

Joshua 9:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes.

Analysis

And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes. But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them.

Despite discovering the deception, Israel honored their oath, demonstrating the sacred nature of promises made in God's name. When the congregation "murmured" (vayillonu, וַיְלִילוּ), using the same verb describing Israel's rebellious complaints in the wilderness, the princes stood firm: "We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel." The repetition of the full divine title emphasizes that the oath's binding nature derives not from political treaty law but from invoking Yahweh's name, making Him witness and guarantor.

This decision reflects profound theological integrity. The oath was obtained through deception, the Gibeonites were Canaanites under divine judgment, and public opinion favored annulment—yet the princes recognized that breaking an oath sworn in God's name would profane Yahweh's holiness regardless of how the oath was obtained. This demonstrates the Reformed principle that God's honor takes precedence over human convenience or even seemingly just outcomes. Truth-telling and promise-keeping reflect God's character (Numbers 23:19;

Hebrews 6:18).

The princes' decision established a crucial precedent: covenant faithfulness, even when costly or inconvenient, maintains community integrity. Centuries later, when Saul violated this treaty and attempted to exterminate the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1-2), God brought judgment on Israel, confirming that the oath remained binding across generations. This teaches that our words and commitments matter eternally, and that God values faithfulness to sworn promises even when circumstances change or new information emerges.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern treaty law generally permitted annulment of agreements obtained through fraud or deception. The Code of Hammurabi and Hittite treaties include provisions for voiding contracts made under false pretenses. From a purely legal perspective, Israel could have justifiably repudiated the Gibeonite treaty. However, Israel's covenant theology operated under different principles—oaths made in Yahweh's name invoked divine authority, making them irrevocable regardless of circumstances.

The congregation's murmuring reflects a persistent pattern in Israel's wilderness experience—the people repeatedly challenged leadership decisions they disliked (Exodus 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Numbers 14:2; 16:41). The similarity of language suggests this was a serious challenge to Joshua's authority, potentially threatening national unity. The princes' unified response—speaking with one voice to uphold the oath—prevented civil strife and maintained covenant integrity despite popular pressure.

The solution of making the Gibeonites "hewers of wood and drawers of water" (verse 21) transformed them from enemies under death sentence to covenant servants with protected status. This intermediate category—neither full Israelites nor exterminated Canaanites—allowed Israel to honor the oath while acknowledging the deception. The Gibeonites served at the tabernacle (later temple), effectively becoming devoted servants of Yahweh, an unexpected outcome of their desperate gambit.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does the princes' insistence on honoring a deceptively obtained oath challenge our tendency to justify breaking commitments when circumstances change?
2. What does this passage teach about the seriousness of making promises or vows "in Jesus' name" in our contemporary context?
3. How can we balance the competing claims of justice (Gibeonites deserved judgment) and integrity (honoring sworn oaths) in our ethical decision-making?

Interlinear Text

לְהַם נִשְׁבַּע וְיִשְׁרָאֵל בְּנֵי הַכֹּם וְלִלְאֵל
had sworn and Israel of smote And the children
H7650 H3588 H3478 H1121 H5221 H3808

אֱלֹהִים בְּיַהְוֵה הַעֲדָה וְלֹא כְּפָשִׁיאִים:
God by the LORD unto them And all the congregation against the princes
H430 H3068 H5712 H5387 H3821 H1121 H5221 H3808

עַל כָּל הַעֲדָה וְלֹא כְּפָשִׁיאִים: לִיל נְאָזִין יְהִלְלֵל
against the princes And all the congregation murmured of Israel
H5921 H5712 H3605 H3885 H3478 H3808

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 15:4 (References Lord): In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.

