

JOSHUA (17) – Joshua 9:1–27
Covenant Fellowship Church
Wednesday, September 16, 2026
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READ Joshua 9:1–27

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE GIBEONITES

Principal texts: Joshua 9:1–27; 10:1–15; 11:19; 18:25; 21:17

Related Torah texts: Exodus 23:20–33; 34:11–16; Deuteronomy 7:1–6; 20:10–18; 29:10–15

Principal cities: Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim (Josh. 9:17).

The Gibeonites were a Canaanite people centered in the important city of Gibeon, northwest of Jerusalem. Joshua describes Gibeon as “a great city,” comparable to one of the royal cities, larger than Ai, and populated by formidable men (Josh. 10:2). They were therefore not a helpless or insignificant tribe. Their extraordinary place in biblical history resulted from their decision to seek survival through covenant with Israel rather than join the other Canaanite peoples in armed resistance.

Joshua 9 cannot be understood apart from the Mosaic legislation concerning the Canaanites. God had commanded Israel not to enter into covenant with the inhabitants of the land: “You shall make no covenant with them and their gods” (Exod. 23:32; cf. 34:12–16).

Deuteronomy 7:1–2 similarly commanded Israel concerning the seven Canaanite nations: “You shall devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.”

The Gibeonites therefore faced the judgment of God associated with Israel’s conquest.

Yet Deuteronomy 20:10–18 introduces an important distinction. Cities “very far” from Israel could be offered terms of peace and tributary service (vv. 10–15), whereas the cities belonging to the peoples of Canaan were subject to the *herem*, the ban of destruction (vv. 16–18).

This explains the Gibeonite strategy with remarkable precision.

They did not merely lie about their address. **They built their deception around the provisions of Israel’s own covenant law.** They had apparently learned enough about Israel’s God and Israel’s law to understand that **distance could make the difference between destruction and a treaty.**

THE GREAT CONTRAST OF JOSHUA 9

Joshua 9 opens by presenting two radically different responses to Israel and Israel’s God. The kings of Canaan hear what has happened and decide to fight Israel (vv. 1–2). The Gibeonites hear essentially the same news and decide to seek peace with Israel (vv. 3–15).

ISRAEL’S KEY FAILURE: v. 14: “. . . but [they] did not ask counsel from the LORD.”

ISRAEL’S CRUCIAL ACT: v. 15: “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.” v. 19: “We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.” The oath was sworn in the LORD’s name. That fact determines everything that follows.

(over, please)

2 Samuel 21:1–14 reveals that God himself regarded Israel as obligated by it.

THE CURSE THAT BECOMES A KIND OF BLESSING

v. 23: “Some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.” At first this appears purely punitive. But *the location of their service* changes its significance. They become servants associated with “the house of my God” and later “the altar of the LORD” (9:27). The Gibeonites have escaped *herem* and spend their lives closely associated with Israel’s worship. *A remarkable reversal*: they seek merely to remain alive; they end up serving at the LORD’s altar. Their humiliation simultaneously becomes their privilege.

THE GIBEONITES’ CONFESSION

Their response to Joshua deserves much more attention than it ordinarily receives.

“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” (v. 24).

The Gibeonites believe:

The LORD spoke to Moses.

The LORD gave Canaan to Israel.

The LORD commanded judgment upon Canaan.

The LORD possesses the power to carry out that judgment.

The stories of both Rahab and the Gibeonites involve Canaanites who **hear the word concerning divine judgment, believe it, fear the LORD, and seek refuge among God’s covenant people**. The Gibeonites’ method is morally compromised by deception, but their fundamental assessment of Israel’s God is correct.

They finally surrender themselves completely: “And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it” (9:25). They have moved from attempted negotiation to unconditional surrender.

MAJOR LESSONS

First, divine judgment is real. The Gibeonites’ fear was not irrational. Their understanding of Moses’ command was correct (Josh. 9:24).

Second, hearing produces a crisis of response. Rahab hears. Gibeon hears. The Canaanite kings hear. All receive essentially the same news, but they respond differently.

Third, peace is possible for outsiders. Joshua 11:19 remembers Gibeon uniquely as the city that “made peace” with Israel.

Fourth, salvation involves submission. “We are your servants” becomes the Gibeonite refrain. They do not dictate the conditions of salvation.

Fifth, human sin does not nullify covenant obligation. Israel’s leaders sin by failing to consult the LORD, and the Gibeonites sin through deception. Yet the oath sworn in the LORD’s name remains binding.

Sixth, God identifies Himself with covenant faithfulness. Saul’s attack upon the Gibeonites is not treated as correction of Joshua’s old mistake. God treats it as bloodguilt.

Seventh, grace can transform a curse without pretending the curse never existed. The Gibeonites become servants—but servants at the LORD’s altar.