

Who were the Gibeonites?

The Gibeonites were a group of people, descended from the Amorites (2 Samuel 21:2). They are described in Joshua 9 as people who deceived the Israelites in order to protect themselves. After the Israelites had defeated the cities of Jericho (Joshua 6–7) and Ai (Joshua 8), many of the nearby Canaanites united to form a large army to fight Israel (Joshua 9:1–2).

The Gibeonites, however, took a different approach: “They resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. They put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy. Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the Israelites, ‘We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us’” (Joshua 9:4–6).

The Israelites did not consult with God before agreeing to the treaty and fell for the Gibeonites’ scheme. The Israelites soon discovered they had been tricked and discussed how to respond. The leaders of Israel decided, “‘We have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now. This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that God’s wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them.’ They continued, ‘Let them live, but let them be woodcutters and water carriers in the service of the whole assembly.’ So the leaders’ promise to them was kept” (Joshua 9:19–21).

The end of this account notes, “That day [Joshua] made the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers for the assembly, to provide for the needs of the altar of the Lord at the place the Lord would choose. And that is what they are to this day.” (Joshua 9:27).

In other words, the Gibeonites survived, yet they served as slaves to the Israelites for generations to come. The land of Gibeon would later be allotted to the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 21:17).

King Saul later broke the treaty that Joshua had signed and attacked the Gibeonites. Later still, during the time of King David, a famine occurred in Israel. When David asked the Lord about the famine, God said, "It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death" (2 Samuel 21:1). To appease the Gibeonites and put an end to the famine, seven descendants of Saul were given to them to be put to death (2 Samuel 21:6). God healed Israel's land after that (2 Samuel 21:14).

Though the Gibeonites were enemies of the Israelites, they teach us some important lessons today. The Gibeonites' deception was effective because Joshua and his people did not first consult God for wisdom. Thus, Joshua 9 reveals the need for believers in Christ to pray concerning all major decisions and to seek His will before moving forward. Also, the fact that the Lord held the Israelites to their covenant with the Gibeonites shows that God requires faithfulness of His people. Breaking a covenant is a serious thing. Finally, the eventual incorporation of the Gibeonites into Israel shows the mercy and grace of God to all people.