

Joshua 9 (1984 NIV)
***A Bad Mistake Turned Good*¹**

I. Upsetting the Equilibrium

On 5 Feb 2012, 5-year-old Jothilakshmi from the district of Villupuram in India, got up in the morning to do her usual thing—brushing her teeth. Five days later on 10 Feb, she was admitted to the hospital and died of liver failure two days later.

On 22 Feb, 3-year-old Iyyappan, also from the same district, got up in the morning to do his usual thing—brushing his teeth. He too fell sick and was admitted to the hospital. He died a week later on 29 Feb, also of liver failure.

The cause of their sudden deaths was uncovered. They had both mistakenly brushed their teeth with rat poison that was packaged and sold like toothpaste. Rat poison is highly toxic and can severely damage the liver, brain and kidneys if consumed.

(*The New Paper*, 5 March 2012, p. 16)

Bad mistakes in life can be costly and even deadly. But when we look at Joshua 9 today, we learn that a bad mistake can bring about good outcome.

II. Analyzing the Discrepancy (vv. 1-15)

Joshua 9 introduces us to a tribe in Canaan called the Gibeonites. The city of Gibeon was located only 25 miles from the camp of Israel at Gilgal. It was on Joshua's list of cities to be destroyed. God commanded Israel to destroy all the cities in Canaan (Deut. 20). Yet, God also told them that they could offer peace to cities that were outside Canaan. Somehow the Gibeonites knew about this law and decided to use it for their own purposes.

Verses 1-15

1 Now when all the kings west of the Jordan heard about these things—those in the hill country, in the western foothills, and along the entire coast of the Great Sea as far as Lebanon (the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites)—

2 they came together to make war against Joshua and Israel.

3 However, when the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai,

4 they resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended.

¹ This sermon is crafted using the narrative approach of Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot*.

5 The men put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy.

6 Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us."

7 The men of Israel said to the Hivites, "But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?"

8 "We are your servants," they said to Joshua. But Joshua asked, "Who are you and where do you come from?"

9 They answered: "Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God. For we have heard reports of him: all that he did in Egypt,

10 and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan—Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth.

11 And our elders and all those living in our country said to us, 'Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, "We are your servants; make a treaty with us."'

12 This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is.

13 And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey."

14 The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the LORD.

15 Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath.

Powerful alliances began immediately to form in both the north and the south of Canaan. Deadly enemies were brought together in alliances as they united themselves against God's people.

The Gibeonites were not willing to openly go against Israel. So they used a ruse (trick) designed to deceive the Israelites by hiding their true identity. They tricked the Israelites to believe that they were from a country outside Canaan. They evidently knew that God had commanded the Israelites to totally destroy all the inhabitants in Canaan, but make peace with those outside it.

It appears they really did believe in the power of the God of Israel much like Rahab. They knew they could not withstand the power of God and did the next best thing in their thinking—they turned to deception in order to save themselves from the power of God's destruction through Israel.

They disguised themselves as weary travellers who had been on a long journey. They appeared before the Israelites in dirty and worn-out garments. Their food was dry and mouldy, their wineskins old and patched, and their sandals worn and thin.

They lied that they had come from a great distance to show their respect for the power of Israel's God and wanted to be allowed to live as Israel's servants (i.e. subjects protected by Israel).

Many deceptions come to us every day, each trying to convince us that it wants to help us be better people of God's creation.

Deception #1: "IF GOD LOVES YOU, THEN YOU DESERVE BETTER!"

This causes us to doubt God's love for us. It says to us, "If God loves you, then why are you suffering the way you are; shouldn't God be taking better care of you? Look at the Tans and the Lim's—see how much they have and how little God has given you. You deserve better." When we begin to doubt and don't feel God's love for us, we stop being content with and in Him.

Deception #2: "IF GOD HAS GIVEN IT TO YOU, THEN FLAUNT IT!"

We are often tempted where we are weakest. But we can also be tempted where we are strongest. Every one of us has been gifted by God. We have unique strengths and abilities to use for God's glory. But if we are not careful, we use it for our own self promotion.

Maybe you have to deal with these voices of deception from time to time, or you are already facing them at this time.

The voice of deception that spoke to Joshua and his leaders might not be saying the same things. But Joshua and his leaders were just as vulnerable.

Why? This is because there is something that is universally true in human nature—i.e. our human vulnerability to be swayed by feelings and pride.

Joshua and the leaders of Israel fell to the ruse of the Gibeonites because they allowed them to play tricks on their feelings and pride.

They heard the "sob" story of the Gibeonites. They felt for them with real sympathy. They believed the lie of the Gibeonites. Their feelings were tricked.

They heard how the Gibeonites praised and feared the God of Israel for what He had done in and through Israel—the great deliverance out of Egypt, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and the famous victories over the Amorite kings. Israel felt proud about their God. But the most important is this—they felt very proud about themselves. They sampled the provision of the Gibeonites. They saw the visible evidence but they did not see the hidden deception. Why? This is because they did not seek counsel from the Lord. They thought they were capable of good judgment. After all, they were conquerors. Their pride blinded them to the deception. In today's language, we say that they were presumptuous because of their prayerlessness.

It is always a mistake for us to lean on our own wisdom or judgment. It was a mistake then ... and it still is. The exhortation of God's Word is (Prov. 3:5-7): "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil."

Unfortunately, Joshua and the leaders trusted in their own understanding and became wise in their own eyes. Without seeking counsel from the Lord, they made a peace treaty with the Gibeonites and let them live, even sealing that by oath in the Lord's name.

There is something that is universally true in human nature—i.e. our human vulnerability to be swayed by feelings and pride. Joshua and the leaders of Israel fell to the deception of the Gibeonites because they allowed their feelings and pride to be manipulated.

III. Disclosing the Clue to Resolution (vv. 16-21)

Verses 16-18a

16 Three days after they made the treaty with the Gibeonites, the Israelites heard that they were neighbors, living near them.

17 So the Israelites set out and on the third day came to their cities: Gibeon, Kephirah, Beeroth and Kiriath Jearim.

18a But the Israelites did not attack them, because the leaders of the assembly had sworn an oath to them by the LORD, the God of Israel.

Three days later, Israel discovered their bad mistake of making a peace treaty with the Gibeonites. These people were Canaanites. God had commanded that they be destroyed.

The human way is to react with tit for that. You deceive me; I kill you. You do me wrong; I will do more wrong to you.

But Joshua was caught in a dilemma. Israel could not destroy the Gibeonites because they were on oath to God to let them live.

When you commit something on oath to God, it means that God is your witness to what you say. And when we don't honour that commitment, we dishonour God and we show no fear of Him.

Verses 18b-21

18b The whole assembly grumbled against the leaders,

19 but all the leaders answered, "We have given them our oath by the LORD, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now.

20 This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them."

21 They continued, “Let them live, but let them be woodcutters and water carriers for the entire community.” So the leaders’ promise to them was kept.

When the people realized that they had been tricked, Joshua would not give excuses for his mistake. He would also not correct the mistake of being deceived with a second mistake of breaking the oath to let the Gibeonites live. Two wrongs don’t make a right. He said to his people, “We have given them our oath by the LORD, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now. We will let them live.”

Here’s where God can help us bring about good even in a bad mistake. It is not tit for tat, not correcting one wrong with another wrong. It is:

- Owning up to our mistake.
- Willing to face the consequences.
- Remaining true to what we have committed (as long as our God-given conscience allows).

IV. Experiencing the Gospel (vv. 22-25)

When God comes into the picture to bring something good out of a bad mistake, we see and experience hope.

Verses 22-25

22 Then Joshua summoned the Gibeonites and said, “Why did you deceive us by saying, ‘We live a long way from you,’ while actually you live near us?

23 You are now under a curse: You will never cease to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God.”

24 They answered Joshua, “Your servants were clearly told how the LORD your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you. So we feared for our lives because of you, and that is why we did this.

25 We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you.”

While Israel could not go back on their oath, the Gibeonites had deceived them, so a punishment fitting their sin had to be prescribed. First, Joshua rebuked them for their dishonesty and then sentenced them to perpetual slavery as woodcutters and water carriers for Israel.

The Gibeonites (enemies of God’s people) deceived Israel. They were judged and became slaves to God’s people. But being such, they came under the protection and influence of God’s people for all their days. That’s hope.

The Israelites were not discerning and were tricked to make a treaty with the Gibeonites. But they became masters of a people who did not worship the true God, and thus, they were able to influence them for Him. That's hope.

Israel made a wrong commitment to make peace with the Gibeonites. But they did not break that as they had made an oath in the name of God.

We apply this to marriage. These days, more and more marriages of couples with grown-up children have ended in divorce. It is not till death do us part, but till our kids grow up do us part. I am not surprised if many of these divorces involved Christian couples who once said their marital vows before God. But sometime through the years, they said to themselves, "This is a mistake. I cannot live with this commitment anymore. It has to end."

Perhaps, some of these are living with the painful consequence of marrying an unbeliever. They need to be reminded that God is in the business of helping them honour that commitment. He wants them to have a sanctifying influence on their unbelieving partner. For the believing spouse, the love for the unbelieving partner is still there. But the deep chasm between their differing spiritual values and priorities has often led to misunderstanding, rejection, and loneliness.

TESTIMONY OF KATHY CORDELL (she became a Christian some years after her marriage):

For the last seven years, I've found myself caught in this divine dilemma: torn between the love of my life (husband) and the Lover of my soul (Jesus).

Brian (not his real name) and I were married 13 years and had two children when I accepted Jesus as my Savior. While being drawn intimately to the Lord, I experienced joy and excitement like I'd never known. My lifestyle began to change as I lived 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come!"

But to Brian, something seemed fundamentally wrong with this Scripture! He liked the old creation, and I morphed into someone he didn't know. He believed in God, but felt I had taken "this thing" way too far. My weekdays became interspersed with Bible studies and ministry meetings, and weekends were filled with participation in church services. My taste in movies (among other things) changed ... In addition, I claimed to be in love with someone else! His name was Jesus, and to my husband, he seemed like a real threat to our marriage.

Brian began to feel abandoned and soon his justifiable feelings of jealousy and loneliness were projected as anger and resentment. He criticized my new friends, church activities, and books I read. Rejection hit every time he changed the radio from my favorite Christian station, and I felt guilt-ridden whenever I tithed or said “yes” to ministry opportunities. I began to lose respect for my husband and the empty places in our marriage grew until any attempt to communicate was strained. We were definitely unequally yoked.

And strenuous is exactly what our marriage became.

After much help through the years, Kathy had learned to love Brian and stay committed to their marriage. She went on to add:

Brian still doesn’t go to church or attend Bible study. He still changes the radio station every time we get in the car. But he better understands the importance of God’s centrality in my life, and I understand his need for my attention and respect. Whatever God is doing in Brian’s life is between him and a very personal Savior. I cling tightly to the biblical promise that says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31). In the meantime, I’m thankful for the miracle of a lighter yoke.

Yes, you hear pain in this testimony. But at the same time, you hear hope as well.

(<http://www.kyria.com/topics/marriagefamily/marriage/spirituality/tornbetweenlovers.html>)

In the same way, the story of the Gibeonites shows how important it is to keep our commitments, even when it’s tough going. The well-being of others depends on it. Scriptures warn us not to enter into vows or oaths lightly. And it is crucial to keep them with integrity once they are established. Be slow to say “yes” or “no”, but once said, let your “yes be yes” and your “no be no”.

V. Anticipating the Consequences (vv. 26-27)

Verses 26-27

26 So Joshua saved them from the Israelites, and they did not kill them.

27 That day he made the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the LORD at the place the LORD would choose. And that is what they are to this day.

In God’s grace, this bad mistake of making an “unholy” peace treaty with the Gibeonites turned out to be a blessing—to keep the Gibeonites’ idolatry from

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defiling the true faith of Israel, their work would be carried out in the tabernacle (for the altar of the Lord—v. 27), where they would be exposed to the worship of the one true God.

How gracious of God. The Gibeonites had the privilege of being brought close to the Lord and spiritual things on a regular basis. I believe they became believers in time to come, like Rahab and her family.

That is the amazing way the grace of God works. He is able to turn a bad mistake into something good. While it is true that the natural consequences of our sin generally have to run their course, God in His sovereign grace not only forgives, but He also overrules our mistakes and reverses the sin effect to bring forth blessings.

But let us not knowingly and freely do wrong or sin, thinking that God will bail us out or clean up our mess every time. For that is not only a flawed thinking, but a sin in itself as well.

We are human. We make mistakes, even costly mistakes. We try to cover our mistakes—tit for that or correcting one mistake with another mistake. But two wrongs don't make a right.

How then shall we live with our mistakes? It is by knowing and turning to God.

- God is all knowing—we might as well be honest with our mistakes and not blame others for them.
- God is love—when we admit our mistakes, God lovingly forgives us.
- God is just—we must humbly and willingly face the consequences not only as God's judgment, but also as His lessons for us.
- God is our help and hope—we ask God to grant us strength to live with the consequences, and trust Him to work through the consequences for His glory, for our growth, and even for the blessing of others.

We make mistakes in life. But God can turn our bad mistake into something good.

There's no helpless or hopeless situation in our fallen world of mistakes IF you and I turn to God as the source of our help and hope.

Amen!