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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4** Victory at Jericho (Joshua 6)
- 9** Defeat at Ai (Joshua 7)
- 15** Restoration at Ai (Joshua 8)
- 20** The Gibeonite Deception (Joshua 9)
- 24** The Battle of Gibeon (Joshua 10)

VICTORY AT JERICHO

JOSHUA 6

There aren't too many battles in the Bible that are more familiar to people than the Battle of Jericho. Maybe David and Goliath, but that's it. If you grew up in the church, you probably grew up singing songs about it. We know that Joshua marched around the walls of Jericho seven times and "the walls came a-tumblin' down."

Chapter 6 starts by describing the scene that faced the people of Israel. Verse 1 says, "Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in." People built walls to turn cities into saferooms. The gates would be open during the day to allow people to go out and farm in the fields and to allow merchants and travelers to come and go. They would be closed at night to keep the people safe. During a siege, the gates would be shut during the day as well. The only way to get inside a walled city was to climb over the wall, dig under the wall, knock the wall down, or convince someone on the inside to betray the city and open the gate. The fact that Jericho has shut its gates confirms what Rahab tells the spies: they know a battle is coming. We know how the battle ends, but in between we see God continue to do miraculous things. He also uses this event to reinform to his people what victory in God's kingdom looks like.

We live in a society that is consumed with success. We are highly competitive. We strive to be victorious in all of life's hard situations. Unfortunately, the world's picture of what it takes to succeed is vastly different than what the Bible says we should hope for and expect. By looking at the story of Joshua and Jericho, perhaps we will regain the perspective we need to pursue God's goals in God's way.

VICTORY INVOLVES SURRENDER (V2-5)

It might sound weird. But the first element of Biblical victory is surrender. You have to surrender to God and his plans before you can experience his victory. Verse 2 says, "The LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors." I love that the first word God says to Joshua is "see."

Imagine being Joshua. Look. Look at Jericho as it is described it verse 1: soldiers looking out from the top of high, thick walls with iron-barred gate shut tight. When God told you to "see," I don't think you would see an already conquered city. But that is what God says Jericho is. He speaks in the past tense: "I have given Jericho into your hands." It's a done deal. It might as well have already happened. That is what God is telling Joshua. In order

for Joshua to believe God, he will have to surrender some things first.

He will have to surrender his agenda. We don't know if Joshua ever thought he needed to take Jericho. Perhaps he was planning to bypass the city and gain some easier victories over less defensive cities before turning back on this one. We don't know. God doesn't give him a choice. He tells Joshua that taking Jericho is what they are going to do. This is important to realize because sometimes we want to dictate the agenda to God and try to get God to do what we want. But God calls us to surrender our agenda and our expectation and join what He is doing where He is doing it. As Psalm 127:1 says, "unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain." It is useless to do work that God did not intend for you. If God doesn't intend something for you, you won't achieve it no matter how hard you work. Victory is only possible if we surrender our agenda.

He will have to surrender his fear. Joshua was looking at a fortified city under heavy guard. He is leading a ragtag group of people out of the desert. They have no military training or heavy weapons. I wonder what sort of fears came to his mind while he was standing there looking at Jericho. God is telling Joshua to look at Jericho and see it through God's eyes, not the eyes of fear. Fear might tell Joshua it is impossible God says it is already done. Who are you going to believe? Victory becomes possible when we realize our fear is lying to us, God loves us, and, as 1 John 4:18 says, His "perfect love casts out fear."

He will have to surrender his ego. If God is going to be the one who conquers Jericho, Joshua can't. He will have to surrender his hopes of glory and exalting himself. We already know from the close of chapter 5 that Joshua willingly submits to God, but it is important to underscore here as well. We are to experience God's victory; We have to surrender our ego and acknowledge that victory belongs to the Lord. We serve Him and seek His glory not our own.

VICTORY INVOLVES WORSHIP (V6-11)

God tells Joshua the plan in verses 3-5. In verses 6-11, Joshua communicates this plan to the priests and people. The people won't overcome Jericho by their own work. They will overcome it by the worship. The central feature of what God calls them to do is to parade the ark of the covenant around the city. It is the ark not the army that takes center stage in God's plan. This chapter refers to the ark ten times, nine of which are in these verses. It is the ark, which symbolizes Yahweh's presence in the midst of his people, which will be the decisive factor.

Additionally, the ram's horns are not ordinary trumpets. They are jubilee trumpets, which, according to Hebrew texts, were used in connection with Israel's feasts to proclaim the presence of God. God was demonstrating to the people that He was in their midst. The ram's horns were calling the people of God to worship, not to war.

The number 7 also plays a significant role in this chapter. It is mentioned 14 times. There are seven days before the conquest of the city, seven priests who carry seven rams' horns, and a march of seven times around the city on the seventh day. Seven is the number of divine perfection or completeness.

The emphasis on the number seven, the use of ceremonial ram's horn trumpets and the prominence of the ark all indicate that the conquest of Jericho and the whole promised land was not just a military campaign; it was a religious event. God was giving them the land as a gift. They begin the conquest the way they are to live in the land: focused on God in worship.

The same is true for us. Worship begins when we focus on God, praise Him for who He is and what He has already done. Such an attitude opens us up to the possibility of seeing God's victory in our lives.

VICTORY INVOLVES PERSEVERANCE (V12-16)

After being told that their military strategy was to carry the ark around the city, the Israelites then do it for an entire week. Verses 7-11 tell us about what happens on day one. Verses 12-14a show the people doing the same exact thing on day 2. Then the rest of the days are compressed into a half verse at the end of 14: "they did so for six days."

The first time, they were being told what to do. The second time there was still some novelty. But by the third day, there wasn't anything new to report. Then on the final day they do more walking than they had done on all the previous days combined.

In all this time, and with all this walking, nothing happened. It wasn't like they saw the walls crumble a little each day. It wasn't until they had finished marching the seventh time around the city on the seventh day that they shouted, and after they shouted, then the walls fell down.

I wonder if there was any doubt beginning to enter their minds. I wonder if people began to question whether anything was going to happen. How did they feel when they finished their seventh lap and began to gather the breath to shout?

This complete process reminds us that God's victory requires perseverance on our part. I heard someone say that God's plans are more like chess than checkers. Checkers is a fast game with a straightforward strategy and easy game play. Chess is more complicated, takes time, and the victor isn't always apparent until it is over. Before the victory has been won, while we are waiting for God to accomplish what He promised He would do, we have to demonstrate perseverance.

Perseverance means not giving up. Perseverance means not giving in to fear or doubt.

Perseverance means, like Hebrews 12:1 says, we “run with endurance the race that is set before us.” What God is up to takes time, or at least more time that we want it to take. We want answers and victory now. But frequently the path God has for us requires endurance. James 1:2-4 says: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” When you feel like giving up, know you are in the exact spot where you can demonstrate your faith in God and not yourself by persevering. By just keeping on going, we put ourselves in the right place to experience the victory of God.

VICTORY INVOLVES OBEDIENCE

The people are given specific instructions about what to do when the walls come down: destroy everything and everyone except for Rahab and her family. This may seem pretty harsh. Why does God want every living thing in the city to be killed? It definitely raises some moral questions. If you are asking those questions, good. We will deal with them in greater detail next week. The technical term for what God commands them to do is sometimes translated as “put to the ban” or to “be under the ban.” The Hebrew term is “herem.” Since Jericho is the first city conquered in the promised land, it is supposed to be dedicated to the Lord, like a first fruits offering. The focus isn’t so much on making sure everyone and everything is dead as it is making sure the individual Israelites didn’t profit from the war. In ancient times, most armies provided for themselves with plunder gathered from the defeated foes. Houses would be looted. Animals would be used for food. People would be enslaved, ransomed, or sold. God’s command for Jericho was that He didn’t want anyone taking anything and enriching themselves during the conquest of Jericho. That is why verse 18 mentions “do not covet.”

Again, there are still moral issues to be raised about a God who would command such destruction, but we will deal with those issues more next week. Right now, it is enough to acknowledge that God’s victory required obedience to God’s plan. The Bible is full of people who try to “technically” obey or obey “in the big picture” but fail in some small or secret way. As we will see, something like that happens here. It might seem insignificant, but God’s plans are never achieved through disobedience.

We are called to trust God with our whole heart and not to trust our own understanding. Proverbs 3:4-5 says, “⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.” Trust starts when we realize we don’t have all the answers. If you think you are wise in your own eyes, you will do things according to your own assessment of things. If we will trust God and live according to His plan, He will “make our path’s straight.” Straight paths are an ancient symbol for the most direct route to travel to the destination. It is not the promise of an easy path every time, but it does promise that all the unnecessarily pitfalls of evil will be removed. In the next chapter, the Israelites will learn the hard way that obedience is

essential to experience the victory of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean that victory involves surrender? What do we need to surrender?
2. What does Psalm 127 teach us about the relationship between our work and God's plan?
3. What does it mean that victory involves worship? How do the Israelites worship in this passage?
4. What does it mean that victory involves perseverance? What is perseverance? Why do we need it? How do we get it?
5. What does it mean that victory involves obedience? How do we try to experience God's victory without obeying? Why do we need to obey?

DEFEAT AT AI

JOSHUA 7

I remember learning from a veterinarian about how to treat a dog with heartworms. I don't know why I asked or how the subject came up. But I do remember the name of the medicine you prescribe: arsenic. In case you don't know, arsenic is a poison. It's the key ingredient in many rat poisons. If you have ever seen a show or read a book where the butler tries to kill his employer, he normally slips arsenic into some tea. When I pointed this out to the vet, he told me he knew that. I then asked him, "How much arsenic do you give a dog with heartworms." I still remember the answer, "Enough to kill the heartworm, but not so much that you kill the dog."

Sin is like that. At this point, you might think that I am going to make the analogy between sin and heartworm. But no. Sometimes Christians treat sin like its arsenic. We try to figure out how much sin we can have in our lives and still be on God's good side. Deep down, we still like our sin and can't figure out why God can't just relax, or perhaps we lie to ourselves and pretend like God's grace doesn't mean that we should forsake sin and seek righteousness. Yes, we will fail. When we fail, God promises us mercy and grace to start again. But to play the arsenic game with sin is to deceive yourself about the nature of sin and about the nature of what God came to give you through Jesus. Salvation means deliverance not just from the penalty of sin but also its power. That's why Colossians 1:3 says, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." Salvation is a rescue mission, delivering us from slavery to sin. When we run back to sin, we are intentionally, willingly reenslaving ourselves to the thing that Jesus came to deliver us from.

One of the reasons we do this is that we don't understand the nature of God's hatred of sin. God hates sin because he loves us. God hates sin because sin causes death. He isn't trying to spoil your fun or deprive you of pleasure. He is trying to prevent you from destroying your life.

A power picture of sin's destruction force is found in the story of the Israelite's defeat at Ai. On the heels of their overwhelming victory at Jericho, they experience a crushing defeat because of a failure to understand the true effects of disobedience to God's commands.

SIN CAUSES DELUSION (V1)

The first verse in this new chapter reads rather ominously. "But the sons of Israel acted

unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban.” Remember, before the fall of Jericho, Joshua told the people they were not supposed to take anything from the conquered city. Joshua 6:17-18 says:

¹⁷ The city shall be under the ban, it and all that is in it belongs to the LORD; only Rahab the harlot and all who are with her in the house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. ¹⁸But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, so that you do not covet them and take some of the things under the ban and make the camp of Israel accursed and bring trouble on it.

Evidently some of the people had decided that God was overreacting, didn't mean business, or wouldn't find out. Maybe they thought God was being mean. These reactions are common in our own day as well.

One reason people react this way is because of the apparent harshness of God's command to put everything in Jericho "under the ban." Some find fault with God's commands to destroy everything in the city except for Rahab and her family. Some go so far as saying that a God who would command something like this is a moral monster.

The technical term for this question is "The Moral Problem of the Book of Joshua." It is an important question that must be answered by anyone dealing with these issues. How do we reconcile these actions with the God of love and forgiveness we see in Jesus? If Joshua did this today, he would be brought up on charges of committing war crimes. Is the God of the Bible a war criminal? In considering this question, here are a couple of important considerations to keep in mind.

- **God was not impatient.** In Genesis 15, after promising to give Abraham and his descendants the land, God tells Abraham it won't be during in his lifetime. Genesis 15:16 says, "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." The nations that currently were in the land were not innocent. They were sinful and desperately wicked. But even then, God was patient with them. Some may ask, "Why didn't God send someone to tell them to repent?" The answer has a couple parts. First, God wrote his law on our heart. We all know what right and wrong are, even if we choose to ignore it. Second. We don't know whom he sent to them. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, another wicked place, to prophecy destruction. The people heard and repented, so God spared them. This passage in Genesis shows that God was treating the people in the land patiently, giving them time and opportunity to repent. He might have known they wouldn't, but he was still patient with them.

- **Escape was not Impossible.** Have you ever noticed how in war movies the cities are always empty? It's because when war comes to an area, non-combatants who have time to flee usually do. This probably happened here as well. History is full of mass migrations of people. Rahab said people's hearts melted when they heard about the Israelites. No

doubt some people did leave. But even those who didn't, escape was still possible. Rahab escaped and her whole family did. God provided a way out.

- **“The Ban” was not primarily about killing people.** The word “covet” is repeated multiple times. The focus of the ban was to prevent the Israelites from profiting from the conquest. This wasn't about God or Israel being vengeful or bloodthirsty. It was about Israelites not enriching themselves. Notice, Achan doesn't spare a person, he steals gold.

But the main point is sin makes you delusional. It makes you doubt God. This is what sin does. This is what sin has always done. It's how the serpent tempted Eve: by causing her to doubt the love of God and the reason for His command.

Psalm 36 1-2 says, “1 Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes.2 For it flatters him in his own eyes. Concerning the discovery of his iniquity and the hatred of it.” Sin lies to you. Sin tells you it's not a big deal, no one will find out, and if they do find out, no one will hate it. This happened to Eve. This happened to the Israelites at Ai. This happens to us today. Sin deludes us.

SIN CAUSES DEFEAT (V2-5)

This story shows us how sin causes defeat. Initially the story sounds like a repeat of Jericho. Joshua sends people on a scouting mission (v2). They come back with a favorable report and say that the whole army need not go (v3). So, they send 3000 men and are routed by the weak defenders of Ai. The Israelites act like Rahab says the residents of Jericho acted. Joshua 7:5 says, “the hearts of the people melted and became as water.”

They had gone from overwhelming victory to demoralizing defeat. What changed? It wasn't the army. It had more battle experience and should have been more ready. It was the fact that God wasn't with them. Notice: nowhere in the passage does it say that the Israelites consulted the Lord about what to do. They were confident in themselves and not God.

Sin causes defeat because God isn't present. James 4:7-9 says “7Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Sin makes us double minded. Sin makes us withdraw from God. Sin causes defeat because we are disconnected to the source of life and victory. The Israelites experienced this firsthand.

SIN CAUSES DESPAIR (V6-15)

Joshua hears of the defeat and falls into despair. Verse 6 says “Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, both

he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads.”

Joshua complains to God. He pours out his heart to God. He isn't complaining like Israel did in the desert. They complained about God. Joshua is pouring out his complaint to God. There is a difference. He isn't doubting like the first set of spies. He is despairing. If God isn't with them, what are they going to do? If victory is because of God's presence, their defeat can only mean that God is no longer with them.

Joshua isn't doubting God or rebelling against God. He is seeking answers from God for his urgent questions. He is desperate. He knows the only answer is God. So, he seeks him with brutal honesty.

It's important to distinguish between despair and repentance. Repentance is remorse over sin that cause us to forsake it and return to God. Despair convinces us things are hopeless and unchangeable. It's a product of sin. In fact, it's the way sin keeps us in its clutches. Despair convinces us that God can't or won't deliver us and this is the life will be from here on out. We think we ruined God's plan, that He has forsaken us and is done with us forever.

I love how God responds to Joshua's despair. Joshua 7:10 says “So the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face?’” It's almost like God says to Joshua, “Will you please get up, we need to talk about some stuff.... its serious, but it's not the end.”

In verse 11, He tells Joshua the reason for the defeat was because “Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things.”

The result of this sin is that Israel was defeated. As verse 12 says, “Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, for they have become accursed. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things under the ban from your midst.”

What Joshua needs to do is to reconsecrate the people (v13), find the things under the ban which had been taken, and start over.

This is always God's answer to sin. He takes it seriously. But He also loves us more. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our temptations. He desires us to return to him. The despair we feel in our sin is condemnation that comes from the enemy. There is difference between conviction and condemnation. Condemnation convinces us things are hopeless, things can't be any different. Conviction leads to repentance and is the work of the Holy Spirit. Conviction makes a person realize “I made a mistake.” Condemnation convinces a person “I am a mistake.”

God convicts us of sin, but never condemns. As Romans 8:1 says, “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.”

SIN CAUSES DECEPTION (V16-26)

Joshua begins the reconsecration by doing a selection process of narrowing down the people of Israel to discover who was responsible. Eventually, a man named Achan is singled out. In verse 19, Joshua confronts Achan and encourages him to confess and repent. In verse 20, Achan confesses. He reveals what he did. When they verify what he said, the people of Israel take not just Achan and the stolen goods, but also all his property and children. They stone them to death and then burn them.

This is another place where people question the goodness of God. Isn't God supposed to be forgiving. How come Achan wasn't forgiven? How come his children were killed too? The answer is that Achan's confession was not a sign of genuine repentance. When it was announced that the defeat was caused by sin, and that the people needed to be reconsecrated, Achan stayed silent. He stayed silent through the whole selection process. He was hoping no one would know it was him. He was still hoping to get away with it. His confession was not driven by real repentance because he would have stayed silent had he not been confronted.

The children, probably older or adult children because no mother is mentioned, were killed because the description of what he did (hiding what he took in the ground under his tent) was something that could not have been done without their knowledge. They knew what he did and stayed silent too. That is what sin does. Sin causes deception. Sin makes you think you have a secret to keep, and no one will find out. God is omniscient. He already knows. That is why the Greek word for confession means “to agree.” We aren't telling God anything he doesn't already know. We are agreeing with him about its nature and asking for freedom from it. This is not what Achan was doing. This is why he faced the full brunt of sin's destructive power.

CONCLUSION

The story of Achan seems to call into question the goodness and forgiveness of God. Hopefully, as we have studied this passage, what has emerged is not the harshness of God but the destructive power of sin. God understands sin and takes it seriously. We often times play games with it, not realizing we are trying to figure out how much arsenic we can consume without it killing us. Maybe our outrage at how Achan was treated exposes the ways in which we don't fully understand what sin does to us. Sin causes delusion. Sin causes despair. Sin causes deception. If we fail to learn this lesson, we will be in danger of experiencing the defeat and death that plagued Israel because of Achan's sin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do we play games with sin and not take it seriously? What does it reveal about our understanding of sin and God?
2. What is the moral problem of the book of Joshua? What are some ways to understand and answer this objection?
3. What does it mean that sin causes delusion? How does sin lie to us?
4. What does it mean that sin causes despair? What is the difference between condemnation and conviction?
5. Why was Achan still killed even after he confessed? Why were his children killed? What does the reason for his confession reveal about sin's ability to cause deception?

RESTORATION AT AI

JOSHUA 8:30-35

“Let’s do that again!” Ever said that after a much needed and long-anticipated victory? After a season of drought and failure, we finally get to where we hoped to be. The problem many people have is that they never stop to think what it will take to stay in this place of victory.

Defeat is a different story. Defeat makes us introspective and questioning. We want to know why. We want to know what we can do. We often want to find somebody or something to blame. But with victory, we frequently just pat ourselves on the back, celebrate, and enjoy the feeling.

Good leaders call us to consider what was different that led to victory rather than defeat. Learning to live in a place of victory requires a willingness to consider the causes of both success and failure. It also requires a determination to continue doing the things that lead you to where you are if you want to stay there.

That is what Joshua does. After the defeat at Ai, Joshua and his people sought the Lord and were restored. The beginning of Joshua 8 tells the story of the victory the Israelites experienced after their repentance. God shows them the way to be victorious over the enemies who had previously routed them.

It is what Joshua does after the victory that is just as important. He does more than celebrate the victory. He leads the people in reconsecrating themselves before God. This might sound odd. Didn’t they just do this right before they crossed the Jordan? Yes. This is another of the countless biblical examples that God knows we will continually fail and that He never tires in continually restoring us.

The actions of Joshua give us a powerful picture of the attributes of a restored people. When God restores us, here are the things we can do in response to continue living in his promises and experiencing his blessing.

WORSHIP (V30-31a) - “then Joshua built an altar..”

Joshua marks the victory by building an altar to the Lord. It was not just any old altar, though. Joshua built the altar according to the specifications “written in the book of the law of Moses.” Joshua follows the specifications given in Deuteronomy 27:4-8. The rocks were uncut and had not been worked by any iron implements, meaning they didn’t have

any images on it.

Building an altar is a reminder of the centrality of worship for abiding in the promises of God. An altar is a place of victory. Altars are built following battles where the Lord's presence ensured triumph. An altar is a place of sacrifice. Sacrifices can be made with thankful hearts towards God who has delivered them. Sacrifices can also be made as an act of petition, a way of asking God to intervene to act on your behalf. An altar is a place of remembrance. As Israel moves on from here, this altar will serve as a reminder of how God has led them thus far and how he delivered them on that particular day.

Worship is essential for us to continue abiding in God. Worship redirects our hearts and refocuses our attention on God, celebrating his goodness, acknowledging his blessings, and submitting our petitions to Him with thanksgiving.

Everything else on this list could easily be categorized as distinct aspects of worship. But it will be helpful to enumerate them. Sometimes we fall into a very modern notion at that worship equals singing. We think worship is one dimension of our spiritual lives when in fact it is a life lived focused on God. Music can be worshipful. But worship is more than singing. William Temple, a leader in the English Church during World War II, gave this amazing definition of worship: "Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose."

Joshua knows this because he leads the people of Israel in acts which enable them to live lives of worship, abiding in the presence of God.

REPENTANCE (V31b) - "they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD"

Some of the first sacrifices to be offered on this altar were burnt offerings. A burnt offering is a type of sacrifice in which the entire animal is consumed by fire. The whole animal is offered as "an aroma pleasing to the LORD" (Exodus 29:18). The chief purpose of a burnt offering was to atone for the sins committed by the one offering the sacrifice (Lev 1:4).

Sin separates. It separates us from God and each other. God knows this, so he institutes sacrifices to make a way for us to be restored. Joshua knows this so he begins his worship with burnt offerings: confessing sin and seeking restoration.

Though the sacrificial system has been done away with by Jesus, we still need the restoration that comes from confession. 1 John 1:8-9 says, "8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

As we draw near to God, one of the best places to start is by confessing our sin. Not because he doesn't know, but because we need the restoration that comes from admitting those things that have come between us and God, those things which have distracted us from His plan or distorted our picture of who he is. He promises we will find grace and mercy. Living as restored people doesn't mean we will never stumble or fall; it means running to God when we do and starting over again.

Such confession is a form of worship because as we do so, we are able to thank God for making a way for us to be freed from our sin and to praise Him for his love, mercy, and grace.

FELLOWSHIP (V31c) - "they sacrificed peace offerings."

The Israelites offer more than burned offerings on the altar they built. The end of verse 31 says they sacrificed "peace offerings" as well. Another name for this type of sacrifice was "fellowship offerings." These sacrifices were joyful and often times free-will offerings in which the body of the sacrificial animal, minus a portion for God and the priests, was returned to the one offering the sacrifice in order for him to host a banquet for his family and neighbors. The goal was to demonstrate restored fellowship with God and with man.

This provision for peace offerings reminds us that sin separates us from both God and man, and that restoration God provides to both with Him and with others. Many times, we are so focused on being restored to God that we forget about being restored to other people. But God doesn't forget. He wants us to be restored with each other. 1 John 1:7 says, "7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Walking with God includes walking with others.

Fellowship has always been a key dimension of the church. Acts 2:42 says, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." I love that it says they devoted themselves to it. It requires effort sometimes. It requires intentional choice. I love that in order to facilitate this, God basically included hosting a barbeque as one of the ways to worship Him.

OBEDIENCE (V32-34) - "he read all the words of the law"

Another aspect of worship that Joshua performs is he writes the law of God on the stones of the altar and had the whole law read to the whole people. Joshua knew that in order to live as the restored people of God, he needed to keep the law of God before the people. This is true of us as well. Many people reduce the gospel to the forgiveness that get us into heaven. They misunderstand that God wants to do more than forgive our sins when we fail. He wants to show us the way for us to live lives that honor him and bring us fulfillment.

Most people associate commands and obedience with compulsion and slavery. But the truth is that God's commands are his operating manual for how to operate the human machine. It shows us how to find life and fulfillment by staying in right relationship to him and to others. That is why Psalm 1 says that the blessed man delights in the law of the Lord. He is eager to learn what God commands and to obey it, knowing that it's the path of life.

Obviously, this is a process we grow in. Commands force us to do the things that will bring us joy in the long run. It's like exercise. To the out of shape, it is unenjoyable. But as we become healthier, we start enjoying what was once drudgery. We start by obeying, and as we do so, we learn that obedience brings life.

The only way we will learn what God commands and be motivated to do it is by filling ourselves with His word. That is why Joshua inscribes the law on the altar. That is why Joshua has the whole law read to everyone. So that everyone can hear and know how God wishes us to live, so that they can stay in his will and continue to experience his blessing.

MISSION (V35) - "and the strangers who were living among them."

Looking at the passage, it might seem like we have exhausted what it can tell us about how Joshua reconsecrated the people. But there is one more dimension that we will miss if we don't look closely. Among the people who were gathered to hear the law read, in addition to women and children, the text says the law was read to "the strangers who were living among them." These were people who were not ethnically Israelite, but who had joined Israel while they were wandering in the wilderness and entering the promised land.

This group is important for a couple reasons. First, the presence of this group demonstrates that Israel didn't kill every non-Israelite that they met. They destroyed cities and governments, but they evidently welcomed any who wished to flee and join them.

It also reminds us that Israel's job always carried a missionary component to it. God chose Abraham and his descendants not because he wanted to bless them only, but so that through them He could bless entire world. God's choice of Israel is part of God's great plan of redemption for the entire world. We best recognize that we are living in the center of his will and abiding in his presence when we respond to God's missionary call and are a part of inviting the world into His family.

CONCLUSION:

This story of Joshua reconsecrating the people after their repentance and victory at Ai highlights for us key aspects of what it means to return to God and remain in His fulfillment. It's important to remember that God never changes his standard because what brings life never changes, but he also never tires of showing us forgiveness or offering us restoration. When we return to God, the best way to fortify ourselves to be able to stay in a life of abiding is through worship, repentance, fellowship, obedience, and mission. Living a life with these dimensions fortifies us with the strength to withstand the temptation of the world and to live in ways that bring glory to God and fulfillment to ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is worship? How do we sometimes define the word too narrowly?
2. Though we do not have to offer sacrifices anymore, how can we demonstrate our repentance to God?
3. What is a peace offering? How is it different than a burnt offering? What is it for? What important aspect of our lives does this demonstrate?
4. Why do many Christians deemphasize obedience? How can we imitate Joshua and make sure we keep the commands of God before us?
5. How does mission show up in this passage? Why is mission important to living as restored people?

THE GIBEONITE DECEPTION

JOSHUA 9

Have you ever messed up, recovered, and just felt content to get back in the game? Sometimes we approach God's plan that way. We look at our imperfections, failures, and flaws and are glad to be included in God's plan, but secretly think that we have to settle for second best. Not because of God, but because of us. We know we messed up and figure God is doing the best with what we gave him.

But that is not the case. God knows our weakness and our failures. Psalm 103:14 says, "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust." The truth is that God's perfect plan is worked out in the lives of imperfect people. This is not an excuse for sin, but a hope for sinners. Our sin didn't wreck his plan. That is the case with the story we are looking at today. Everyone in this story falls short. But even as they do, they see the glory of God as he works things to their appropriate end.

The story is about a people in the Promised Land called the Gibeonites. They are afraid of Israel and trick them into making a covenant. The people of Israel are overconfident and fail to consult the Lord for guidance, which causes them to be deceived. But neither of these is the real story. The real story is that despite the deception of the Gibeonites and the arrogance of the Israelites, God still finds a way to welcome a whole nation into His people and to give them a place in His service.

THE GIBEONITE EXCEPTION (V1-2)

The story about the Gibeonite's ploy doesn't start with them, but with some other Canaanite nations. The word of the Israelites' continued victory in Jericho and Ai went out among the other inhabitants of the land. Verses 1-2 says:

when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan, in the hill country and in the lowland and on all the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, heard of it, ² that they gathered themselves together with one accord to fight with Joshua and with Israel.

Six city-states united and rose up to fight against Israel. It seems like all the remaining nations were determined to oppose Israel. All of them except one. The Gibeonite deception is set in the context of this alliance. The other nations were uniting to oppose Israel. The Gibeonites evidently realized they couldn't beat Israel, so they were determined to find a way to join them.

Their deception was an imperfect ploy to join the side of the people of God.

THE GIBEONITE DECEPTION (V3-15)

Instead of fighting against the Israelites, the Gibeonites flee to them, begging for mercy and asking for protection. Their deception is in how they disguised their appearance to pretend to be from far away. Verses 4 and 5 says they “took worn-out sacks on their donkeys, and wineskins worn-out and torn and mended, 5 and worn-out and patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and had become crumbled.” In verse 6 is says that they told Israel, “We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us.”

Joshua and the people are fooled by the deception and fail to consult the Lord about the truth of the claim. Perhaps they were trying to do the right thing. Perhaps they were arrogant and overconfident because of their recent victories. Whatever the reason, verses 14-15 say, “14 So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not ask for the counsel of the LORD. 15 Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them.”

It is important to realize, though, that while the Gibeonites lied about who they were, what they were seeking was the same as Rahab. Verse 9 says that they came “because of the fame of the LORD your God; for we have heard the report of Him and all that He did in Egypt.” They know God was on their side and were eager to submit to Him. Verse 11 conveys their intent, “We are your servants; now then, make a covenant with us.” Like Rahab, they knew God had given Israelites the land and the Gibeonites wanted to be spared. Their deception wasn’t because they hated the Israelites; it was because they wanted to join them but didn’t think they would be accepted.

THE GIBEONITE REVELATION (V16-25)

As is bound to happen with lies, the Gibeonite deception is discovered by the Israelites. It wouldn’t take long before it became obvious that the Gibeonites are not from far away but rather neighbors. When this is discovered, the Israelites are mad at the Gibeonites and worried about what God will do to them. Not a few of them wanted to take revenge on the Gibeonites for their deception but were prevented by their leaders. Verse 18 says, “The sons of Israel did not strike them because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD the God of Israel. And the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders.”

The Israelites let them live because of the covenant they made. When Joshua confronted them about the deception they respond in verse 24, “Because it was certainly told your servants 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 before you; therefore, we feared greatly

for our lives because of you, and have done this thing.” Like Rahab, they feared the Lord, and their deception was intended as an act of submission. Even after their deception is discovered, they are still eager to submit to Israel’s God and to be received into Israel’s protection. Verse 25 says, “we are in your hands; do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us.”

THE GIBEONITE INCLUSION (V26-27)

It might sound hard that Joshua pronounces a curse on them and makes them slaves. The truth is that by doing so, it prevented anyone from taking direct retribution on the people. It places the entire Gibeonite people under the direct protection of Israel.

Though it sounds like they are condemned to perform menial labor in the camp: hewers of wood and drawers of water, it is important to realize they did this both “for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD.” This means that they were given a role to play in both the social and spiritual life of Israel. Fire and water were both integral in community life and worship. These people were given a central if subordinate role to play. They got what they wanted. They were included among the people of God.

There is an interesting postscript to this story. Hundred of years later, after the rise and fall of the Kings of Israel, after the exile, when Nehemiah returned from Babylon to Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Gibeonite men are mentioned among the Jews who helped repair the walls (Neh. 3:7; 7:25). This reveals that the Gibeonites were fully welcomed and assimilated into the people of God. They were, like Rahab, included in God’s people, even if their admission into his kingdom was fraught with difficulties.

APPLICATION

When you survey the story, the obvious application is “don’t lie,” but on further inspection there are a couple more truths that emerge.

God welcomes everyone – One wonders what would have happened if the Gibeonites had come to Joshua and said what they said without masking their appearance and if the Israelites had bothered to consult the Lord. Perhaps God would have told them to spare them like they spared Rahab. We don’t know. We do know that these people were different. Instead of fighting God and his people, they were eager to join them. They found a way. This reminds us that God is a missionary God. He is eager to protect his people. But he is also eager to welcome into his people anyone who will submit to His laws.

God wants to be consulted – Surely the biggest failure of the story is Israel’s. They didn’t consult the Lord. We frequently do the same. We take credit for God’s goodness to us. We think we are mature enough or wise enough to make decisions on our own. We may even feel like we don’t want to bother God with things we can handle on our own. The

truth is that God wants to be involved. He is a father who knows how to give good gifts to his children. He is also a father who invites us to pray for daily bread. Which means we will never outgrow our need to seek God's wisdom and guidance.

God will find a place for everyone – Perhaps my favorite part of the story is the role assigned to the Gibeonites. It was menial work. But it was work for the God they wanted to serve. I wonder if they considered it an honor and took great pride that it was they who were tasked with gathering the wood that was used on the altar for sacrifices and the water that was used for purification. It reminds me that God finds a place for everyone in his kingdom. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:18, "God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." We all have a role to play in his kingdom. Our role might now be flashy or prestigious, but it is significant. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:16, we are "fitted and held together by what every joint supplies." The important thing is to discover the role God has for us and take joy in playing it well.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who were the Gibeonites? How were they different from their neighbors?
2. What did the Gibeonites do to deceive the Israelites? Despite their deception, what was truthful about their request?
3. How did Israel fail in this situation? How do we do the same thing sometimes?
4. What role were the Gibeonites given in Israel? How is this a blessing?
5. What does the story of the Gibeonite deception teach us about God's plan and our flaws?

THE BATTLE OF GIBEON

JOSHUA 10

I don't think it is any coincidence that Girl Scout cookies go on sale in early February. People have made New Year's resolutions to eat right, get in shape, and try to turn things around. After a month of hard work, people are tired, discouraged, and want to give up. Perhaps they feel like their current life is all hard work with no reward. Then -- boom -- when people are at their weakest and most vulnerable, a little girl with a big smile asks you to buy cookies to help her go to camp. It's not coincidence; it's strategy. They exploit weakness for their gain.

The same is true of most major decisions. When people make the hard choice to leave an old life behind, the enemy will try to sow seeds of doubt, discouragement, or fear to try to persuade the person to forsake their new life and return to their past.

That is the situation we are looking at today. Israel has just made a deal with the Gibeonites. It was not a perfect deal. The agreement was made with deception and failure. However, we saw how through these imperfect people God worked out His perfect plan to welcome a whole nation of Rahabs into his kingdom.

Now with the ink barely dry on this fragile new alliance, nations rise up to punish the Gibeonites and perhaps persuade them to forsake their new friends. They are also trying to put Israel in a position where they have the choice of forsaking the people who deceived them into making peace.

The situation is ripe for failure, defeat, and compromise. But both the Gibeonites and the Israelites trust in each other and in God and through it all have their faith strengthened as they see God accomplish a mighty victory for them and through them. Perhaps as we study their story we will gain strength to trust God in complicated times as well.

KINGS ATTACK GIBEON (V1-5)

Israel's victories at Jericho and Ai as well as their new alliance with the Gibeonites had effectively divided the land in half. The kings of Canaan decide to unite against this new and powerful enemy.

If you look closely at the strategy of the kings, you see their hard-heartedness in action. Verse 1 says that King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem "heard Joshua had captured Ai and had utterly destroyed it (just as he had done to Jericho and its king, so he had done to Ai and its king), and that the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were within

their land.” The king realizes that the Israelites have utterly destroyed everyone who has opposed them. He also knows that it is possible to make peace, but that peace comes at the price of total submission.

The King makes his choice and assembles an alliance of 5 city-states to oppose the people of God.

One interesting side note: we learn in verse 2 about the true nature of the Gibeonite nation. It says, “Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities...and all its men were mighty.” The people of Gibeon didn’t make peace with Israel because they knew they were a weak nation and therefore didn’t stand a chance. They were a large nation full of mighty men. This reveals the difference between the hearts of the Gibeonites and Adoni-zedek. The Gibeonites knew they were strong, but that Israel and their God was stronger still. They sought to make peace before they knew it was possible. Adoni-zedek knew the strength of Israel and that peace was possible but chose war rather than submission to Israel’s God.

The target isn’t Joshua, though, it’s Gibeon. Verse 4 records the message Adoni-zedek sends to the other kings: “Come up to me and help me, and let us attack Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and with the sons of Israel.” The Gibeonites have to be punished for joining Israel. The king is also worried about other defections to the cause of Israel as well.

ISRAEL AIDS GIBEON (V6-9)

When confronted by the combined armies of 5 kings, the people of Gibeon were worried. I wonder if they doubted their commitment to Israel. I wonder if they considered trying to tell the opposing army that their decision to join Israel had been a matter of necessity that they regretted. I wonder if anyone in the city counseling trying to go back on their decision to submit to Israel and instead try to join this army. Perhaps their combined armies would be enough to overthrow the Israelites. Perhaps they doubted whether Israel would come to their aid because of the way in which they had tricked Israel into their treaty.

But that is not what happened. They remain the servants of Israel. They send word to Joshua reminding them of their status and imploring him for help. Verse 6 says, “Do not abandon your servants; come up to us quickly and save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites that live in the hill country have assembled against us.”

I wonder what Joshua thought when He received the message. This seems like a perfect situation to rid himself of the people who had tricked him into making a peace treaty. If he didn’t help, it wasn’t him who had backed out of the deal. They had simply been attacked by other enemies. The situation was out of his hands. Besides, the distance between Gilgal, where he was, and Gibeon was over twenty miles. Armies on foot move slow. They

would be lucky to march one or two miles an hour. There was no way for his army to make it there in time.

But that is not what Joshua does. First, Joshua sought the Lord. Though it doesn't say explicitly Joshua does this, the record of God's answer is proof that he did. Verse 8 says, "The LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands; not one of them shall stand before you.'"

In a time of urgency and stress, God provides a word of encouragement. That encouragement takes the form not of a new word but of a reaffirming of promises already given. Most of the time, we need to be reminded of God's promises in the midst of trying times. We need to have an old truths brought to mind and applied to our current circumstances.

Next, Joshua demonstrates that the Gibeonites have been fully accepted into the people of God by rushing to their defense. Verse 9 says, "So Joshua came upon them suddenly by marching all night from Gilgal." Joshua went above and beyond in defense of his newfound brothers. He doesn't lollygag and slowpoke his way to their aid. He doesn't leave first thing in the morning. He doesn't allow God's promise of victory to cause him to try less hard. He force marches his army all night to come to their aid. God's promise motivates him to try even harder; he knows that his work will not be in vain.

GOD AIDS ISRAEL (V10-15)

The center of the story, though, is not Gibeon's loyalty to Israel, or even Israel's loyalty to Gibeon. Rather the most important aspect of the story is the way God does what only God can do to protect his people. This passage lists three ways in which God fought for Israel.

1. Confounded them – the word here is related to "causing panic." The presence of God on your side causes peace. The presence of that same God standing in opposition to you causes panic. The Hebrew word used to describe the precise nature of the panic that fell upon the Canaanites is a word frequently used to describe human response to a meteorological event. The Canaanites worshiped nature deities. When they saw the weather conspiring against them, they must have thought that their own gods were aiding the Israelites.

2. The panic that ensues allows the Israelites to rout the Canaanite forces. As the Canaanite forces retreat, a hailstorm begins. Verse 11 says, "As they fled from before Israel, while they were at the descent of Beth-horon, the LORD threw large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword." Initially, they are just called stones from heaven, but are described later as hailstones. These large hailstones killed more enemies than the Israelites did.

3. The final sign of God's miraculous intervention occurs in verses 12 and 13. Joshua prayed for God to prolong the day and, as verse 13 says, "So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies."

Numerous explanations have been given regarding what exactly happened. Did God stop the earth from rotating, so that the sun stood still in the sky? Surely if this was the case, someone else somewhere else in the world would have recorded the fact that they sun stopped in the sky for a period of time. Other people propose a more localized event like a solar eclipse, which would have caused panic among the enemy and encouraged the Israelites who saw it as a sign of God's favor. A third interesting suggestion is that what God provided was more darkness not light. Remember, the Israelites marched all night and attacked by surprise in the morning. The sun rising would reveal the inferior numbers and perhaps embolden the enemy. The Hebrew word for "stopped" can also mean "cease." So perhaps what God provided was not more sun but prolonged darkness to enable the Israelites to complete their surprise victory.

Whatever the interpretation, the fact remains that God fought for Israel and ensured that they won an impressive, lop-sided victory.

APPLICATION

No Second Class Citizens – The Gibeonites may have found their way into the people of God by failure and deceit, but once they were in, they were fully in. Neither God nor Joshua used this attack as a chance to clean up a problematic situation. The Gibeonites submitted themselves to God and experienced God's protection. The same is true for us. God doesn't have any second-class citizens. As Galatians 3:28-29 says, "28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

God's Promises Excludes Fear Not Work – God tells Joshua not to fear the Canaanites. God promises Israel victory. This promise does not mean there is no work for Joshua to do. It just means that Joshua's work is not in vain. Joshua still had to make a grueling night march and still had to fight all day. He didn't receive from God a free pass from labor. He received comfort from God that his labor would be worth it. God's promises and sovereignty shouldn't make us lazy; it should energize us. God's activity doesn't exempt us from work, it exempts us from meaningless work. As 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

Miracles require Faith and Brains – Many people have tried to understand how the miracles of the Bible happened. Some go so far as trying to explain them away. When trying to understand miracles we should avoid two extremes. The first extreme refuses to

believe miracles are possible and therefore tries to explain them away or dismiss them. The opposite extreme is all too willing to accept miracles by faith but without trying to understand exactly what is going on. We should have enough faith to be open to the possibility of miracles. We should also be willing to use our brains to understand what precisely is going on in the passage so we can have an accurate explanation of the nature of the miracle.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does God encourage Joshua before the battle? How can we remind ourselves or allow God to remind us of important truths in the midst of pressing situations?
2. What are some possibilities for how to understand the miracles of this passage? Which do you think is most likely?
3. What does it mean that “God doesn’t have any second-class citizens in his kingdom”? How does that relate to the Gibeonites? How does that relate to us?
4. How does God’s promises motivate us to work hard rather than make us lazy? How can we learn to fight, knowing that God also fights for us?
5. How can we use both brains and faith to understand miracles? What is the danger of not using one or the other?

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