



Text: Joshua 9:1-27¹

Series: Facing Life with Courage

Title: Part 8 -- How to Keep the Battle from Making Us Bitter **OR** How the Battle Can Make Us Better Not Bitter

Date: June 28, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

This morning we're going to think about what we can learn about "Facing Life with Courage" from a story you'll find in Joshua, chapter 9. In this story, a group of people called "the Gibeonites" manage to make peace with Israel using a very unorthodox method. As I read the story from the Book of Joshua this morning I want you to notice **two details**. **First**, in **verse seven** I want you to notice that the Gibeonites are not only known as "Gibeonites." There is another name applied to them and I want you to notice what it is. **Secondly**, I want you to notice **where the Gibeonites end up**. There is a very specific location to which they assigned and it comes at the very end of the story. Watch for it.

I'm reading from God's holy, inspired and authoritative Word from Joshua chapter 9, verses 1 to 27. I invite you to follow as I read...

[TEXT on screen]

"As soon as all the kings who were beyond the Jordan ... heard of this, they gathered together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel." Joshua 9:1, 2

Living in a state of constant conflict can affect our spirits in some pretty damaging ways. We want to be strong and courageous to face the challenges, but we don't want to become hard and insensitive in the process. We want to be prepared for the conflicts but we don't want to become defensive and hypersensitive to criticism, nor do we want to become aggressive and spoiling for a fight. Somehow we need to find and keep our spiritual balance in the middle of the battles of life.

How do we do it? I think we can learn some important lessons from the people of Israel about **how to keep the battle of life from making us bitter or better yet, how the battle can make us better not bitter**. Israel learned some important lessons about being God's people in the challenges that were presented to them by their enemies. That, in itself is one of the most important perspectives we can adopt to help us avoid developing bitterness through the challenges we face in life. When we take trials and challenges as opportunities

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.



to learn how to express God's grace and truth more effectively we move away from bitterness and towards godliness. Joseph told his brothers who had abused him and sold him into slavery in Egypt,

“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” Genesis 50:20

I've always thought of this passage as an escape hatch from bitterness. When we stop and realize that nothing that comes into our lives unless God allows it then we can turn to ask the question: how can I use this experience, this situation, for God's glory? Even when enemies press us hard, even when our greatest enemy, Satan, pushes us down, the question we can ask is: **in getting up again, in rising to my feet again, in refusing to stay down, how can I bring glory to God?**

God's challenge and his blessing to Joshua and the Israelites as they faced the challenges of conquering the land of promise was...

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9

Everywhere Israel turned there were enemies. There was someone waiting around each corner to do battle with them. Last week we looked at the time of renewal that Israel had had with God after their victory in battle at the city of Ai. They sacrificed offerings that reaffirmed their connection with God and they heard God's Word read for them by their leader, Joshua.

But even that time of spiritual renewal seemed to provoke their enemies even more. We talked last week about “the blessing” that was spoken over Israel as they gathered at the foot of two small mountains in Canaan. There were many blessings read but one of these blessings may well have caught the ear of spies who were among them was this military blessing. One of the blessings God promised his people was that if they obeyed him ...

“The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.” Deuteronomy 28:7

This blessing might have been one of the things that kings heard that caused them to rise against Israel. Perhaps it was the news that the army of Israel had been defeated by the army of Ai in its first encounter that encouraged the kings to organize for battle. The aura of invincibility was gone. Israel could be defeated. Maybe they were sharpening their swords and fletching their arrows simply because that was the only thing they knew to do when faced with a threat like the army of Israel. Whatever the reason, a confederation of kingdoms was



massing for battle against Israel. It was hopeless, but they didn't know that. After all, what else could they do?

One group of people thought of something else. The people of Gibeon came up with an idea and you almost have to admire them for their ingenuity, their creative thinking, their chutzpah. They came up with a plan that involved deception and role-playing, and it was based on what they knew about Israel and what God had commanded them to do. Instead of pursuing a traditional war, they sought an unorthodox peace.

Somehow they had come to understand that Israel only had designs on those nations who lived within the geography of Canaan. The Law of Moses had been specific...

¹⁰ “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. ¹¹ And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. ¹² But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it....¹⁵ Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. ¹⁶ But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷ but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, ¹⁸ that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.” Deuteronomy 20:10-12, 15-18

The people of Gibeon seem to have had fairly specific knowledge of these provisions of the Law of Moses. Why, nobody seems to know, but their whole plan of deception hinged on the provision that Israel could make peace with cities “that are very far from you.” They pretended to be “a distant country.” (v.6) They also knew that making peace meant that they would become Israel's servants and so they declared their willingness to be Israel's servants upfront...

“We are your servants.” Joshua 9:8

As I read the passage at the beginning I asked you to notice that the Gibeonites were also called by another name in verse 7. **What was that name?** They were called “**the Hivites**.” (v.7) Now notice that one of the nations on the “hit list” in Deuteronomy 20 was “the Hivites.” The Gibeonites were part of a larger nation of people whom as a whole God had identified as ready for judgment because of their sin and particularly because of the “abominable practices” associated with their worship of their pagan gods. Some of the “abominable” activities involved child sacrifice, sexual immorality and other gross sins. Because of these things Israel was not to make peace with any of these nations but rather to “devote



them to complete destruction.” The reason for their destruction was two-fold. First, their time for judgment had come. (cf. Gen 15:16) God had tolerated their sin long enough and now it was time to bring it to an end. Secondly, God did not want these nations teaching Israel to sin by their example. He wanted them gone from the land so that Israel would not be drawn away to paganism. There was to be no peace with sin and with those who practiced it.

But that’s not what happened with these “Hivites.” Israel did make a covenant of peace with them. What was God’s attitude to that? Was God angry with Joshua and elders of Israel for their decision to make peace with the people of Gibeon?

The writer of Joshua called the Gibeonites’ deception a “**cunning**” plan. This word, “cunning,” carries a dual meaning. In a negative context, it can mean “crafty” or “scheming.” (Ps 83:4) In a positive context, it can mean “prudent.” (Prov 15:5) Saul considered David “very cunning” (1 Sam 23:22) because Saul was twisted in his thinking, but the Bible writer who reported that situation saw David’s “cunning” as a wise trait. You see, the meaning of this word depends on your perspective. So, were the Gibeonites “crafty” or “prudent”? That question is connected to the question of whether God approved of this peace treaty or not and so I’m going to leave the answer to both of those questions to the end of the message. I want you to have them simmering on the back burner of your mind while we think about some lessons we can learn from Israel about dealing with the challenges of life.

There are three main lessons I want us to take home this morning.

First of all, we can learn that...

God wants his strong and courageous people to be people of humble prayer

The Gibeonites put on a great act! In order to try to convince Joshua and the leaders that they were from a distant country they wore worn out clothes, they brought with them dry bread and they carried their provisions in packs that were patched and mended.

There were some suspicions that they might not be all that they seemed to be. The elders of Israel said, “Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?” (v.7) But the Gibeonites stayed “in character” very well. I want you to notice that the writer of Joshua tells us that the Gibeonites hatched their plan after they...

“heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai...” Joshua 1:3

But when they explain their reasons for seeking peace with Israel they never mentioned Jericho and Ai. They said...



“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 were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.” Joshua 9:9-10

They never mentioned Jericho and Ai. Why? Because if they had, the Israelites would have caught them. How would people from a far country have known about something that happened only a few days before? These guys were good!

What these people said matched almost word for word what Rahab had said to the spies in Jericho just a week or two earlier. She had said to the two spies...

“I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction.” Joshua 2:9-10

Of course, Rahab and family had been spared destruction. Rahab had been given a covenant of peace. Even though she was part of a nation that was to be devoted to destruction, God had saved her and at the very moment that these Gibeonites were asking for peace, she and her family were probably within earshot, welcomed within the family of God's people.

After giving their reasons for seeking peace, they repeated their request...

“We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us.” (v.11)

The word “servant” carried a huge implication with it. It meant more than “I’m willing to do your laundry and water your livestock.” It meant that they were willing to swear allegiance to Israel AND to Israel’s God. It meant that they would support Israel in her battles with her enemies, but it also meant that Israel would provide protection to them as their “over lord.”² They were saying that they were willing to live under the laws of Israel and cause her no trouble.

Everything that Joshua and the elders saw with their eyes and everything they heard with their ears led them to believe that they were free to offer these emissaries a “covenant of peace.” They checked out the provisions and found them dry and crumbly – it looked like they were old enough to support the story. The confession they heard from the mouths of the emissaries contained all the right words about the LORD and the glory of his name. They even used the

² Andrew C. Bowling, “Joshua,” Baker Commentary on the Bible, Baker Books, 1989, p. 143



proper name of God, “Yahweh,” the LORD. So Joshua and the elders made peace with them, “to let them live” (v.15) just as Joshua had “saved alive” Rahab and her family when the city of Jericho had been destroyed. (Joshua 6:25)

BUT they did not pray about it!

The only criticism of the dealings that Joshua and the elders had with the Gibeonites was that they...

“did not ask counsel from the LORD.” Joshua 9:14

Everything looked right; everything sounded right. They had made peace before with someone who had presented the same understanding of God. God’s Word clearly gave them provision to make peace with people from distant cities. But of course, that was the problem. These people weren’t from a distant place.

When Moses prepared Joshua to take over the leadership of Israel from him, the Lord had given Moses a very specific instruction about how Joshua was to seek counsel from Him. This is what the Lord told Moses...

“And he [Joshua] shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his [Joshua’s] word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.” Numbers 27:21

The Urim and the Thummim was a device carried by the High Priest and used for making decisions. We really don’t what they were. Some suggest they were a white stone and black stone, carried in a pouch by the priest. If a question was asked of God and the priest pulled out the white stone it meant “yes,” and if he pulled out the black stone it meant, “no.” We really don’t know. But it was some device used to take decisions out of the hands of Joshua and place them into the hands of God.

And that’s the point. In deciding what to do with the Gibeonites, Joshua needed to place the decision into the hands of God. Joshua thought he knew what God’s will was, but he didn’t ask God. He saw with his eyes, he heard with his ears, he knew what God’s Word said, he had previous experience in a similar situation with Rahab... and he went with it. But here’s the lesson for us all. There is always something we can’t see! Always! There are factors beyond our understanding that are known only to God! And we always need to humbly submit our decisions to his sovereign will. Always!

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:5-6



“Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” Luke 22:42

Always!

God wants his strong and courageous people to be people of humble prayer

The **second** lesson I draw from Israel’s experience with the Gibeonites is that...

God wants his strong and courageous people to be people of clear-cut faithfulness

One of the surprising aspects of this story is that once the Gibeonite deception was discovered the covenant was not considered broken. Why didn’t they just call the deal off? Obviously the Gibeonites had lied. There had been “bad faith” on their part. Three days later, after it came to light that the Gibeonites actually lived “among them” (v.16) rather than in “a distant country” (v.6), the people of Israel wanted to kill them. The people “murmured” against their leaders, but its clear from what the leaders said to them that what they wanted to do was to destroy the towns of Gibeon.

They were probably thinking back to what had happened to them because of Achan’s sin. Remember the story in chapter 7. Because of one man’s disobedience to the Lord, 36 Israelites had died in battle and the people had suffered a humiliating defeat. The people might have been thinking back to that very fresh memory. They didn’t want it to happen again and so they considered taking matters into their own hands and “righting” the wrong done by their leaders.

But the leaders stood their ground. I love the integrity and clear-cut honesty of what these men said...

“We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them. 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.” Joshua 9:19-21

Notice the number of times the leaders acknowledged their responsibility for the situation. You’ll see it in their use of the word, “we”: “We have sworn...we may not touch them...this we will do...because of the oath that we swore to them.” I love their clear-cut faithfulness to their oath.

What motivated them to keep their word? First of all, they’re keeping their word because they took an oath in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. God’s honor was at stake. Our God is a God who keeps his word, even when there’s



been “bad faith” on the part of the one to whom he’s made his promise. Listen to what the prophet Ezekiel says about our God’s faithfulness...

“For thus says the Lord God: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.” Ezekiel 16:59-60

The elders of Israel and the people gathered that day probably remembered the words of the pagan prophet Balaam. Balaam had been hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel as they passed through his territory on the way to the land of promise. But Balaam had been unable to utter a single word against Israel because the Lord had taken control of his mouth and wouldn’t let him curse them. Balaam had spoken of Israel’s God...

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.” Numbers 23:19-20

God’s honor was at stake, and the leaders would not allow God’s name to be dishonored by revoking their promise.

Secondly, they feared that God’s wrath would break out against them if they broke their word. The wrath of God they’d experienced because of Achan’s sin was what was on their minds. And you know, four hundred years later, that exact situation happened.

Saul, the first king of Israel, came from the region of Gibeon. He got it into his mind to “purify” the area by killing off the Gibeonites and making the region thoroughly Jewish. Writing centuries after the days of Joshua, the writer of 2 Samuel explains to his readers...

“Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.” 2 Samuel 21:2

Bad things happened! God sent a famine that lasted for three years and it was only lifted when seven members of Saul’s extended family were executed for Saul’s crime of breaching the covenant with Gibeon. You can read the full story in 2 Samuel chapter 21.

God wants us to be people who keep our promises, especially of those promises we make that reflect on his name. When we take an oath in court to tell the truth; when we give our word in making a contract; when we stand before God, our



friends and family and promise faithfulness to our spouse; when we give our country our word that we will serve faithfully; in fact, whenever we claim to be speaking the truth, God expects us to keep our word.

Jesus amplified the importance of faithfulness to our word. It wasn't only those promises we make using an "oath formula" that need to be kept. Jesus said...

“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.’ 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 King. 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.” Matthew 5:33-37

Every promise we make; every commitment we affirm; every story we tell; every assertion we utter must be truth that can be trusted because...

God wants his strong and courageous people to be people of clear-cut faithfulness

There's a **third lesson** I draw from this story and it's that...

God wants his strong and courageous people to be people of tender mercy

When the deception was exposed Joshua demanded that the Gibeonites explain themselves. "Why did you deceive us...?" he asked them. (v.22)

“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 hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it.’” Joshua 9:24-25

The Gibeonites reveal how much they knew about the directive the Lord had given Israel to "devote to destruction" the inhabitants of the land. As Hivites, they knew that they were on the "hit list," and so they devised this strategy to sue for peace.

Notice the phrase, "it was told to your servants for a certainty..." What they're saying is that they heard what God had commanded and that they believed that what they heard was the truth. We're beginning to see the level of their faith in God here. They had heard what Rahab had heard about God and they believed it to be true. They had offered themselves as "servants" to Israel and in so doing had declared their willingness to live in submission to the God of Israel.



But I think their faith is most compellingly expressed in the vulnerability they show in placing their destiny in the hands of Joshua...

“And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it.” Joshua 9:25

Bible scholar Robert Hubbard views this appeal for “good and right” treatment as “a call for mercy” that whether they realized it or not, was really “an appeal to the character of [the LORD] as ‘good and right.’”³ After all, the standard for measuring what was “good and right” for the people of Israel was God’s Law and God’s character. On the day in which the Lord had given his law to Moses, God had proclaimed himself to be...

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” Exodus 34:6-7

The Gibeonites threw themselves on the mercy of Joshua and of Joshua’s God. In response, Joshua did what was “good and right” according to God’s Word which required that the Gibeonites become servants for Israel. They were to be “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” as the KJV put it. By the way, Canadians have long been considered “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for the world because of our resource-based economy. You may have heard or read that phrase somewhere and this story from which it originates.

You might be asking: where’s the mercy in being consigned to service? Well, two things. First, it was certainly better than the alternative! They were alive and they had a ongoing role to play in the life of Israel. Being a servant, or even a slave, in Israel did not mean that you were without rights, as the story we touched on about Saul demonstrates. But secondly, let me remind of the observation I asked you to make as we read this passage. I asked you to notice **“where the Gibeonites end up.”** And where do they “end up”? That day, Joshua made the Gibeonites...

“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.” Joshua 9:27

They ended up at the altar of God! They were assigned to service first to the tabernacle as it moved from place to place, and then finally to the temple in

³ Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Joshua: The NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan, 2009, p. 307



Jerusalem. Any form of temple service was considered a high honor among the people. King David had said...

“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” Psalm 84:10

These people from the “hit list” were brought into the very heart of Israel! There is something very “New Testament” about this arrangement. I connect with the Gibeonites, and so should you. The Apostle Paul wrote to “Gibeonites” like you and me, people like us who deserved God’s wrath because of our sin, that we should...

**“remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
Ephesians 2:12-13**

It was the “tender mercy of God” (Luke 1:78) that brought to us the knowledge of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It was his kindness that drew us near. And he asks us to be his instruments to help draw others near through faith in Christ.

So, coming back to the question I left you with at the beginning, **how do you think God viewed this covenant with Gibeon?** Well, let me tell you that there is not a single incident in all of Biblical history that the people of Gibeon ever caused a single moments trouble for Israel. They were devoted temple servants. In fact, there’s much evidence that they were, throughout the centuries of Israel’s history,⁴ exactly what they said they would be from the very beginning...

“We are your servants.”

And may we be exactly that for all of our days, for His honor and glory!

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song: Thy Mercy, My God**
- **Benediction**

⁴ In chapter 10:1-15, God does remarkable cosmic things to assist Israel in its defense of the Gibeonites, demonstrating his support for the covenant made with them. Gibeon became one of the key sites for the Tabernacle (2 Chron 1:3). Of course, Saul’s violation of the covenant and God’s judgment of Israel for this breach is further evidence of his support for the covenant. David had a Gibeonite among his most trusted “mighty men” (1 Chron 12:4) After the Exile in Babylon, over 500 Gibeonites (or *Nethinim* ‘temple servants,’ as they were called) returned to help rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. (Ezra 2:43-58, 8:20; Neh 3:7, 26)