshua 8, God would lead the way, and the people of Israel would follow God's Word. Israel had underestimated the enemy, so now God was sending an overwhelming force to annihilate Ai. In verse 2 we are surprised to hear that God was lifting the ban on taking personal wealth from Ai. It was as if God was proving He wasn't depriving them. Think of the irony for the now punished thief Achan. If he had just suppressed his greedy desires at Jericho, he would have realized his dreams of wealth in God's good time at Ai. A wise theologian said, "Aim for the things of the world and you will miss heaven, but aim for heaven and God will throw in the world also".

The strategy to capture Ai was brilliant. God used Israel's previous defeat to them to set up His victory. Once again a small Israeli force would approach the front of Ai, and when the army of Ai came out to attack them, a hidden large army behind the hills at the rear of the city would rush into the city and burn it. Another Israeli force flanked the army of Ai, and the Canaanites were easily destroyed. Twelve thousand men, and women were killed, and the king was hanged on a tree. Joshua made the city like a heap of rubble so that it was desolate and disappeared forever.

Joshua 8:30-35, The Sequel—A Spiritual Pilgrimage to Mt. Ebal

After the victory at Ai, surely they would strike while the iron was hot, but no, Joshua led Israel on a pilgrimage to worship God and reaffirm their covenant. In Deuteronomy 27:1-8, Moses had instructed them to go to Mt. Ebal and set up large stones on which they would write the Law. They would also build an altar and sacrifice to the Lord there. Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim are at the geographic center of Canaan (now Israel), and from either peak most of the Promised Land can be seen. The two mountains are separated by a narrow valley. Joshua positioned half the people on the slope of Mt. Ebal and half on Mt. Gerizim, then the Ark of the Covenant surrounded by priests was in the valley between. In Deut. 27-28, Moses had given them the blessings if the people obeyed the Law, but also the curses if the people disobeyed the Law of God. The huge amphitheater formed by the mountains made it possible for all the people to hear Joshua read the law along with all the blessings and curses, and the people said, "Amen" (Deut.27:26).

The Deception of Gibeon

In Joshua 9:1-2 we see the reaction of all the tribes of the Canaanites to the victories of Israel over Jericho and Ai. Previously these Canaanite tribes had been rivals and enemies, but now the enemy of their enemy became their friend. The whole country was aroused by Israel's victories, and began raising armies to get organized in an all out war against Israel. Powerful confederations developed in both the north and the south with Israel's forces like a wedge between them. Many years later, David would write Psalm 2, which explained such alliances as more than just fortunes of war. There is also a spiritual war going on in which rivals have a common cause against God's people. In Ps. 2:1-2, David wrote, "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed". Israel's strategy would be to drive south and destroy the southern Canaanite armies, and then turn north to confront the northern tribes.

While the rest of the Canaanite tribes organized to fight against God, the Gibeonites had a different strategy that I will call the "Humility and the Brilliance Strategy". Their humility would save them in God's eyes and their brilliance would save them in the eyes of Joshua. If you are like me, when I read the orders from God to destroy all the Canaanites and to not leave anything breathing, I wondered if there would be any exceptions. Right off the bat in Jericho in ch. 2, we find that Rahab was saved because she believed in God and helped the Israelis. Now in Joshua 9 we see God's mercy upon the Gibeonites because of their humility, belief, and willingness to serve God's people. Gibeon was known as an important city and it had a confederation of three towns with it (9:17). Somehow they received the intelligence report that Moses had allowed Israel to make treaties with cities outside of Canaan (Deut.20:10-11). The Gibeonites believed in the God of Israel so they knew it was futile to fight against Him, so they formed a brilliant plan to deceive Joshua. In Joshua 9:4-6, they disguised themselves in great detail as

wearry travelers from a far away land. They had old wineskins, worn out sandals, torn dirty clothes, and their food was dry and moldy. They appealed to Joshua disguised as foreigners from a distant land to make a treaty with Israel. As further inducement they were willing to become proselytes to Judaism and be servants to Israel from that day onward. At the time they probably didn't know just how true that would be, because almost a thousand years later they were still servants in Nehemiah 3:7 when Israel rebuilt Jerusalem. In Joshua 9:8-15, the Israelites hesitated and were suspicious, but I think the "hook" of having thousands of servants to do all the work closed the deal. Also notice that Israel made the mistake in v.14 of not asking the counsel of the Lord. Joshua made the peace treaty deal, and we learn in Joshua 11:19-20 that God approved of the deal.

My question is—Could God's providence have actually been behind all these events? In spite of Israel's failure to consult God and Gibeon's lies, I believe God honored Gibeon's belief, fear, and humility. In Joshua 11:20, God hardened the hearts of all the other Canaanite tribes, but not Gibeon. In the New Testament, Peter said it well in 1 Peter 5:5, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

A Deal is a Deal

In Joshua 9:16-19, three days later the people of Israel discovered the truth, and they were angry at the Gibeonites for deceiving them. The question among them was should they break the deal they had made? All the leaders said "We have sworn to them by the God of Israel" and now we must not harm them. About 400 years later the truth of this statement was proven in 2 Samuel 21:1-3 when King Saul broke the treaty and killed a bunch of Gibeonites. God then moved to bring a famine upon Israel to enforce the oath.

The Curse Became a Blessing

In Joshua 9:21-27, the leaders of Israel made it clear that they would enforce the curse upon Gibeon to make them servants to Israel from that time onward. Specifically the Gibeonites would do all the work around the Tabernacle (v.23) and later the Temple. Later in 2 Chron.1:3, the Tabernacle was pitched at Gibeon, and much later the Gibeonites would help rebuild Jerusalem in Nehemiah 3:7. God turned a curse into a blessing. The Gibeonites were saved, and Israel was helped. Even in Joshua 10:10-11, God worked a miracle for Gibeon and saved Gibeon from the attack of the other Canaanites. Throughout the history of Israel it is clear that Gibeon was converted, and they were believers in the God of Israel.

Conclusion

The story of the Gibeonites is like a sequel to the story of Rahab. Like all Canaanites they were on Israel's hit-list. Whereas Rahab was one individual spared, Gibeon represented thousands. Both Rahab and Gibeon feared God, believed in God, and humbled themselves before God's instrument of righteous wrath, Israel. Rahab left the kingdom of the enemies of God to join the friends of God. The Gibeonites also gave up their worldly kingdom to humble themselves by becoming the lowly servants of God's people. Therefore, we cannot deny that God's annihilation command was not absolute—exceptions were made. Where people seek God, humble themselves and believe, our merciful God will spare them. In the same way, we must admit that there are parallels in our experience with God since we are also Gentiles who (before Christ) were lost and dead in our sins. Yet we have also humbled ourselves and sought out God and believed in His provision for our sin. We are every bit as much a marvel to the wonderful grace of God as Rahab and Gibeon were. We have all come to Him and been forgiven and restored.

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