

Sermon Outline

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

THE PROMISE KEEPER

Joshua 9:16-21

I. Introduction

II. The Story Thus Far

- A. At the start of Joshua 9, the nations of Canaan had formed a coalition against Israel.
- B. There was one group that did not join in that coalition—the Gibeonites from the Hivite nation.
- C. The Gibeonites deceived the Israelites so that they could be spared the judgment of God (9:3-11).
- D. We see in the Gibeonites a case of deception; twisting the truth to suit oneself.
- E. But the Israelites allowed themselves to be deceived by not asking counsel from the Lord (9:14).
- F. If we are not regularly attuned to what God’s Word, we too will be easily deceived by the world.
 1. When we are deceived by the world, it’s often because we have allowed ourselves to be deceived.
 2. Our Abba Father has given us his Word to guide us and the Church to help us understand his Word.
 3. If we do not heed these means of grace, we have only ourselves to blame.
- G. Another crack has begun to show in the otherwise picture-perfect portrait of God’s people.
 1. Joshua’s failure to consult the Lord anticipates a time when Israel will turn aside from the Lord almost entirely.
 2. During the time of the Judges, the Israelites will do whatever seems right in their own eyes (Jdg 17:6; 21:25).
 - a. They will ignore the voice of God their Father.
 - b. They will listen more and more to the voices of the anti-God civilizations that remain.
 - c. Israel will mix the holy religion of the Lord with the false religions of Canaan.

***Question for reflection:** (1) What happened at the start of Joshua 9? (2) Who did not join with the Canaanite coalition? (3) How and why did the Gibeonites deceive the Israelites? (4) Why did the Israelites act foolishly? Why were the Israelites partly responsible for their being deceived?

III. The Truth Comes Out (Joshua 9:16, 17)

- A. In verse 16, the Israelites learn the true identity of the Gibeonites.
- B. Upon learning the truth, Joshua and his leaders lead a military expedition to the Gibeonite cities.
 - 1. They “reached their cities on the third day.”
 - 2. The cities included “Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What happens in verse 16? (2) What did the Israelites do after they learned the true identity of the Gibeonites? (3) What were the names of the Gibeonite cities?

IV. Israel Refrains from Attacking the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:18)

- A. The Israelites move into position outside the cities. But nothing happens! —“But the people of Israel did not attack them...”
- B. The explanation: “...because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel.”
- C. We are now seeing something very interesting.
 - 1. Although the Gibeonites were a condemned people, Israel has now been put into a situation where they are *not* allowed to carry out the judgment against the Gibeonites.
 - 2. Israel has put themselves into a situation where striking the Gibeonites is no longer the will of God!
 - 3. The change in the situation was due to the Israelite’s promise to the Gibeonites—a promise made in the name of the Lord God of Israel.
 - 4. The Third Commandment reveals the Lord wants his name to be honored (Ex 20:7)!
 - 5. If Israel were now to strike the Gibeonites—especially having promised life to them in the name of the Lord, as representatives of the Lord—they would have been guilty of taking the Name of the Lord in vain.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What happens when the Israelites reach the Gibeonite cities? (Or rather, what doesn’t happen?) (2) Why did the Israelite leaders adopt the course of action they took? (3) “Israel has put themselves into a situation where striking the Gibeonites is no longer the will of God!” Discuss.

V. The Congregation Murmurs (Joshua 9:18)

- A. Many Israelites took issue with what their leaders did (or didn't do).
—“all the congregation murmured against the leaders.”
- B. The Israelites may have been wondering:
 - Why are our leaders not punishing the Gibeonites?
 - Has Joshua lost his nerve?
 - More importantly: By failing to destroy the Gibeonites as God had instructed, are we going to bring God's anger upon Israel?

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How did the Israelites respond to their leaders' decision? (2) What were some possible questions the Israelites had in mind?

VI. “We Have Sworn to Them by the Lord” (Joshua 9:19)

- A. The leaders explain their decision: “We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.”
- B. Since the Lord's name was used to seal the promise, the Lord's honor is now tied to the promise.
- C. The situation has changed.
 - 1. A promise to the Gibeonites has been made in the name of the Lord.
 - 2. In order to guard the Lord's own reputation from blasphemy—in order to prevent people from accusing the Lord God of Israel for not keeping his word—the Israelite leaders had to refrain from attacking the Gibeonite cities.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How do the Israelite leaders explain their decision not to attack the Gibeonites? (2) How has the situation changed by the use of the oath?

VII. “Let Them Live” (Joshua 9:20, 21)

- A. The leaders add: “This we will do to them: let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them.”
- B. Two ideas of what the right course of action would be.
 - 1. The Israelites may have thought that failing to fight the Gibeonites may lead to punishment from God.
 - 2. The leaders thought otherwise: Breaking their word to the Gibeonites would most definitely bring the punishment of God.
—Exodus 20:7, “the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

- C. Here is a lesson on keeping our promises.
—Once a promise has been made, we are to keep our promises.
- D. Israel’s leaders had made a promise to be allies with the Gibeonites.
 - 1. So the leaders do what they have promised.
 - 2. “And the leaders said to them, ‘Let them live.’ So they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, just as the leaders had said of them.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What were two possible ideas of right action? (2) What does Exodus 20:7 teach about the keeping of vows? (3) What does this chapter teach us on keeping our promises?

VIII. Promise Keeping People

God our Father wants his children to be keepers of their word. If we had promised people that we would do something, we should do it.

- A. Keeping our promises is rooted in two of the Ten Commandments.
 - 1. The Third Commandment: “You shall *not* take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Ex 20:7).
 - 2. The Ninth Commandment: “You shall *not* bear false witness against your neighbor.”
—Keeping our promises really has to do with a desire to honor the name of the Lord as well as a desire to be truthful.
- B. In case we think that this is only an Old Testament commandment, consider what our Lord Jesus himself says in Matthew 5:33-37.

³³“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

- 1. The Lord is teaching his people that their ordinary speech should be so truthful that they would not need to make promises.
- 2. A Christian should not have to resort to oaths and vows to get things done—Christians should already be known as keepers of their word!
- 3. While earthly authorities may require us to make formal oaths in courts of law or other official statements, you and I need not resort to such language in the course of daily life.

—We should already be people of truth and integrity.

C. The leaders of Israel were right to keep their word to the Gibeonites.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What are two of the Ten Commandments on which promise-keeping rests? (2) What is our Lord teaching in Matthew 5:33-37? (3) How reliable are you as a person? Do people see you as reliable?

IX. More Thoughts on Promises

A. There is still some more we can say about keeping oaths.

1. *What happens if the promises we make are sinful? What happens if what we promise to do is wrong? What happens if our promises lead us to violate any of the Ten Commandments?*

a. In such instances, it would be right—even necessary—to be freed from those promises.

b. God does not want us to use promises to escape our central duties to him.

—You cannot use God’s name to sin against God.

c. During the time of the Judges, we do see one instance where a promise should have been un-made.

i. The judge Jephthah promises to offer to the Lord the first thing that comes out of his home as a sacrifice (“burnt offering”) (Jdg 11:31).

ii. Jephthah’s daughter comes running out (Jdg 11:34).

iii. Jephthah sacrifices her to the Lord!

iv. Some Christians think Jephthah was right to carry out his vow.

v. But a better interpretation takes into account one key point of the account:

(A) Judges was written to show us how sick and compromised Israel and her leaders had become!

(B) Even Israelite religion had been distorted by Canaanite practices.

vi. By burning his own daughter, Jephthah was behaving like a Canaanite, not a faithful worshiper of the Lord.

vii. God condemned the Canaanites for child sacrifice (Lev 18:21).

d. Our promises are nonbinding when they are sinful!

2. *By promising not to destroy the Gibeonites, wasn’t Israel also making a sinful promise? Wasn’t Israel making a promise that would prevent them from obeying God’s original instruction to judge the nations of Canaan?*

- a. I offer two possible (highly tentative!) ways of responding to those questions.
 - i. The Israelite leaders kept their promise to the Gibeonites possibly because they understood that God’s command to honor his name outweighs God’s instruction to destroy the Gibeonites (cf. Lk 14:26).
—The Third Commandment is part of God’s eternal moral law; while the commandment to destroy the Canaanites is not.
 - ii. The Israelite leaders kept their promise to the Gibeonites possibly because they understood that God himself is biased toward life and mercy.
 - (A) Exodus 34:6: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”
 - (B) Ezekiel 33:11: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live...”
—God delights in the repentance of sinners.
 - (C) It’s one thing to promise destruction. It’s another thing to promise to do good.
—The promise to do good, give life, and show mercy always has greater weight than a promise to inflict harm.
That seems to be our Father’s heart.

- B. Our heavenly Father calls us to be like him in truthfulness and our promises.
 1. Our Father wants us to be people of our word for he is a God of his Word.
 2. If God were unfaithful to his Word, the universe would be thrown into chaos.
 3. Furthermore, our Father wants us to be people of our word most especially when we have promised good things to others.
—Be like God. Be like your covenant-keeping Father who loves to keep his promises of mercy and life to us.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What happens if our promises are sinful? (2) Why are two other possible reasons behind Israel’s keeping its promise to the Gibeonites?

X. The Gospel of the Promise Kept

- A. God loves us in spite of our failures to keep our promises.
 1. God’s steadfast love is not only a model for us to follow; it is the assurance that God will not remove his love from us.
 2. What ultimately saves us is not our promise-keeping.

3. What saves us (in Christ) is the promise which God himself made to Christ our Lord concerning us from the very beginning of time (Eph 1:4).
4. The good news on which we base our hope is neither that we have kept our promises nor that we are getting better at keeping our promises.
5. The good news is that God has kept his promise to us in Jesus Christ.
 - a. In Christ, we hear the Father say to us: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).
 - b. In Christ, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:39)

B. Will you embrace your Father’s love to you in Jesus Christ?

***Questions for reflection:** (1) “God loves us in spite of our failures to keep our promises.” Discuss. (2) What is the good news on which we base our hope? (3) What are God’s promises to us in Christ?

XI. Keep Your Promises—and Your Hope on the Promise-Keeper

Being inspired by God’s steadfast love, let us keep our promises to one another. Let us keep faith with one another not because we fear punishment, or because we fear that we would look bad. Let us be true to one another because our God is love and we belong to God.

However, we must also never take our eyes off Christ. Let us never for a moment think that we have attained perfect integrity, perfect truthfulness. For this reason, to protect ourselves from the despair that only leads to more sin, let us keep resting on Christ. It is in him that we have the assurance of God’s promises to us. “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb 13:5). “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).