

The Gibeonite Deception
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If you're visiting us this morning we are going through the OT book of Joshua. It's six books in from the beginning.

Let's turn together to chapter 9 and read **verses 1-15**.

Deception has always been a crucial part of military strategy. In 1943 the British army wanted to divert German attention away from their plan to invade Sicily so they devised a clever deception. They took the corpse of Glyndwr Michael, a homeless man who died from eating rat poison, and dressed him up as an officer of the Royal Marines and placed on his person correspondence laying out Britain's plan to attack Sardinia and fake an attack of Sicily. To make it more convincing, they went so far as to place love letters and the picture of a fictitious girlfriend named Pam on poor Glyndwr's person. He was then transported by submarine close to the coast of Spain where his body was released close to shore. The Spanish found the corpse, gave the information to the Germans and the Germans fortified their troops around Sardinia leaving Sicily unprotected. The British deception worked perfectly.

After Joshua and Israel crossed the Jordan and conquered Jericho and Ai, the surrounding nations and their kings realize they can't ignore Israel any longer and so they form an alliance to wage war against Israel. But the Gibeonites take a different approach. Instead of trying to defeat Israel, they decide to deceive Israel. The Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote *know thy enemy* and the Gibeonites knew their enemy well enough to know that God had commanded Israel to destroy any and all neighboring nations. But there was a loophole. Deut. 20 says that they can make a treaty of peace with distant nations.

The reason for this command is Israel's protection. God knew that if Israel made peace with nearby nations, that it would just be a matter of time before they would start to intermarry and the pagan influences of those nations would infiltrate Israel and turn their hearts away from God. A distant nation wouldn't be able to infiltrate and influence Israel away from God as easily due to the distance.

So the Gibeonites acted like they came from a great distance saying they wanted to make a treaty with Israel.

When I first read this chapter, I zeroed in on the topic of deception and how it reminds us of the importance of spiritual discernment. I still think that is an important lesson this story carries for us. But as I studied it further, I began to see that, like life, this story is more complex, more layered than that. Like a real-life domino effect, a series of chain reactions were set off when the Gibeonites put their deception into motion. And we might be surprised by the last domino in the chain. Let's begin with the first domino.

1. Gibeon's deception and Israel's lack of discernment

The Gibeonites said they came from a distance. In verse 7 we are told that the Israelites were suspicious. *But perhaps you live among us, then how can we make a covenant with you?*

This isn't a case where the Israelites weren't suspicious, or that they were just being naïvely trusting and gullible. They asked the right question, they had their suspicions. What they did wrong is outlined in verse 14 – they did not ask counsel of the Lord.

They trusted their own judgment instead of trusting in the Lord. The Gibeonite delegation was really good at deception. They not only had the all the weather-beaten props that a distant delegation would have - moldy bread, cracked wineskins, worn out sandals - they also had a carefully crafted story. Let's read again verses 9-10.

9 They said to him, "From a very distant 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, ¹⁰ and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.

The report they say they've heard is old news. They've heard how Israel was delivered from Egypt by God's mighty hand, how they destroyed two powerful kings on the east side of the Jordan. But missing from this "report" is any mention of Jericho or Ai. Believe me, they've heard about Jericho and Ai but they can't admit it cause this was before the days of cable news and if they had been traveling for the past few months, they wouldn't have heard about these more recent conquests. They're good. But if Israel had inquired of the Lord, He would have revealed to them it was a deception.

The Bible tells us that we are engaged in a spiritual war. Satan, the world, and our flesh all war against our souls and against God. If we are to take Sun Tzu's advice and know our enemy, the devil is a deceiver. Jesus said when the devil lies he is speaking his native tongue because he is a liar and the father of lies. One thing Satan is good at is deceiving.

So we are at war and sometimes the battle rages on a clearly marked battlefield: we can see the enemy and easily identify him. But many times the devil uses deception to get us to let down our guard. This is often the most dangerous tactic of the enemy – not the frontal attack, but the friendly approach – "I come in peace, make a treaty with me".

The Bible says there are false teachers who are "wolves in sheep's clothing." Paul warns the Ephesian elders in Acts 20

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Acts 20:29-30

The point of this metaphor is that these are those who come in looking like friendly, like-minded, harmless fellow-sheep. Baaaa. But inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Interesting fact about wolves – normally when they kill they kill just what they need to eat. But when wolves come upon flocks of sheep, it's like something goes off in their heads and they will kill 10-20 sheep in a night, way more than they can eat. There are false teachers and false teachings that rip up and devour entire flocks at a time. They are allowed to get close because they look like just another sheep. It's not enough to trust our judgment (I know false teaching when I hear it), we need to inquire of the Lord by carefully reading and studying His word, the Bible. There are happy, feel-good teachings that will lead our souls right to hell. Sin also tries to make a peace treaty with us, usually not by tempting us with some big, momentous sin but by deceiving us into opening the door to a smaller, seemingly harmless sin.

In a sermon titled "Little Sins" Charles Spurgeon warned:

We all see in nature how easily we may prove this, —that little things lead to greater things. If it be desired to bridge a gulf, it is often the custom to shoot an arrow... with a line almost as thin as film. That line passes over and a string is drawn after it, and after that some small rope, and after that a cable, and after that the swinging suspension bridge, that makes a way for thousands. So it is oft times with Satan. It is but a thought that he would shoot across the mind. That thought shall carry a desire; that desire a look; that look a touch; that touch a deed; that deed a habit; and that habit something worse, until the man, from little beginnings, shall be swamped and drowned in iniquity. Little things, we say, lead on to something worse.

~ Charles Spurgeon, *Little Sins*

Israel's mistake wasn't that they didn't ask hard questions or raise suspicions, it's that they trusted their own judgment more than they trusted in the Lord. They asked the Gibeonites hard questions but they didn't ask the Lord for His counsel.

The Bible says there is a gift of discernment. The Greek word “diakrisis” describes being able to distinguish, discern, judge or appraise a person, statement, situation, or environment. It can be discerning of spirits (what spirit a person or teaching is of) or between good and evil. It’s the voice of the Spirit speaking within and we should never ignore it when it warns us something is off. But to develop the gift of discernment in our lives we must know the authoritative word of God, the Bible. Last week I said God’s word is able to make us wise. God’s word is also able to give us spiritual discernment. The Bible is like a compass pointing us to true north when we lose our way. The more we know God’s truth, the more we are able to discern Satan’s lie. So the first domino is the Gibeonite’s deception and Israel’s lack of discernment. That leads to the second domino which is...

2. A messy, complicated situation

Read vv. 16-23

It’s really complicated at this point. Three days after they made a covenant with Gibeonites, Israel finds out they had been duped. But they have sworn with a covenant and even though the people want to attack and kill them, Joshua knows this would only compound their mistake because God would be angry with them for breaking their oath.

The most Joshua can do is curse the Gibeonites for their deception, but he’s stuck with it - forever. Israel didn’t ask for the Lord’s counsel and made a treaty with the enemy, and now they’re stuck with the consequences - forever. And the Gibeonites are now reduced to being servants of Israel carrying wood and water - forever. It’s a mess! And it’s a mess that isn’t going to go away.

It's often been said that sin is stupid. It’s also messy. Often we make choices or decisions that we can’t undo or if we try to undo it, it just makes it worse. There are consequences that don’t just go away when we realize what we’ve done. Things we can’t undo once we’ve done them. Sometimes the act is over in a few sec-

onds but the consequences last a lifetime. You push one domino and it knocks over another domino and that domino knocks over another domino and that knocks over another and on and on it goes. And try as you might, you can't reset the dominos.

- A word spoken in anger that hurts a friendship so deeply it will never be quite the same again
- A moment of passion results in an unwanted pregnancy, and life will never be the same again
- A dishonest act that, when discovered, destroys a reputation and trust
- A foolish decision that can't be retracted

The place the Israelites find themselves is a place we've all, in some sense, found ourselves. We do something unwise, undiscerning, or sinful and we're bound to that thing for the rest of our lives.

And that can feel pretty hopeless. But there is still a final domino to fall...

3. God's sovereign power to overrule our mess with His grace

Our God is a redemptive God and He can redeem our worst mistakes and sins and bring good out of it. The final domino is grace in this situation. You might wonder, where am I getting this out of this chapter?

Let's keep reading...

Vv. 22-27

Joshua cursed them before he heard their entire explanation. All the surrounding nations knew that Israel was a huge threat and fear filled their hearts. But with fear something else filled the Gibeonite's heart: faith.

*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. ²⁵And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it. Vv. 24-25

They heard about the Lord their God and they knew it was a certainty. They believed that God was God and there was no doubt He would give them victory. It reminds us of Rahab who also believed that God was God and it was a certainty He would give them victory over Jericho. They believed that any who stood against Him. So the Gibeonites humbly said, we don't want to fight against the Lord. Do whatever seems right to you. What would happen over the centuries that followed is that the Gibeonites brought the wood to stoke the fire in the temple and the water to cleanse the ritual instruments in the house of God and that house became their house too, and that God became their God too.

Hundreds of years later, King Saul would kill the descendants of Gibeon thinking he was doing Israel a favor and God hit Israel with a vengeance – literally. They had a famine for three long years until finally King David inquired of the Lord and the Lord said it's because of the evil Saul did in murdering the Gibeonites. He broke the oath. David went to those few Gibeonites still living and asked what can we do to make this right? Their answer was to put seven of Saul's sons to death for what Saul had done to them. God was still protecting the Gibeonites and expected the covenant to be honored.

600 years later, we find 95 of Gibeon's sons helping Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem – an integral part of God's purposes in history. Joshua cursed the Gibeonites. God blessed them. And even though they were never supposed to be a part of Israel's life, they became a blessing to them as well.

This is the glory of Yahweh. He cannot be outmaneuvered by human cunning or hindered by human fallibility. That glory is shown in the grace that can turn a curse into a blessing, that can use

our mistakes and foolishness to bind us more closely than ever to him, that can reveal where we went wrong and make it become the means by which we can begin to go right.

-David Jackman

It's not that sin becomes good, or that deception is to be desired. Don't say, "I'll sin so that God can make it good." That won't end well. But we can know that God's grace trumps our sin. He can use our failings and sins and foolishness to draw our hearts to Him...and that is always a good thing. This is the glory of Yahweh – to overrule the mess of our sin with His grace.

When we walk to Calvary, we see this paradox clearly. It is the darkest, vilest act humankind has ever committed. And it is the brightest, most loving act God has ever performed. Jesus died for our sins. In his death we have life.

Next Sunday will be our baptism Sunday as those who are baptized celebrate the spiritual reality that they died with Christ and have been raised to new life in him. If you have never been baptized and would like to be, meet with us immediately after the service right up front. We'd love to have you take this important step of faith. It represents Jesus taking what we had messed up so badly and making something beautiful out of it. Our God is a redemptive God. Our Savior is able to overrule our mess with His amazing grace.