

## RESOLVED

2 Samuel 21:1-6, 10-14

How important is keeping our word and doing what we have agreed to do? Most reasonable people would put that near the top of the list of important things in life. Without the implied trust that is associated with an assumption of integrity in our interactions with others, it is practically impossible to get anything accomplished.

What is our responsibility if we agree to do something and it turns out that the person with whom we made the agreement lied to us about critically important facts that would have influenced our willingness to make the agreement? In the legal system we have today, most courts would rule that a contract that was based on trickery (false information) is voided. That seems like the fair thing to do. Many contracts will have a statement that says that providing false information renders the contract null and void.

Apparently, this understanding was not always the case in various historical times. An example of needing to be careful of what we agree to do and the importance of checking out the validity of the claims of the other party is seen in what the Gibeonites did in tricking Joshua into an agreement when Israel was conquering the land of Canaan.

This was a situation in which all the leaders of the various tribes of Israel agreed to a contract and then later discovered that the other party misrepresented themselves. Joshua and the other leaders swore by God's name to let the Gibeonites live. What is ironic was that while they swore by the name of the Lord and thus made Him part of the deal, they did not inquire of the Lord regarding what they should do before they committed themselves. They asked questions only of the Gibeonites who turn out to be liars.

What responsibility do we have before signing a contract or making a covenant? A 200-year-old Russian proverb was made famous by Ronald Reagan when he quoted it to Gorbachev when negotiating a treaty with the USSR in 1987: "Trust but verify." When making a commitment, we should always do the "due diligence" to know with whom we are dealing and what the potential costs of such a commitment would entail. As Solomon advised in Ecclesiastes 5:5, "Better not to vow than to vow and not pay." This was echoing what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 23:21-23 regarding making vows to God. Making a vow or commitment is not something that is to be done in haste.

Not only do we have a responsibility to do the right thing before making a vow or executing a treaty, we have the added responsibility of doing the right thing after the commitment has been made. When we enter into an agreement with someone, then we give up some of our choices or freedoms. This is why the "verification" step is so important in such a process. Verification (in its simplest terms) is "learning the truth." When we are dealing with people who have their values based on the way the world thinks, then we are vulnerable to being exposed to the world's value system which may be in conflict with the perfect will of God.

It was the Lord's goal to remove all the pagan influence from this land that had been promised to Abraham's descendant so that God's people would not be unfaithful to Him. What Joshua and the other leaders did in their covenant with the Gibeonites was clearly not in God's will, however, the Israelites would be responsible for abiding by this agreement. Since they took an oath in the Lord's name, then the Lord would hold them accountable if they violated the terms of the covenant. This was a situation in which the people exercised their free will but found themselves still subject to the sovereignty of God which holds people accountable if they do not exercise faithful integrity.

If we have carelessly agreed to do something that worked out to be in violation of God's will, what should we do? Are there any good alternatives? Our tendency is to think that we must do God's will regardless of what we agreed to do. The example we have with the Gibeonites shows a surprising collection of priorities and consequences. This example also shows the importance of seeking, knowing, and doing God's will rather than giving authority to people who operate according to the principles of the world.

The account of the interaction of Israel with the Gibeonites spanned about 400 years. The error that Joshua and the tribal leaders of Israel made in 1400 BC was discovered three days after they made the mistake. The agreement to not eliminate the Gibeonites was contrary to the commission they were given by God as they occupied the Promised Land. The reaction of the Israelites was anger directed against their leadership because of this mistake, however, the leaders had agreed by an oath involving God's name and they believed that they could not violate what they had vowed to do even though that meant living with the consequences of violating God's will. To them an oath was a solemn sacred thing, and was not to be broken. The conscience of a person of integrity would require that the agreement to which he swore would be kept even if it would cause harm to himself.

In an effort to assuage their guilt of having made a bad agreement and to perhaps calm down the Israelites who wanted to ignore the agreement and kill the Gibeonites, the leaders came up with a way to penalize the Gibeonites for their trickery. They told them that their lives would be spared but they would have to be servants of Israel: to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the altar of the Lord. Our tendency is to think that this requirement was a good thing to do so that Israel would get some benefits from the bad deal. Wrong!

There is no mention that Joshua or the other leaders consulted with God to determine His will in this matter. Making the Gibeonites the servants of Israel carried an implied promise to protect them from harm from others. In this case the "others" were their Canaanite neighbors who thought the Gibeonites were traitors to their cause of resisting the invasion of Israel. When the Gibeonites heard that five Canaanite kings were putting together a large army to deal with their treason, they sent word to Joshua to come protect them which he was obligated to do.

If the Gibeonites had not been made servants of Israel then their neighbors would have done the job that God had originally intended for Israel to do and the covenant agreement to not kill them would have been moot. At that point Israel had made two bad deals and they lived with the consequences of having pagans in their community and the negative influence of the pagan customs caused problems throughout the first millennium of their history. On the positive side, they did have people around who would provide the wood and water for their worship practices.

Sometime during Saul's reign as king he got the idea that he would (by executive order) fix the problem of the Gibeonites and he had many of them killed. There is no Scriptural record of anything similar to this unless it was something that happened during the time Saul had ordered the execution of the priests at Nob because the High Priest had assisted David when he was fleeing from Saul. After 85 priests had been killed at Saul's order, he then had the town of Nob and all its people and animals destroyed. Since the Gibeonites provided wood and water for the priest, it is probable that many Gibeonites were among those killed at Nob near the end of Saul's reign as king.

### The Cause – 21:1-3

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, "It is for Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." <sup>2</sup> So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them (now the Gibeonites were not of the sons of Israel but of the remnant

of the Amorites, and the sons of Israel made a covenant with them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the sons of Israel and Judah).<sup>3</sup> Thus David said to the Gibeonites, “What should I do for you? And how can I make atonement that you may bless the inheritance of the LORD?” 2 Samuel 21:1–3 (NASB95)

When we encounter something unusual such as a persistent famine, we are faced with the question of whether the problems we are encountering are a result of sinful behavior or just something random that happens. Those who give more weight to random happenings point out that we live in a fallen world and those who give more weight to the idea of sinful behavior being the cause of problems note that God is in charge of everything. Of course, we can argue that both sides are right. Without sinful behavior we would not have a fallen world that does produce some random events. At the same time, God does allow things to happen to bring conviction regarding passed errors and sins that need to be addressed and not just ignored.

How can we determine the difference? We could certainly do what David did. He inquired of the Lord for insight into a problem (famine) that would not go away. We recognize this as an excellent first step and the Lord provided an answer to David’s question.

Saul did many other terrible things toward the end of his reign as king and yet this particular act of killing many Gibeonites (twenty or thirty years ago) was the one thing that God remembered as significant and He withheld His promised blessings upon the nation. There was no mention of Saul having killed eighty-five priests and their family members. Why was there no national responsibility in the case of the unjust killing of the priests but there was for the killing of the Gibeonites?

In the case of the Gibeonites there was a “national covenant” made by the leaders of the nation with the Gibeonites and Saul (as the national leader) violated that covenant and, therefore, the nation was accountable. In the case of the murdered priests, there was no “national covenant” involved but there was the general covenant of God with the people called the Ten Commandments which Saul violated and he was then personally responsible.

With David having been made aware of the covenant violation, he then took action to make atonement for the wrong that had been committed by the nation under the direction of their king. What did David then do? He asked the Gibeonites what they wanted to happen that would cause them to stop holding resentment against Israel.

Do we see a pattern of behavior? Joshua and the tribal elders made a covenant with a group of people they did not know without consulting the Lord. Joshua and the tribal elders took control of the Gibeonites as their servants without consulting the Lord. Saul made a decision to get rid of the Gibeonite influence in Israel without consulting the Lord. David asked the Gibeonites what they thought was appropriate for atonement without consulting the Lord. In each of these cases, the leaders put the nation in situations where the actions the nation wound up taking were contrary to the principles of the Covenant that God had made with Israel. If we “make a deal” with those in the world that provides them any control of the outcome, then they will operate by the value system of the world rather than by the values of the Kingdom of God.

#### The Request – 21:4-6

<sup>4</sup> Then the Gibeonites said to him, “We have no concern of silver or gold with Saul or his house, nor is it for us to put any man to death in Israel.” And he said, “I will do for you whatever you say.”<sup>5</sup> So they said to the king, “The man who consumed us and who planned to exterminate us from remaining within any border of Israel,<sup>6</sup> let seven men from his sons be given to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD.” And the king said, “I will give them.” 2 Samuel 21:4–6 (NASB95)

As it turned out the Gibeonites had given David another opportunity to consult with the Lord on the matter when they told him the things that would not make a difference such as silver or gold or property that had belonged to Saul and they were not asking the nation of Israel to

execute anyone. Instead of taking that information and consulting the Lord, David handed them a blank check – “I will do for you whatever you say.” Once again the leadership of Israel had given up control to those people who did not abide by the principles that God had given to Israel through Moses.

The justice system that was typical of that time among most people groups was harsh and revenge against an adult included harm to his or her family members. The laws and principles given by God to Israel were not the same as those of the pagan world. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:16 we see “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.” We also see a similar statement in Ezekiel 18:20 that says “The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.”

Some may see these statements to be in conflict with Exodus 20:5-6: “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” In the first two references the issues are guilt and prescribed penalties for the guilty. The issues addressed in the Exodus passage are the consequences of sinful behavior of the parents impacting the children but not imputing guilt. If the parents are drug addicts, then the children will be impacted by neglect, exposure to harmful chemicals, poverty, learned bad behavior, failure to be properly trained, etc.

Giving the Gibeonites the benefit of the doubt, they probably acted in accordance with what they thought was the acceptable retribution for the attempted genocide committed by Saul. He had tried to eliminate them and their progeny and they asked for a token action against Saul’s descendants. This would be following the idea of “eye for eye” judgment. Apparently, David did not have a problem with the idea and agreed to do what they asked. We could argue that what they said they wanted was reasonable when compared to the accepted pagan practices. We don’t know how many Gibeonites Saul killed, but it was likely many more than seven. David was also likely influenced by another generally accepted pagan culture practice of the family of the previous king being eliminated from having ongoing influence.

David had promised Saul that he would not do that as we see in 1 Samuel 24:21-22. “Swear now therefore unto me by the LORD, that thou wilt not cut off my seed after me, and that thou wilt not destroy my name out of my father’s house. And David sware unto Saul.” Technically, David did not violate his oath to Saul. Five of the “sons” given to the Gibeonites were born to Saul’s daughter Merab and her sons would not be counted in the lineage of Saul but in the lineage of her husband. The other two were sons of a concubine of Saul. Apparently, children of concubines and maid servants were not as highly regarded as sons of wives. Saul’s lineage continued through the descendants of Jonathan since David preserved the life of Mephibosheth.

#### The Resolution – 21:10-14

<sup>10</sup> And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until it rained on them from the sky; and she allowed neither the birds of the sky to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night. <sup>11</sup> When it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, <sup>12</sup> then David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the open square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them on the day the Philistines struck down Saul in Gilboa. <sup>13</sup> He brought up the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from there, and they gathered the bones of those who had been hanged. <sup>14</sup> They buried the bones of Saul and

Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zela, in the grave of Kish his father; thus they did all that the king commanded, and after that God was moved by prayer for the land. 2 Samuel 21:10–14 (NASB95)

Needless to say, what happened to satisfy the request of the Gibeonites had a significant negative impact on other people whose lives were forever changed. One such person was the mother of two those hanged by the Gibeonites named Rizpah who had been a concubine of Saul.

The Gibeonites were pagan to their core and they had no problem disrespecting the corpses of the sons of Saul by leaving them out exposed to scavengers. This was what was done to enemies when given the chance. It was similar to what the Philistines had done to the bodies of Saul and Jonathan decades earlier.

Rizpah cared for her sons and also showed compassion toward the five sons of Saul's daughter since she devoted herself to protecting the bodies of the seven men from scavengers. This was apparently a 24-7 job and she faithfully kept watch from April until October so that their bodies were not subjected to birds and beasts. We typically don't think about "the person" who was a concubine. This woman took her responsibility of being a mother very seriously and acted in a sacrificial way to preserve the dignity she thought these seven men deserved. We could easily describe her as a "high quality person."

Eventually, David heard of what she had done and that prompted him to do something regarding giving a proper burial to Saul and Jonathan as well as these seven who were hanged by the Gibeonites.

While the retribution on the family of Saul followed pagan ways and violated many of the principles which we believe represent the values of the Kingdom of God, God accepted the action as atonement for what Saul had done to the Gibeonites as the king of Israel and the famine was ended.

We may find this account difficult to fit into our frame work of fairness and that is good that we are bothered by what happened. It shows us where making alliances with non believers and allowing them to set the terms of the agreements can lead. If Israel's leaders had been careful to follow the Lord's directions and had been equally careful to seek the Lord's council at every decision point, then many of these "troublesome" situations would have never happened.