

The Folly of Prayerlessness

Jonathan K. Dodson | Joshua 9 | April 8, 2018

A group of kings “gather together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel” (2). *War*, and yet, not a single sword is brandished in the entire story. Why? Because the war is often more subtle and more dangerous than we make out. In the documentary *Carte Land*, top meth gang members are interviewed about how they deal with the awareness their job painfully destroys tens of thousands of lives. They say, “*The moment we start paying attention to our hearts we will get screwed.*” Instead, they pay attention to their wealth, their bosses, job, families. Don’t they have it backwards? Isn’t the *real* war—the place they really get screwed—*in the heart*? Isn’t it there they are deceived, they make the choice to destroy? So it is with in *our* subtle war. Satan would have us so attentive to wealth, bosses, jobs, and families that we miss the heart. This is a story of deception, folly, and an important lesson.

The Deception

The kings gather to fight Israel, but the Gibeonites respond differently: But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning (3–4). *cunning*. The word is neither good nor bad; it is simple cleverness resulting in good or evil. How are they clever? They take worn-out: sacks, wine-skins, sandals, clothes and provisions, and in an air of exhaustion, they approach Joshua declaring, “We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us.” Israel responds, “Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?” (7). The exchange seems bizarre. Why would the Gibeonites living “among Israel” prevent a covenant? Or why would living “far away” promote a covenant? Here they demonstrate working knowledge of Israel’s laws, particularly Deuteronomy 20, warfare law. It states that Israel can enter into a covenant of peace with cities that are far away, but close cities are to be destroyed or rendered useless. The Gibeonites are deceiving Israel, that they’re far away, to save their skin. Joshua steps in, “Who are you? And where do you come from?” They say, “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” (8–9). What are they doing? “We are your *servants*,” We’ve heard of *your god*, of all his *victories*. Flattery: and Israel takes the bait: So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the Lord. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live (14–15). In taking provisions they’ve had a covenant meal to seal the deal. What’s the deal: the enemy is in the camp; their unclean cities not rendered useless, *herem*, and God dishonored. Three days later Israel discovers they’ve been duped. To us, their deception is obvious, but when you’re in it, deception is not so plain. Where are you being deceived? It’s hard to say because, by its nature, deceit is cunning. Let’s lift this deceit out of the story and examine *the folly*.

The Folly

The Book of Joshua shows us over and over again a people who depend on God when they have to: crossing the Jordan, taking Jericho, dealing with Achan’s sin. Israel depends on God in the extremes, the high of watching him part the raging river and the low of facing God’s wrath with Achan. But where they fail to trust God is in between, in the normal days: talking out strategy, conversing with the Gibeonites. Here’s their folly: but did not ask

[counsel from the Lord](#). Do *you* depend on God only when you have to? Pray mainly when things are high or low? It can be true for me. In seasons of intense suffering, I pray like I'm in a foxhole. When on sabbatical, I prayed all the time. Why do I pray less in the everyday? Or perhaps not less but less *desperately*? Have we fallen for [flattery](#)—you can do this; you can figure it out; if you think well, get the biblical paradigm, you're good. Have we fallen for the folly that [to live a truly Christian life all we need is to think well, not pray well](#)? Say you're going to get married or have a baby. What is your first instinct? To beg God for wisdom or to nail down a parenting philosophy, grasp the meaning of marriage? You're struggling with a sin or an injustice. Do you turn to intercession or education? You feel joyless. Do you ask the Spirit to search your heart or fine-tune work/life balance? You're going to wake up and live another day in God's world, do you launch off in desperate prayer or with coffee and a to-do list? You see it wasn't that Joshua and the elders didn't ask the right questions; they were suspicious at the right times. And when they found out, they visited the "distant country" to find four cities; they investigated the claims. But their folly, in the words of a commentator, "*wasn't that they didn't think, but that they didn't pray.*" [Have you fallen for this folly? Taken the bait of self-flattery, the idea that if you think well, not pray well, then you're good? Are you running on a theological operating system that does not require prayer?](#) Have you made the assumption that if you've got right theology you'll never be duped. Deception is no respecter of right thinking; Joshua just read the whole law. [Satan loves a prayerless disciple. What he despises is a disciple who prays.](#) Have *you* been duped? You've taken the bait? Nobody likes to be duped. The congregation murmured. It's the same word used of Israel in their wanderings where they grumbled against God. Here they grumble against their leaders. Israel wants to destroy the pagan cities. [They're embarrassed, not convicted. They try to save face, not seek God.](#) What about you? What will you do with your conviction this morning? With prayerlessness? Will you try to save face or seek God? Will you shift blame or shift your posture? God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. He's leaning over the edge of heaven, eager to shower you with grace, *but you have to kneel to receive it*. Confess and repent for, "[God is faithful and has called us to fellowship with his son, Christ Jesus our Lord](#)" (1 Cor 1:9). If you're humble enough to admit you've been duped, you'll enter in to fellowship with Christ.

The Lesson

So what happened to the Gibeonites? The leaders honor God by upholding their covenant of peace with the Gibeonites. They live. Two wrongs don't make a right. But Gibeonites are also cursed: "[Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God](#)" (23). They are reduced to a subservient status, carriers of wood and water. However, they were not treated as African-American slaves, like chattel. Nor were they owned by individual Israelites. Instead they were, as verse 27 says, "[for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord,](#)" meaning they co-existed with Israel and served the gathered people in worship. But now inside of Israel, did they hope to revolt from within, introduce their idolatry, and subvert the worship of YHWH? Is this a Trojan horse, all part of the deception? It's certainly what the Father of Lies would like, to thwart Israel and God, but God proves sovereign. He overrules the deception and the Gibeonites remain a part of Israel for years to come, the covenant of peace upheld. God is true. But more than that, God is good. Turns out serving at the altar put the Gibeonites close to the heart of God. The altar required an abundance of

wood for fire and water for cleansing. Over and over the Gibeonites witnessed worship to a God who upheld his word and forgave sins. Water and wood, water and wood, a daily pointer to the need for sacrifice—to the One who would climb on the wood and spill cleansing blood and water from his side. Surely this transformed them. In fact, we're told hundreds of years later they chose to return the Land after enduring exile with Israel (Neh 7:25). And there they rebuilt the wall around the holy city so worship of the true and good God could resume (Neh 3:7). What a comfort to us, people who fall prey to deceit and embrace flattery, who prefer knowledge over intimacy, people close to worship but cold to God. We can be changed, in an instant. But we have to pay attention to our hearts, not merely to our circumstances. We have to be awakened to grace, wooed to prayer, endeared to Christ. Will you shift blame or shift your posture? "God is faithful and has called us to fellowship with his son, Christ Jesus our Lord." At the end of *Cartel Land*, the filmmaker gets one last interview with a meth doctor. With a black bandanna covering the lower half of his face he says, "*pretty much everyone has gotten corrupted...It's just not going to stop, period. It's a never-ending story.*" But in Christ the story changes, the corrupt are cleansed by the fire of his sufferings, the cursed are blessed, and the sinner set free to a life of dependence on God.