

The Book of Joshua, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: The Deception of the Gibeonites

Joshua 9:1-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal center of this lesson is the seriousness of a word sworn before God and the faithfulness of God even when His people stumble. Help the class feel both edges of the story at once. On one edge stands Israel's failure: they examined the evidence but 'asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord,' and so were deceived. On the other edge stands Israel's integrity: tricked though they were, they kept their oath because it had been sworn in the name of the Lord. Lead your students to see that the chapter is not finally about clever Gibeonites but about a God who is honored when His people seek Him before deciding and who is honored again when His people keep their word at cost to themselves.

Be ready to handle the moral question the class will raise: should Israel have kept an oath obtained by fraud? Let Scripture answer. The leaders judged the vow binding because it was sworn in the Lord's name, and 2 Samuel 21 confirms it, recording a famine generations later because Saul broke this very covenant. Use Psalm 15:4, Numbers 30:2, and Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 to show how heavily God weighs our vows. Resist turning the hour into a debate over loopholes. The point Scripture presses is not how to escape a promise but how seriously God's people are to keep one.

This lesson is aimed squarely at how your students make decisions and keep commitments. Many of them are quietly carrying choices they made the way Israel did, by trusting appearances and their own judgment without seeking God. And many are tempted to walk away from promises (in marriage, in work, in the church) because keeping them has grown costly. Press both truths into their hearts: seek the Lord's counsel before you decide, and once you have given your word before God, keep it. And close with the grace that gathers outsiders in, for the very Gibeonites who lied their way to the altar ended up serving at the house of God, a quiet picture of the mercy that makes strangers into members of God's household in Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

After Jericho and Ai, the kings of Canaan gather to fight Israel together, but the Gibeonites take a different path: they 'did work wilily' and come pretending to be travelers from a far country (Joshua 9:1-6). Look at what they had heard (verses 3, 9-10). What does their fear and their scheme reveal about how the surrounding nations understood the God of Israel, and why did they seek a covenant rather than a battle?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 9 opens with two opposite responses to Israel's victories at Jericho and Ai. The kings west of the Jordan 'gathered themselves together, to fight with Joshua and with Israel, with one accord' (Joshua 9:1-2). The Gibeonites, by contrast, 'did work wilily' and chose deception over war (Joshua 9:3-4).

Both responses spring from the same root: fear of what the God of Israel had done. The Gibeonites name it plainly in verses 9-10, recounting the fame of the Lord's acts in Egypt and against Sihon and Og. Like Rahab before them, they had heard, and the report had melted their resolve.

But notice the crucial difference from Rahab. She came in open confession, declaring 'the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above.' The Gibeonites come in disguise, hiding who they are. Their fear drove them to scheme rather than to honest faith, and that mixture of genuine dread and crooked method runs all through the chapter.

Their choice of a covenant over a battle is itself a backhanded testimony. They had concluded they could not defeat Israel's God, so they sought to live alongside His people by any means they could. The surrounding nations understood, even in their dread, that this God was not to be resisted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The nations around Israel feared the God of Israel because of His mighty acts (Joshua 9:9-10; 2:9-11).
- Fear of God can drive people either to defiance, like the kings, or to seek peace, like the Gibeonites.
- Unlike Rahab's open confession, the Gibeonites came by deception; fear without honesty bends toward scheming.
- Even their trickery testifies that they believed Israel's God could not be overcome by force.

Discussion Prompts

- What had the Gibeonites heard about the Lord, and how did it shape their plan?
- Why did they seek a covenant instead of joining the other kings in battle?
- How does their fearful deception compare with Rahab's open confession of faith?

Question 2

Student Question:

The Gibeonites built their whole deception on appearances: cracked wineskins, patched sandals, moldy bread, and a rehearsed story. Where in your own life have you been most tempted to

judge by appearances, trusting what looks convincing on the surface instead of asking what is really true?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Gibeonites stake everything on appearances: 'old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up; and old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy' (Joshua 9:4-5). The whole con is a carefully staged set of visuals.

The strategy worked because the costume matched the story. 'This our bread we took hot for our provision... and now, behold, it is dry, and it is mouldy' (Joshua 9:12). Israel saw what it expected to see and drew the obvious conclusion.

This is a self-examination question. Press the class to find where they, too, trust what looks convincing on the surface. We are forever judging by the moldy bread in front of us, by what seems true at a glance, rather than asking what is actually so.

Help students see how easily appearances deceive. The Lord Himself warns, 'man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). The eye gathers evidence, but it cannot read the heart behind the costume.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Appearances can be carefully staged to deceive; the Gibeonites built a whole lie out of props (Joshua 9:4-5).
- We are prone to judge by what looks convincing rather than by what is actually true (John 7:24).
- The eye sees the surface; only God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).
- Trusting appearances over inquiry leaves us open to being deceived, just as Israel was.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to trust what looks convincing on the surface?
- What is the difference between examining evidence and discerning the truth?
- How does remembering that God looks on the heart change the way you weigh appearances?

Question 3

Student Question:

The hinge of the whole chapter is verse 14: 'And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord.' Israel inspected the evidence but never inquired of God. What does this verse teach us about the danger of leaning on our own judgment, and how is this a recurring pattern of failure in Scripture (compare Proverbs 3:5-6)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 is the hinge of the chapter, and it deserves slow attention: 'And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord.' Israel did examine the evidence, even tasting the provisions, but they skipped the one step that would have exposed the lie.

The failure is not that Israel was careless. They were diligent in the wrong direction. They investigated the bread but never inquired of God, who alone knew the truth the costume concealed. Diligence is no substitute for dependence.

This is a recurring pattern of failure in Scripture and in our lives. 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5-6). Israel leaned on its own understanding, and understanding by itself proved blind.

Help the class see the spiritual logic. Israel had the high priest and the means of inquiring of the Lord readily available. The tragedy is not that they lacked access to God's counsel but that, in the rush of a plausible situation, it never occurred to them to seek it. The most dangerous moments are often the ones that seem to require no prayer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel's core failure was prayerlessness: they investigated the evidence but did not inquire of the Lord (Joshua 9:14).
- Diligence in the wrong direction is no substitute for seeking God; leaning on our own understanding leaves us blind (Proverbs 3:5-6).
- The situations that seem most obvious and least to require prayer are often where we are most easily deceived.
- Seeking God's counsel is not a last resort for hard cases but the first step in every decision (James 1:5).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that Israel examined the evidence but never inquired of the Lord?
- How does Proverbs 3:5-6 describe the very mistake Israel made?
- Why do the situations that seem to require no prayer often turn out to be the most dangerous?

Question 4

Student Question:

Israel had every tool to make a careful decision: wise leaders, recent victories, hard evidence to examine. Yet they failed at the one point of prayer. When you face a decision, what 'evidence' are you most tempted to trust so completely that you forget to seek the Lord first?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Israel was not short on resources for a wise decision. They had seasoned leaders, the fresh memory of God's power at Jericho and Ai, and tangible evidence to examine. By every human measure, they were well equipped to decide.

Yet all of that became a snare, because the very strength of the evidence made the missing prayer feel unnecessary. The more convincing the case in front of us, the less we sense our need to look up.

This is a self-examination question. Ask students to name the kind of 'evidence' they trust so fully that prayer slips their mind: a strong gut feeling, a trusted friend's advice, financial figures, a door that swung open at just the right moment.

Help them see that none of these things are wrong in themselves. The danger is in trusting them so completely that we ask not counsel at the mouth of the Lord. Wise counsel and good evidence are gifts, but they are meant to accompany the seeking of God, never to replace it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Strong evidence and capable leaders can become a snare when they crowd out the seeking of God.
- The more convincing a situation appears, the more tempted we are to skip prayer.
- Good counsel, feelings, and circumstances are gifts, not substitutes for inquiring of the Lord.
- Self-reliance often hides precisely in our strengths and our resources, not only in our weaknesses.

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of evidence are you most tempted to trust so fully that you forget to pray?
- Why does a strong, convincing case make us less likely to seek God, not more?
- How can you let good counsel and evidence accompany prayer rather than replace it?

Question 5

Student Question:

Three days after the covenant is made, the truth comes out: these are neighbors, not foreigners (Joshua 9:16–18). The congregation murmurs, but the leaders answer, 'We have sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them.' Why did Israel consider itself bound by an oath obtained through deception, and what does this reveal about how seriously God regards a vow sworn in His name?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Three days after the covenant, the deception unravels: 'they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they dwelt among them' (Joshua 9:16). The congregation murmurs against the leaders, and the pressure to void the treaty must have been intense.

The leaders' answer is striking: 'We have sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them' (Joshua 9:19). The oath had been obtained by lies, yet because it was sworn in the name of the Lord, Israel held it binding.

This reveals how seriously God regards a vow made in His name. To swear by the Lord is to invoke Him as witness and guarantor; to break such a vow would be to profane His name before the watching nations. The integrity of God's name was at stake in Israel's word.

Be careful to state the principle accurately. The Gibeonites' sin was real, and Scripture does not excuse their lie. But Israel's responsibility was to keep its own word, sworn before God. A promise does not become void simply because honoring it has grown painful or because we were not as careful as we should have been when we made it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A vow sworn in the name of the Lord was held binding even when obtained by deception (Joshua 9:19).
- To swear by the Lord is to invoke His name as witness; breaking the oath would profane that name (Leviticus 19:12).
- The other party's wrong does not release us from our own sworn word before God.
- God weighs our promises heavily; what we vow to Him and in His name is not ours to casually undo (Numbers 30:2).

Discussion Prompts

- Why did Israel consider itself bound by an oath that had been obtained through a lie?
- What does it mean to swear 'by the Lord,' and why does that make the vow so weighty?
- Why does another person's wrong not release us from keeping our own word?

Question 6

Student Question:

Israel kept a promise that was costly, embarrassing, and obtained by trickery, simply because they had sworn it before God. When has keeping your word cost you something, and how did you respond? Is there a commitment you are tempted to break right now because honoring it has become inconvenient?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Israel kept a promise that was costly, embarrassing, and won by trickery. There was no upside to honoring it except this: they had sworn it before God. That alone settled the matter for the leaders.

This is a self-examination question that moves from Israel's integrity to our own. Keeping our word is easy when it costs nothing; the test comes when honoring a commitment turns inconvenient, painful, or humbling.

Invite students to recall a time when keeping their word cost them something, and how they responded. Then press gently on the present tense: is there a commitment, in marriage, work, friendship, or the church, that they are tempted to break right now simply because honoring it has become hard?

Help the class see that the worth of a promise is revealed precisely when keeping it hurts. Anyone will keep a convenient word. The people of God are marked by keeping the inconvenient ones, because their word, like God's, is meant to be sure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cost of keeping a promise is the test of whether our word means anything.
- Faithfulness is easy when convenient; integrity is proven when honoring our word hurts.
- We are most tempted to break commitments precisely when they become costly or humbling.
- God's people are to be known, like their God, for keeping their word even at personal expense.

Discussion Prompts

- When has keeping your word cost you something, and how did you respond?
- Is there a commitment you are tempted to break right now because honoring it has grown hard?
- Why is the true worth of a promise revealed only when keeping it becomes costly?

Question 7

Student Question:

Psalm 15 describes the one who may dwell with God as he 'that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not' (Psalm 15:4). Israel had sworn to its own hurt, and did not change. What does this teach us about the integrity God looks for in His people, and how does this stand against the way our culture treats promises today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Psalm 15 asks who may dwell in God's presence, and among the marks of that person is one who 'sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not' (Psalm 15:4). This is Israel's situation exactly: they had sworn to their own hurt, and they did not change.

The phrase is remarkable. The godly person, having given a promise, keeps it even when it turns out to cost more than expected, even when keeping it brings harm to himself. The promise is not renegotiated when the bill comes due.

Set this against the way our culture treats promises. We live among escape clauses and fine print, where commitments hold only as long as they remain convenient or as long as we still feel like it. The biblical picture is the opposite: a word given is a word kept, full stop.

Help the class see that this kind of integrity reflects the character of God Himself, whose promises do not fail and whose word is utterly reliable (Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:18). When we keep our word at cost to ourselves, we image the faithfulness of the God who keeps His.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The one who dwells with God swears to his own hurt and does not change (Psalm 15:4).
- Biblical integrity keeps a promise even when it proves more costly than expected; it does not renegotiate when the bill comes due.
- Our culture treats commitments as binding only while convenient; Scripture treats a given word as a kept word.
- Keeping our word reflects the unchanging faithfulness of God, who cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:18).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to swear 'to your own hurt' and not change?
- How does this kind of integrity stand against the way our culture treats promises?
- How does keeping our word at cost to ourselves reflect the character of God?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Gibeonites came in fear, hiding the truth, and yet they came seeking refuge among the people of God rather than standing against Him. Have you ever come to God or to His people imperfectly, with mixed motives or out of fear rather than clean faith? What does this chapter suggest about how God deals with those who seek shelter among His people, even imperfectly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Step back and consider the Gibeonites themselves. They came in fear, hiding the truth, with motives far from clean. And yet they came seeking refuge among the people of God rather than taking up arms against Him. That instinct, however tangled, set them apart from the kings who gathered to fight.

This is a self-examination question. Many of us first came to God or to His people the same way the Gibeonites did, imperfectly: out of fear rather than clean faith, with mixed motives, hiding parts of ourselves, not quite sure we belonged.

The chapter offers real comfort here without excusing the deception. The Gibeonites' lie was sin, yet God did not cast them out. He folded them, fear and flaws and all, into the life of His people. Those who seek shelter among God's people, even imperfectly, are not turned away at the door.

Help students see the difference between the Gibeonites and the kings of Canaan. The kings, in pride, set themselves against God and perished. The Gibeonites, in fear, sought refuge among His people and lived. God can work with a frightened, faltering soul who runs toward Him; He will not be defied by a proud one who runs against Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Gibeonites came imperfectly, in fear and deception, yet they sought refuge among God's people rather than fighting Him.
- Many of us first came to God the same way, with mixed motives and imperfect faith.
- God did not excuse their lie, but neither did He cast out those who sought shelter among His people.
- The proud who set themselves against God perish; the fearful who run toward Him for refuge find a place (compare James 4:6).

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever come to God or His people imperfectly, out of fear or with mixed motives?
- What does this chapter suggest about how God treats those who seek refuge among His people, even imperfectly?
- What is the difference between the Gibeonites who sought refuge and the kings who fought?

Question 9

Student Question:

Trace the providence running through this whole chapter. Israel sins by failing to seek God's counsel, yet God's purposes are not derailed. The oath stands, the Gibeonites are spared, and they become 'hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the Lord' (Joshua 9:21, 27), servants at the house of God. How does this chapter hold together two truths at once: the binding seriousness of keeping our word, and the faithfulness and overruling providence of God even when His people err? How does the placement of these former outsiders in service at God's altar point toward the grace that gathers strangers into the household of faith (Ephesians 2:12–13, 19)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, and it asks the class to hold two truths together that might seem to pull apart. First, the binding seriousness of keeping our word: Israel sinned in not seeking God, yet would not compound that sin by breaking a vow sworn in His name. Second, the faithfulness and overruling providence of God even when His people err.

Trace the providence carefully. Israel's failure was genuine; they 'asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord,' and they were deceived. Yet God was not caught off guard, and His purposes were not derailed. The oath stood, the Gibeonites were spared, and they were placed as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the Lord' (Joshua 9:21, 27). What began in deception ended in service at the house of God.

This is the wonder of God's providence: He does not approve our mistakes, but He is able to weave even our failures into His good purposes (compare Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). Israel's lapse did not unravel God's plan. He overruled it, sparing a people and stationing them where they would serve before His altar for generations.

Notice where these former outsiders end up: not destroyed, not driven off, but serving at the very altar of the Lord, drawn near to the place where God met His people. There is grace in that placement. Those who came as strangers, by a lie, are given a station in the life of God's worship, an early shadow of the gospel that gathers strangers in.

Draw the line to Christ with care, by sound principle and not by forcing the type. In the gospel, those who were 'strangers and foreigners' are 'made nigh by the blood of Christ' and become 'fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:12-13, 19). The Gibeonites at the altar are a faint foreshadowing of that wider grace, the mercy that brings outsiders into the household of faith. Keep the promise where Scripture keeps it, fulfilled in Christ and His church, where the dividing wall is broken down (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel sinned in not seeking God, yet honored its vow; the chapter holds together both human failure and human integrity.
- God's providence overrules even His people's mistakes without approving them; His purposes were not derailed by Israel's error (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).
- A vow sworn in the Lord's name remained binding; 2 Samuel 21:1-2 confirms it still bound generations later.
- The Gibeonites, former outsiders, were placed in service at God's altar, a sign of grace gathering strangers in (Joshua 9:27).
- This foreshadows the gospel, where strangers and foreigners are made nigh by Christ and become members of God's household (Ephesians 2:12-13, 19).
- Keep the promise where Scripture keeps it, fulfilled in Christ and His church, not in a future political restoration (Ephesians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:28-29).

Discussion Prompts

- How does this chapter hold together both the seriousness of keeping our word and the providence of God?
- What does it mean that God overruled Israel's mistake without ever approving it?
- How does the placement of these outsiders at God's altar point ahead to the grace that gathers strangers into His household?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over all of Joshua 9, from the moldy bread to the altar of the Lord. Name one specific way this chapter is changing you. What is the Lord teaching you about seeking His counsel before you decide, and about keeping your word once you have given it, that you need to put into practice this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone. Invite the class to look back across the whole of Joshua 9, from the moldy bread carried up to Gilgal to the Gibeonites serving at the altar of the Lord, and to ask what the Lord is forming in them through it.

The chapter sets before us two great lessons that belong together. Seek God's counsel before you decide, lest you be deceived by appearances and your own judgment. And keep your word once you have given it, even when honoring it grows costly. Help students name which of these the Spirit is pressing on them most.

For some, the conviction will be about prayerless decisions, the choices they are making the way Israel did, by examining the bread and never looking up. For others, it will be about a commitment they are tempted to abandon because keeping it has become hard. Let each name the specific place where this chapter touches their life.

Close by pointing to the God who stands behind both lessons. He is the God whose counsel is always available to those who seek it, and the God who keeps His word without fail and welcomes outsiders to His altar in Christ. Ask each student to name one decision to bring before the Lord and one promise to keep this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Joshua 9 calls us both to seek God's counsel before deciding and to keep our word once given.
- Christ is the goal of the story; the God who gathered Gibeonites to His altar welcomes outsiders in Jesus (Ephesians 2:13).

- Spiritual formation moves from admiring the lesson to living it; the aim is changed decisions and kept promises.
- Each student should name one decision to bring before the Lord and one commitment to keep this week.

Discussion Prompts

- As you look back over Joshua 9, is the Lord pressing you more about seeking His counsel or about keeping your word?
- What is one specific decision you can bring before the Lord in prayer this week?
- What is one commitment you need to keep, even though honoring it has grown costly?