

JOSHUA—WEEK 7

THE MISTAKE



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Joshua, Week 7 — The Mistake
The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)
On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

Joshua seizes on the teachable moment of the victory over Ai to read the entire book of the law to the people of Israel. Then they turn right around and make a ridiculous mistake by forgetting to seek the LORD's counsel.

They seem to always learn from a mistake and then move on to the next mistake.

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1 Joshua 8:30–35

Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: “an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as he who was born among them. Half of them were in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them.

Israel has arrived at a teachable moment and Joshua uses it to teach. The people have just witnessed the hand of God, in both blessing and curse, so Joshua *read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings*. This is what Moses told him to do.

Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: “... And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime. You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the LORD your God is giving you, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey,’ just as the LORD God of your fathers promised you. Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them. You shall build with whole stones the altar of the LORD your God, and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God. And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law.” — Deuteronomy 27:2–8

This means Joshua read them the entire law—Genesis through Deuteronomy. Wow.

But Moses said to do it, “*on the day when you cross over the Jordan.*” This is later, and there’s no way Joshua read the whole thing out loud in one day. What gives?

This is one of those cases when the Hebrew word usually translated as day (יום, “yom”) doesn’t mean 24-hour period. Other examples are Proverbs 25:13, 1 Samuel 8:18, and Exodus 13:10.

Joshua kept this commandment—to the letter.

2 Joshua 9:1–8

And it came to pass when all the kings who were on this side of the Jordan, in the hills and in the lowland and in all the coasts of the Great Sea toward Lebanon—the Hittite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite—heard about it, that they gathered together to fight with Joshua and Israel with one accord.

But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, they worked craftily, and went and pretended to be ambassadors. And they took old sacks on their donkeys, old wineskins torn and mended, old and patched sandals on their feet, and old garments on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and moldy. And they went to Joshua, to the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, “We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us.”

Then the men of Israel said to the Hivites, “Perhaps you dwell among us; so how can we make a covenant with you?”

But they said to Joshua, “We are your servants.”

And Joshua said to them, “Who are you, and where do you come from?”

The men of Israel are suspicious of their claims. The whole thing doesn't make sense.

The Gibeonites say that they *come from a far country*. If they're from a far country, why are they here? If they're here to do business, why are they interested in a covenant? The whole thing just doesn't add up.

Joshua picks up the scent and cross-examines them. “So you're *from a far country*. What country?”

But he'll fail to press the issue. Joshua and the men of Israel are skeptical but not skeptical enough.

This will turn into a study of failure.

There is wisdom in obsessing over failures (both yours and those of others). While this can look like you're depressed, or overly-critical of someone else, learning from mistakes is the best kind of learning.

Emotionally, we like to suppress learning from mistakes because we like to suppress pain. It's not unlike what happens when you stub your toe or hit your funny bone. All you want to do is get past the pain—to get to where you can just forget about it. That's the right thing to do with that kind of pain, because there's no lesson to be learned.

But when something happens where a lesson presents itself—where you might figure out how to avoid that kind of mistake—then suppressing it is the wrong response. You need to fight the desire to end the pain, and pay attention.

And, yes, that means more pain (in the short run). Thinking about what went wrong isn't fun.

But the best coaches do this all the time.

3 Joshua 9:7–15

Then the men of Israel said to the Hivites, “Perhaps you dwell among us; so how can we make a covenant with you?”

But they said to Joshua, “We are your servants.”

And Joshua said to them, “Who are you, and where do you come from?”

So they said to him: “From a very far country your servants have come, because of the name of the LORD your God; for we have heard of His fame, and all that He did in Egypt, and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan—to Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who was at Ashtaroth. Therefore our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spoke to us, saying, ‘Take provisions with you for the journey, and go to meet them, and say to them, “We are your servants; now therefore, make a covenant with us.”’ This bread of ours we took hot for our provision from our houses on the day we departed to come to you. But now look, it is dry and moldy. And these wineskins which we filled were new, and see, they are torn; and these our garments and our sandals have become old because of the very long journey.”

Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD. So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them.

This feels just a bit too stupid, like Joshua knew they were lying and just made the covenant anyway. The Gibeonites don’t answer either question. They never say who they are or where they’re from. Their response to the questioning is awkward, even silly. They just repeat, “*far country*,” and, “*We are your servants*.” That sounds rehearsed. Might Joshua have been tempted by the line, “*We are your servants*.”?

The text makes a point of saying what the Israelites did wrong. *They did not ask counsel of the LORD*. That’s the takeaway, especially given the context. Joshua has done many things that look crazy from a secular point of view, but they were all under the direction of the LORD. This one looks just as crazy.

But this time it’s Joshua’s idea, not God’s.

Always seek the council of the LORD. In other words, always pray first. This is trickier than it sounds. We’re used to asking God for favors. Asking Him for instruction, or help with a decision, is a different kind of prayer. There are ways to do this terribly wrong.

The Bible mentions casting lots and other methods that are analogous to flipping a coin. That is exactly what we must not do. Our seeking the LORD in prayer should be more like Gideon’s prayer about fleece.

Whenever we seek the LORD’s will in prayer, we must leave room for the LORD to not respond—where He effectively says, “This decision is up to you.”

A sign from the LORD must be clear. It can’t leave you wondering, “Was that was just a coincidence?”

And it happened at the end of three days, after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were their neighbors who dwelt near them. Then the children of Israel journeyed and came to their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kirjath Jearim. But the children of Israel did not attack them, because the rulers of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation complained against the rulers.

Then all the rulers said to all the congregation, “We have sworn to them by the LORD God of Israel; now therefore, we may not touch them. This we will do to them: We will let them live, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath which we swore to them.” And the rulers said to them, “Let them live, but let them be woodcutters and water carriers for all the congregation, as the rulers had promised them.”

Technically, Israel didn’t “make” a covenant with the Gibeonites, they “cut” (כָּרַת “kha-raht”) a covenant with them. This is the same sacred ceremony that God used to give them this land in the first place.

Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”

And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”

So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. — Genesis 15:7–11

You don’t break a sacred covenant like that. That’s why the Israelite rulers said, “*We will let them live, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath which we swore to them.*”

So, despite the Gibeonites’ outrageous duplicity, the covenant stands.

This is the flip side of all the brutal things that result from prioritizing God’s law over normal human rules of fairness and justice. Now these clowns get off scot-free because of God’s law. Human rules would void the covenant since it was made under false pretenses.

But God’s rules rule here. They swore an oath and that’s that.

There’s a modern-day equivalent—marriage. Our attitude toward marriage is driven by contract law. The state issues marriage licenses. Our taxes are based on whether we’re married in the eyes of the state.

And, as we’ve all seen, this is now a mess. These laws have gotten so silly I wonder what they’ll think of next. Temporary marriage (a short-term contract)? Marrying your pet goldfish?

Marriage is a covenant. If we treated it like one (took it seriously), the whole world would function better.

But that would be too “inconvenient” for most folks.

Then Joshua called for them, and he spoke to them, saying, “Why have you deceived us, saying, ‘We are very far from you,’ when you dwell near us? Now therefore, you are cursed, and none of you shall be freed from being slaves—woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God.”

So they answered Joshua and said, “Because your servants were clearly told that the LORD your God commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you; therefore we were very much afraid for our lives because of you, and have done this thing. And now, here we are, in your hands; do with us as it seems good and right to do to us.” So he did to them, and delivered them out of the hand of the children of Israel, so that they did not kill them. And that day Joshua made them woodcutters and water carriers for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, in the place which He would choose, even to this day.

There’s an amusing piece of God’s providence on display here. How did they know what the LORD had told Moses?

Because Israel wandered around in the desert for forty years. That gave travelers plenty of time to go back and forth between Egypt and Canaan carrying news of what had happened.

Had Israel gone straight to Canaan after crossing the Red Sea, they would have gotten there before anyone knew what was coming, and this whole deception thing wouldn’t have happened.

But, as always, God was playing the long game, and He had long plans.

It looks like He wants plenty of woodcutters and water carriers for His altar.

This lesson can be very encouraging if we don’t go overboard with it.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. — Romans 8:28

We all make mistakes, sometimes big ones. We can take comfort in the fact that those mistakes do not overturn God’s eternal decree; they do not surprise God in the slightest. In fact, our mistakes are part of His plan. They have a purpose.

It’s in that purpose that we avoid going overboard. One can use Romans 8:28 as an excuse-crutch. Every mistake can just be excused and ignored. That’s an even bigger mistake.

Mistakes are still mistakes. They should be learned from. Our goal is not to see how far we can stretch grace but to see how much we can glorify the LORD.

Job one for every Christian is our own sanctification.

Unfortunately, we often think that job one is everyone else’s sanctification.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When has something good been a teachable moment?
2. When has something bad been a teachable moment?
3. When have you sought a sign from God?
4. What else is a covenant?
5. When has someone over-applied Romans 8:28?

Items for prayer: