

God's Grace Triumphs

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[0 : 00] Well, we turn now to God's Word, and we are continuing our series in the book of Joshua. So do turn with me to Joshua chapter 9, which you'll find on page 184, if you have one of the church visitor Bibles, Joshua chapter 9.

And we'll read the whole chapter. This is coming off the back of two battles, the Battle of Jericho and the Battle of Ai. Well, there's two parts.

The first was the defeat, and then the Battle of Ai part 2, which we looked at last week, where Joshua and his army were victorious. And this charts the next chapter in the conquest.

So Joshua chapter 9.

Heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai. They, on their part, acted with cunning, and went and made ready provisions, and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys and wineskins, worn out and torn and mended, with worn-out patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes.

[1 : 41] And all their provisions were dry and crumbly. And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, We have come from a distant country.

So now make a covenant with us. But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, Perhaps you live among us then. How can we make a covenant with you?

They said to Joshua, We are your servants. And Joshua said to them, Who are you? And where do you come from? 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, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites, who are beyond the Jordan, to Sihon, the king of Heshbon, and to Og, king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.

So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go to meet them, and say to them, We are your servants.

[2 : 54] Come now, make a covenant with us. Here is our bread. It was still warm when we took it from our houses as food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and crumbly.

These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they burst. And these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey. So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from 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 to them. At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were neighbors, and that they lived among them.

And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephreir, Beroth, and Kiriath-Jerim. But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel.

Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders. But all the leaders said to the congregation, We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.

[4 : 21] This we will do to them. Let them live. Lest wrath be upon us because of the oath that we swore to them. 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. Joshua summoned them and said to them, Why did you deceive us, saying, We are from very far from you when you dwell among us?

Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God. They answered Joshua, 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. And now behold, we are in your hands. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it.

So he did this to them and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did not kill them. But Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord to this day in the place that he should choose.

[5 : 55] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Well, please do turn to Joshua chapter 9, and we'll be spending a few moments looking at that together.

So Joshua chapter 9. Joshua chapter 9. Now we are entering, as we come to chapter 9, a new stage in the conquest.

We've just witnessed the conquering of two cities, Jericho and Ai. And now in chapter 9, verse 1, we see a grand coalition of forces coming together to take on Joshua and his army.

Kings drawn from across the promised land come together. Perhaps having heard about the rather embarrassing Battle of Ai Part 1, they feel that Israel is maybe a bit more vulnerable than they first thought.

Perhaps they feel they've got a chance if they take them on and battle to defeat them. And so they gather as one to fight against Joshua and against all of Israel. But before we get to learn about the outcome of this great alliance, the focus shifts to another city, one of the group of cities, Gibeon.

[7 : 22] They take a slightly different approach to Joshua and his army. Rather than fight, they opt to deceive and to infiltrate.

And it works. It seems that the rather dizzy heights of the defeat of Ai and the covenant renewal at Mount Ebal that we read about last week, things have come crashing down to reality here in chapter 9.

God's people make mistakes and they have to live with the consequences. They rashly and unthinkingly enter into a covenant with one of the peoples that they were meant to devote to the destruction.

But God is sovereign. And in his sovereignty, he uses even this event for his own purposes and for his own glory.

Chapter 9, from the Israelite point of view, is a bit of a mess. It's a mess created. It's a mess lived with.

[8 : 25] But it is a mess redeemed. So we'll look at three points this evening. Firstly, a mess created. The foolish failure to seek God's will.

Verses 1 to 15. The plan that is hatched by Gibeon is high risk, but well conceived. They've heard enough about Israel and what they've been doing to develop a plan that they know might just work. They've heard enough to know that there are people to fear. Just look at verse 3. They've heard what Joshua has done to Jericho and to Ai, and they figured that they would soon be in the firing line.

But they've also heard, it would seem, that only certain peoples were marked out for destruction. Deuteronomy chapter 20 is absolutely key to understanding what's going on here.

In that chapter, Moses sets out the nations who lived in the promised land who were to be totally destroyed by Joshua and by all of Israel.

[9 : 30] And it's the exact same list that we have there in verse 1. The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, they were all to be destroyed by Israel because they lived in the promised land.

But Deuteronomy 20 also sets out what Israel is to do with all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the promised land.

And Deuteronomy 20 tells them to offer peace. And if that offer is accepted, then the peoples are to be allowed to live and to work and do forced labor for Israel.

That is the card that Gibeon decided to play. Look at verse 6. We have come from a distant country. So now, make a covenant with us.

Their basic message is this. We are not one of the nations on your list. You can make peace with us. And to make the case, they've gone to all the effort of making it look like they've come from a long distance.

[10:42] They make things look very convincing. They don't wear worn-out clothes and shoes and wineskins. They've brought their dry and crumbly provisions. And they do all this to make it look like they are indeed from a distant country.

And they've been on the road for quite some time. Now, before we jump in and criticize Joshua and Israel for falling for it, we the readers have been letting on the secret.

We know what's going on. Verse 4 tells us what they're up to. We know that Gibeon is not one of the distant nations. We know that they're acting cunningly and they're trying to trick them. But Joshua and Israel don't find this out until it's too late. They don't find out to verse 16 what the truth is. But their suspicions are raised.

Look again at verse 7. They've seen these guys arriving. They've seen their basic arguments. We're from a distant nation. And verse 7, the men of Israel say to the Hivites, perhaps you live among us.

[11:53] Then how can we make a covenant with you? They perhaps suspect something's not quite right. And the reply coming from the Hivites is rather evasive. They say, we are your servants.

But again, doubts remain and Joshua asks more directly, who are you? Where do you come from? This time, a more lengthy and pious sounding reply comes.

And much of what they say is undoubtedly true. Look at what they say. down in verse 8, verse 9, have a slightly longer reply.

And much of what they say here is undoubtedly true. They have heard reports about what Joshua and Israel have done. They mention the battles they fought against Sihon and Og. But they wisely admit the recent battles against Jericho and Ai.

They don't mention those. If they really were from a distant country, then they wouldn't yet have heard about those battles. They were just in the weeks before they arrived. There was no Twitter, no 24-hour news coverage to get the news to them.

[13:03] So the fact they don't mention those battles is part of the ruse, is part of their deceit. The men from Gibeon produce evidence to substantiate their claims.

Look at us. We're worn out. We've traveled so far. Just look at our clothes, our wineskins, our sandals. Their basic plea is, we're from a distant nation.

We've heard about your God, and we want to make peace with you. Let's make a covenant. What will Joshua and the leaders of Israel do?

Well, look at verse 14. They take their provisions, presumably to examine them so as to determine the truth of their story. But crucially, notice the second half of verse 14.

They do not seek counsel from the Lord. They go ahead and enter into this covenant with Gibeon. Now, this is an absolute mess.

[14:09] We, the readers, know the full story. We know that the people of Gibeon were on the list of people to be destroyed. that was the instructions given in Deuteronomy.

That was what Joshua knew he was meant to do. But these people were on the list. And if only Joshua had sought counsel from the Lord, the evidence presented to him was quite convincing. Even under direct questioning and examining, the leaders of Israel were satisfied that these were indeed a people from very far away. it all looked right. What they were saying matched the reality they could see in front of them.

They looked like they had come from a long way. But great wisdom was needed to discern the reality. One writer put it this way, how difficult to tell the difference between real faith, like Rahab's, and flattery, like Gibeon's.

On the surface, both look pretty convincing. But they should have consulted the Lord. And there was provision available to Joshua.

[15:18] There was a way in which he could seek counsel. Listen to these words from Numbers. These are words said to Joshua. The Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.

Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest in him some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people may obey.

And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of Urim before the Lord. So we see there back in Numbers that the Lord gave Moses an instruction that Joshua was to seek the Lord's counsel from the priest.

There was a way made. There was a way in which Joshua was to go and seek counsel from the Lord. But he didn't make use of it. The writers care for to record that there in verse 14. And the implication is this, that if he did seek counsel, if he did go to the Lord, then that foolish covenant with Gibeon would never have been entered into, if only he had sought counsel from the Lord.

[16:37] It wasn't that Joshua didn't exercise discernment. It wasn't that he didn't ask good questions or use common sense. He did all the right things from that point of view.

If we'd gone through the same process that Joshua did, I'm sure we would have arrived at the same conclusion. The problem was this. It's not that they were sloppy in their investigation, but that they were alone in their decision.

It wasn't that they didn't think, it was that they didn't pray. Common sense, thinking rightly, can only get us so far.

If that's all we do, then really it's a failure to recognize and remember our own creatureliness, a failure to recognize that we have a creator, a father in heaven.

On the face of it, Joshua seemed to make the right decision. He seemed just looking at the evidence that was presented, he made the right choice. He knew what he was to do with the nations that were far off.

[17:44] It was told to him in Deuteronomy, he was trying to be faithful to that. He even pressed them to get to the truth, he questioned them. But there is a danger if we ever find ourselves relying solely on our common sense.

If we think a decision is perhaps routine, or so obvious, that we don't need to resort to prayer. The enemy often resorts to tactics like this, tactics that are subtle, that are deceptive, such as you have here with Gibeon.

And it's been his tactic with God's people all through history. We need to exercise care and to avoid cocky independence, thinking we can do it on our own.

God's people to do it on We never grow out of complete dependence on him for all things. And how much more provision has God given to us now? All who call on the name of the Father have immediate access to the throne room in heaven because we come in Jesus' name.

What an astonishing privilege we have. We just call on our Father. We can come to him any time.

Just listen to James chapter 1 verse 5.

[18:59] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

As a church, as we make decisions, as we plan, as we reach out, prayer must be our starting point, our foundation.

Even when the way forward seems obvious, even when common sense will dictate this is the right thing to do, we're to pray. No matter what situation we're facing, we're to pray.

As individuals, too, prayer is to be our starting points, our standard operating mode. It's the means that God gives us to speak to him, to seek him, to submit to his will.

will. A real mess is made through Israel's foolish failure to seek God's will. But it is a mess that they must live with.

[20:02] It's our second point, looking on to verses 16 to 26. A mess lived with, and we see here the faithful fidelity to oaths made.

The faithful fidelity to oaths made. Three days pass, look at verse 16, and with that comes the shocking truth. It really is one of those what have we done sort of moments.

How can we be so naive, so stupid? And they gear up for war, knowing the reality, knowing that this group of people who deceived them, knowing that they were on the list of nations to be destroyed.

And so, verse 17, they march on the city of Gibeon. But they don't attack them. Look at verse 18, they don't attack because of the oath sworn just a few days earlier.

Now, a big question arises with that. You can imagine the discussion that would have happened around the campfires as the army was camping outside these cities. Surely, they would say, the covenant is null and void.

[21:09] We were duped, after all. You can imagine the lawyers amongst them, arguing over the minutiae of contract law. Their offer was based on lies, misrepresentation. Can't we just tear up the covenant and treat them like the Hivites that they are and do to them just as we did to Jericho and Ai?

You can imagine that sort of discussion going on. The people, verse 18, murmured against their leaders. But again, the leaders affirmed the covenant that was entered into.

Look at verse 19. But the leader said to all the congregation of Israel, we have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.

We swore an oath. We must let them live, and they will become our slaves and servants. This oath, this covenant that they entered into, was a complete mess.

But it was a mess that they would have to live with. They were to remain faithful to the oath they had made, even in hindsight, even if it was a bad one. They would have to stick with it.

[22 : 20] An episode a little later in the history of Israel shows that Joshua was right to stick to this oath. In 2 Samuel chapter 21, you have recorded there a famine of three years.

And the reason given for that famine was that Saul put to death some of the Gibeonites. Saul broke the oath that Joshua made, and the result was famine in the land.

This was an oath that was to be kept. This was an oath that the leaders of the congregation had sworn in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. And as a covenant made in the name of the Lord, it was his honor that was at stake.

His very name was at stake and tied up with this covenant that had been made. To go back on that oath, to break that covenant would have been to dishonor the Lord. And the lesson is surely this, an oath solemnly made in the name of the Lord must be fulfilled.

We can't go back on them, even in hindsight if they were entered into foolishly. And this was a foolishly entered into covenant. Yes, it was an absolute mess.

[23 : 40] But they were to live as faithfully as they could in that messy situation. Now, I don't know about you, but I find that greatly refreshing and encouraging.

Life is a mess. Even life in the church is often a mess. And we'll be foolish to pretend otherwise.

Perhaps we would like to pretend otherwise and pretend that life was neat and tidy. But that's not reality. People do make foolish vows. Perhaps you've made a vow like that yourself.

You've made a foolish vow, even a serious one. Perhaps you've entered into marriage a bit hastily and life is difficult and hard. Well, be faithful to your vow, even if it's messy.

Perhaps you've made a vow of church membership, perhaps here or perhaps somewhere else. Are you demonstrating faithful fidelity to that oath, to that vow, even though it's difficult, even though it's hard, even if it would be easier not to?

[24 : 51] Our culture encourages us to hold very lightly to oaths made. It tells us that the main consideration must be our own happiness, our own satisfaction.

If keeping a particular oath doesn't make you happy anymore, well, ditch it. Well, this passage says the opposite. You stick to your oaths, even if it's rashly made.

Let's take the example of marriage again. Let me read you this from C.S. Lewis. He said that people get from books the idea that if you have married the right person, you may expect to go on being in love forever.

As a result, when they find that they are not, they think this proves they have made a mistake and are entitled for a change, not realizing that when they have changed, the glamour will presently go out of the new love, just as it went out of the old one.

It's an example of people holding lightly to an oath. At the heart of marriage, it's not an emotion or a feeling, but a commitment to actively love now and in the future.

[26 : 02] You do the acts of love despite your feelings, despite what you might get out of it. You keep your oath. So yes, we might be in a bit of a pickle.

We may have made a mess of things. We may have foolishly made a promise. Life may well be very difficult or hard because of our past mistakes or foolishness.

And yes, we may well have repented of that. We may have confessed our sin. But even though we're forgiven, we still have to live with the consequences of our sin.

We don't get to lay down our oaths, even if they are foolishly entered into. We must keep and remain faithful to God and to the people we've made those oaths to.

do. This is the very same measure that we find on the lips of Jesus in the New Testament. We recently looked at Sermon on the Mount on Sunday mornings, and this will be familiar to you, but Matthew chapter 5 verse 31, Jesus is tackling this exact topic of keeping oaths.

[27 : 11] He says this, it was also said whoever divorces wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces wife, except on the grounds of sexual

immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you've heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you've sworn. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great kings.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.

So Jesus is saying there, in both the closest of relationships, both in marriage, and in our most extensive relationships, Jesus expects people to be those who keep their word.

And it's because God is faithful and a keeper of his promises, because he is utterly trustworthy that his people are to be likewise. His people are likewise to be trustworthy and true to their word.

[28 : 33] So you and I are to be men and women of our word. We are to be known as trustworthy people. What we say, we do.

And sometimes keeping our word is just downright inconvenient. But rather than seeking a way out, we're to keep it. We're to keep our word.

Even though the Gibeonites were duplicitous and they lied, God's people had to demonstrate fidelity to that oath. Even with hindsight, if it was rashly made and foolish.

God's people keep their oaths, they keep their word. A mess to be lived with. This passage teaches us to remain faithful to oaths, even those rashly made.

But finally, this passage also teaches us that even the worst of messes, can be redeemed. This is our third point, a mess redeemed, the family fellowship that Gibeonites witnessed.

[29 : 40] This is looking at the end, verse 27. Notice what Joshua does. He addresses them back in verse 22. He says, why did you deceive us?

Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cusses of wood and drawers of the water, for the house of my God. And then look down again at verse 27. But Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord. So not only did the people of Gibeon get to keep their lives, but they were to serve the people of God, and specifically they were to serve the altar.

they were to be working in and about the house of the Lord. They were to be witnessing the family fellowship, the worship of God's people as they were in and around the tabernacle, witnessing the daily sacrifices.

God, in his goodness and sovereignty and mercy, uses even the most foolish oath for his own good. Not only were the Gibeonites allowed to live, but they got to serve at the tabernacle.

[30 : 56] They would, in their daily work, they would watch the gospel lived out day by day, not only in the lives of the people of God, but in the worship of the tabernacle.

They would have seen and facilitated the slaughter of lambs and bulls and goats for the sins of the people. A visual demonstration of the gospel would have been enacted in front of their eyes week by week, year by year.

God is so good and gracious and so powerful that he overrules even the most foolishness, the most sinfulness and from it accomplishes his own purposes.

If you fast forward a few centuries, we find ourselves in familiar territory. We find ourselves in the book of Nehemiah. And who do we find there rebuilding the wall but Gibeonites.

Nehemiah chapter 3 verse 7 And next to them repaired Melathiah the Gibeonite and Jason the Moronathite the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah.

[32 : 07] And then again in Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 25 we read of the sons of Gibeon 95 of them. God is a God who works out his purposes in the real world a world of mess a world in which men and women just like us make foolish choices but he is a God who works in our mess and brings all things to work according to his plan and to his glory so even as we look at the mess that we might have landed ourselves in perhaps we have to live with an oath that was rashly made but God can use such things even those things for his own glory perhaps we can't see how but he is at work and we can trust him one preacher on this passage made this comment not that

God's sovereignty or his goodness is ever an excuse for complacency or carelessness or prayerlessness or for believing that mistakes do not matter very much but how the knowledge and the assurance that God can overrule in spite of everything this is the wonder and glory of being in his service this was a real mess it was a mess of their own making but it was a mess they had to

live with but it was a mess that ultimately God would redeem God is sovereign whatever will before me Jesus will do all things well he is sovereign and uses even big messes like this for his own glory and purposes let me pray father we do thank you that your word speaks of reality it speaks of real people in the real world who make real mistakes we thank you for this passage from Joshua which speaks of foolish decisions of a failure to seek your counsel but it also speaks of our obligation to keep our oath to do just as we say but it also speaks of your great sovereignty you use even the biggest of messes for your own glory your own purposes even centuries later these Gibeonites were in amongst the people rebuilding the city for your glory lord you're a good and gracious god and what assurance that brings to us that you can overrule in spite of everything and it's all for your glory all for your purposes so would you help us to trust you because you are a faithful god and you do exactly what you say so help us to trust you in the midst of mess we pray this in Jesus name amen