

Josh 9 Tricked
Tim Anderson 22/11/20

Today's passage is a story of deception, trickery.
The Bible actually contains a number of stories of deception.
Jacob tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing
that belonged to his brother Esau.
Laban tricked Jacob by marrying him to Leah
when he thought he was being married to Rachel.
The Egyptian midwives tricked Pharaoh
when they were commanded to kill the baby boys.
The wise men tricked Herod
when he asked them to reveal the location of the new born king.
And these stories are told in a way that doesn't condemn the trickery.
In fact, it would seem that in these stories,
faithfulness to God in relationship
seems far more important than strictly telling the truth.
As uncomfortable as that might make us feel.
And that theme is continued in today's story.
In the end you might feel like the Gibeonites got away with telling lies.
But as the story is told,
it seems more concerned
with the Israelites being faithful to their promises.

I want to go through this story twice.
Once from the perspective of the Gibeonites.
Once from the perspective of the Israelites.
And let's see what we can learn from each.

As the passage begins,
the word has got around
that the Israelites are in Canaan and they are bent on conquest.
And there are a bunch of Kings mentioned in verse 1
who are justifiably feeling threatened.
The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites,

Hivites and Jebusites.

And when you are feeling threatened by someone bent on conquest, you have basically two options.

You can gather as many friends together as possible.

And hope that your combined numbers will be enough to defend you.

That is the path taken by those six kings.

They banded together and tried to defend themselves against Israel.

It's not unlike Australia

making a defence pact with Japan in the last week.

The sort of thing you might do

if you were feeling threatened by a much larger country.

But there's a second option.

That option is to somehow convince the invading nation

that they can make peace with you on some mutually acceptable terms.

The terms probably won't be favourable to you,

because they have come with conquest in mind.

And you are running away from a fight.

But if you are convinced you would lose a fight,

you may well decide that it's better to be a live mouse than a dead lion.

And this was the path chosen by the Gibeonites.

They didn't join with the other six nations

banding together to oppose Israel,

instead they decided to try to entice the Israelites

to have a peace treaty with them.

But they had a problem,

they had found out God's instructions to Israel.

Josh 9:24 "They answered Joshua,

'Your servants were clearly told

how Yahweh your God had commanded his servant Moses

to give you the whole land

and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you.'"

Had they heard right?

Yes absolutely they had.

We read out the passages from Deuteronomy a couple of weeks back,

where Moses was instructed to totally wipe out nations from within the land of Israel, but he could make a peace treaty with nations further afield.

The Gibeonites were from cities close by.

So the Gibeonites have correctly discovered that they are on God's hit list.

What do you do when you discover that you are on God's hit list?

Well you could take the path of the other six nations, band together and fight to the bitter end.

Or you could take the path of the Gibeonites, and try to find some other path out of your predicament.

What will determine which path you choose to take?

Why would you go one way or the other way?

Well it basically comes down to

what you think of Yahweh, Israel's God.

If you think, "Our gods might just be a match for Yahweh," then you might just decide to band together and fight.

But if you think, "This Yahweh,

he does things that our gods just can't match.

You heard about what he did with the Red Sea?

What he did to Sihon and Og the Amorite Kings?

What he did with the Jordan River?

With the Walls of Jericho?

Israel's God is the real deal.

We can't fight against that."

Well if you thought that,

then you'd be looking for an option that didn't involve fighting.

And that's where the Gibeonites were.

They had decided that fighting Yahweh was a losing proposition.

They didn't feel like sitting around and waiting to be slaughtered.

So they came up with an alternative plan.

Let's engage in a bit of subterfuge.

Let's see if we can trick Israel into a treaty.

So what did they come up with.
They'd heard about God's instructions to Moses somehow.
They knew that Israel was allowed to make a treaty
with people who lived a long way away.
How about we dress up as travellers from far away.
Ask Israel for a treaty.
Get them to swear by Yahweh.
And try to hold them to their word.
They did that and it worked.

Now you might think to yourself,
"Should Israel really be bound by a treaty
that was obtained by deception?"
Well that's a question
for when we look at the story from Israel's perspective.
So hold your horses.
From the perspective of the Gibeonites,
they weren't totally sure that Israel would honour
a treaty they were tricked into.
But Israel honoured it,
and the Gibeonites survived.
Survival was their number 1 goal.
They knew that the alternative
was to be wiped from the face of the earth.

But there's one more thing to look at from the Gibeonites perspective.
What do they do when their ruse is busted,
when their cover is blown?
You see they could have argued like sea lawyers.
"Well you guys made a promise in the name of Yahweh your God.
You don't want to break your word taken in his name, do you?"
That would have been the attack is the best form of defence line.
But they don't.
They realise that they are not in a strong bargaining position.
Joshua has all the cards.

And they are simply relying on his integrity.
He's told them that they will be subject to forced labour
in the Israelite community indefinitely.
Indefinite forced labour sounds like not a real flash option.
But what do the Gibeonites say,
"We are now in your hands.
Do to us whatever seems good and right to you."
They would rather be doing forced labour
on the side of the God who created the universe,
than trying to fight against him.
So hats off to them.
We won't judge them for their deception.
We will commend them for having the right attitude to God.
They were submissive to God's plans for them.
They wouldn't fight against him.
And unlike the rest of the Canaanite nations, they survived.

Being submissive to God's plans for you is a great virtue.
And it's one that is not held in high enough regard today.
You know, sometimes life turns against you.
I've known a woman who was struggling with infertility.
She said to me,
"If I can't get pregnant, then I'm going to give up being a Christian."
Well that's not being submissive to God's plans for you.
You might wind up fighting against God.
It's far better to humbly serve God
in a position you would not have chosen.
The Gibeonites might have preferred to be born Israelites.
Then they could have had an inheritance in the land.
But that wasn't an option open to them.
They chose the right option.
It's better to be a wood cutter or a water carrier than dead.
The Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites and the rest
wound up dead.
The Gibeonites were smart.

There's a lesson in that.
There's a great expectation today,
fed by everyone posting unrealistic portrayals of their lives
on social media,
that I should be able to have everything work exactly the way I want.
When that sort of an attitude gets baptised,
then it feeds disappointment with God.
Discontentment is cancer for your relationship with God.
Being a wood cutter or a water carrier in the kingdom of God
is a great privilege.

Well, it's time now to view the story
from the vantage point of the Israelites.
So the Israelites have just renewed the covenant.
They are fired up and passionate about staying faithful to the Lord.
They've read out the whole of the law Moses gave them.
They know exactly what it is they need to stay faithful to.
They've been reminded.
And then they get some visitors.
Out of the blue.
Now they know what is expected of them.
All the nations of the land are to be completely destroyed.
You can make a treaty with people from far away.
Well the visitors look like they come from far away.
Their sandals are worn and patched,
their clothes are old,
their wineskins are old and mended,
their bread is mouldy.
They look like how you'd expect people to look
who have been on a very long journey.
They say they come from a far away place.
Their attitude towards the God of Israel is commendable.
Josh 9:9 "Your servants have come from a very distant country
because of the fame of Yahweh your God.
For we have heard reports about him."

They don't sound like evil people
who need to be wiped out from the face of the earth.
And so the Israelites were tricked.
They made a treaty.
They swore an oath in Yahweh's name.
Now Israel really tried to do the right thing.
They weren't intentionally disobeying God.
Should we be critical of them?

Well the key verse is verse 14.
"The Israelites sampled their provisions
but did not inquire of the Lord."
That's the author's way of telling us
that he is being critical of Israel in this situation.
They might have tried their best to find out about the Gibeonites.
But they relied on their common sense,
they did not inquire of the Lord.
That was their failing.
That was the cause of the problem.
What was God expecting of them?
How did he expect them to inquire?
Well the Israelites had two methods of inquiring of God.
Number one, their leader, Moses or Joshua could just go and ask.
You read back in earlier chapters of Joshua,
there's lots of dialogue.
Joshua said such and such to Yahweh.
Yahweh said such and such to Joshua.
Whether it's crossing the Jordan River, the conquest of Jericho,
or dealing with the sin of Achan,
God has very specific instructions for Joshua
and he just gives them to him in conversation.
The other option available to an ordinary Israelite
was the Urim and Thummim.
Moses and Joshua just chatted away with God
like you might chat to your friend,

but Joe Average couldn't do that.

So they went to the priest and used the Urim and Thummim if they wanted to inquire of the Lord.

This was like a supernatural way of God giving guidance, that was available from the priests at the tabernacle.

You can read about it in Exodus 28:30 if you want to chase it down.

So it was quite possible for Israel to inquire of the Lord.

They didn't have to trust their common sense.

But they failed to inquire of the Lord.

Now the question that comes to Christian people reading that is, "Could we fail to inquire of the Lord?"

We don't just chat with God like Joshua.

We don't have the Urim and Thummim available to us.

How does God expect us to inquire of him?

Now what I'm going to say about that, you might not necessarily agree with.

That's OK.

You subject it to Biblical scrutiny and see if you think it stacks up.

Many evangelical Christians would say that inquiring of the Lord, means praying to him and asking him to show you.

And you can get whole books in Koorong on praying for guidance.

I'm just not at all convinced

that the New Testament ever tells Christians to pray for guidance.

God does sometimes supernaturally provide guidance for Christians in matters that are important to the gospel.

But when he does that, it tends to be on his initiative.

What Christians are told to pray for is wisdom.

James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom,

you should ask God,

who gives generously to all without finding fault,

and it will be given to you."

We ask for wisdom, and God provides.

And that enables us to make God honouring decisions.

The other way we are expected to inquire of the Lord

is to read the Scriptures.

I think the reason we don't have some Christian equivalent of the Urim and Thummim

is that we now have so much more direct guidance from God written down.

Just think for a minute about how much clearer it is how to live a life that pleases God now we have the NT.

If your decisions about living were restricted to what you could glean by reading Genesis to Deuteronomy like Joshua, then you would be far more limited than we are.

Jesus' teaching in the gospels and the apostles' teaching in the Epistles gives us a lot more to go on.

The failure to inquire of the Lord in the church is most often when people are thinking about a Christian response to some contemporary problem.

Something like responding to refugees or euthanasia, climate change or wealth inequality, abortion or homosexuality.

And instead of inquiring of the Lord, that is instead of asking what the Scriptures have to say about the issue, they use their common sense,

that is they allow their view to be shaped by the thinking of secular scientists or politicians, journalists or academics.

The other place we fail to inquire of the Lord is in matters to do with the church.

What's the best way to reach out with the gospel?

What should we expect our worship services to look like?

What should we expect from people in Christian ministry?

There are any number of questions churches might want an answer to.

How could we fail to inquire of the Lord?

Well we would base our answers on common sense,

what seems right to us, or what our denomination has always done.

But we should always inquire of the Lord.

That is we should read the Scriptures and discern what God has to say on the matters about which we have a question.

It's a grave mistake to fail to inquire of the Lord.

But what if we are like Joshua,
and we do fail to inquire of the Lord?

Well this passage has something to say to us about that situation too.

Sometimes when Christians fail,
we throw our hands up and say,

"I've stuffed up. All is lost."

All is not lost. We worship a God who redeems.

What happened with Joshua?

Well he found out pretty quickly that he'd stuffed up.

9:16 "Three days after they made the treaty with the Gibeonites,
the Israelites heard that they were neighbours, living near them."

Whoops. Got sucked in there.

So what do you do next?

Joshua realised that because he'd sworn an oath in Yahweh's name,
he couldn't back out of it.

That would be making the Lord into a promise breaker.

That's not who he is.

Our God is a promise keeper!

So what's Joshua going to do?

Well he comes up with a very neat solution.

The Gibeonites claimed to come from a far away land.

What did God instruct Moses in Deuteronomy should happen to nations
who come from a far away land?

Deut 20, they should be subject to forced labour.

OK, the Gibeonites want a treaty,

then they will be subject to forced labour.

But why is it that the Lord wants the close by nations wiped out?

It's so that they don't lead Israel into idolatry.

How can we make sure the Gibeonites don't lead Israel into idolatry?

Well we make it so that their whole livelihood in the nation
depends on serving the temple of the Lord.

They can be wood cutters and water carriers for the house of my God.

What an elegant solution!

He doesn't break his oath.

But he comes up with a solution

that doesn't lead Israel into spiritual danger.
 And the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, right?
 As we read through the rest of the OT,
 is there a spiritual problem because the Gibeonites lead Israel in to sin?
 No there is not.
 And when you think about
 how adept the Israelites were at getting led into sin,
 you may consider that quite remarkable.

Well let's summarise the teaching of this chapter.

1. Like the Gibeonites, we need to be submissive to God's plans for us.
 They might not be what we would choose.

But let God be God and submit gracefully to what he has for you.

2. Don't fail to inquire of the Lord.

In particular,

when you are trying to work out a Christian response to a situation,
 whether that's a question about the world or the church,
 make sure you find out what the Scriptures have to say.

So often we say we believe the Bible but we forget to actually use it.

3. If you do stuff up,

then remember we worship a God who redeems.

God redeemed Joshua's stuff up,

by giving him the wisdom to make an elegant decision,
 that maintained his oath and kept Israel spiritually safe.

He can work through your stuff ups for his glory too.

You just need confess your sins and faithfully continue to serve him.