

EXPERIENCING THE PAST—THE BIBLE WAY

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Denis Kaiser

We are gathered here in a place that has historical significance for Seventh-day Adventists. Our movement did not begin here, yet it was here where the church was organized, where the headquarters of our church were located, and where most General Conference sessions took place until 1901. Our history contains many lessons for us today and we would do well to learn from them. We can learn from both the successes and the failures of our Adventist forefathers. Like them, we want to trust God's leading and guidance. Nevertheless, we do not want to follow and repeat their mistakes.

However, this morning I would like to take you on a different journey, to a different time and place. Please, open your Bibles to the book of Joshua chapter 1. If we were to have the time, I would read with you the entire book of Joshua.

The Setting of the Book of Joshua

The book of Joshua begins with the words, "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant" (Josh 1:1). God had raised Moses to deliver the people of Israel from their bondage and slavery in Egypt. Their Exodus from Egypt was preceded with and accompanied by many miracles. The people celebrated the Passover. When they left Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea on dry foot. When they had crossed the wilderness and arrived at the entrance to the land of Canaan, they sent out twelve spies to survey the land, yet only two spies brought a positive report, inspired by their trust in God's leading. What Moses began, Joshua was supposed to finish.

The Sending of the Spies

In Joshua 2, we read the story of Rahab and the hiding of the spies. Forty years earlier, Moses had sent out twelve spies to explore the land of Canaan. Ten spies brought back a negative report, which put a stop to the conquest before it could actually begin. Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, brought a faithful and positive report. Interestingly, here in Joshua 2, Joshua decided to send only two spies to explore the city of Jericho. Maybe he wanted to make sure that the report is going to be positive. When the two spies returned to him, they said, “Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us” (Josh 2:24).

Besides the link between the two spy stories, we find an example of God’s amazing grace in this chapter. Although the citizens of Jericho are doomed, there are honest souls in the city. Rahab was certainly not perfect because she lied to the men of the king of Jericho (Josh 2:4-5). She hid and protected the spies because she believed the reports about the mighty acts of Israel’s God and she realized that her only hope was in connecting with the people of this God (Josh 2:8-16). The later biblical account reveals that both David and Jesus were descendants of Rahab (Matt 1:5), and that she was an example of faith and good works (Heb 11:31; James 2:25).

Passing Over the Jordan River

The next stage was the passing or crossing over the Jordan River, which we see in Joshua 3 and 4. It is this act of passing over (*abar*) the Jordan that makes them worthy of their name—Hebrews (*ibri*), which means literally those that pass over or cross over. It is in the book of Joshua that this word “passing over” appears the most—57 times. In fact, more than twenty percent of the occurrences of the word in the Book of Joshua are in chapters 3 and 4, where Israel passes over the Jordan.

There is another interesting fact about this chapter—the phrase “on dry ground.” The author highlights that the Israelites passed over the Jordan “on dry ground” because the water stood still and rose up on one side (Josh 3:16). The phrase, which appears in Joshua 3:17; 4:18, 22, occurs only in two other places in the Bible. The first place is in Exod 14:16, 22, 29; 15:19—the crossing of or passing over the Red Sea during the Exodus. The other place is found in 2 Kings 2:8 when Elijah and Elisha passed over the Jordan “on dry ground.” Thus, the entrance into the land is closely, once again, linked with an event during the Exodus.

As the priests are leaving the Jordan River, they erect a memorial, consisting of twelve stones from the Jordan (Josh 4). Those stones were to serve as a reminder “to the people of Israel . . . forever” that God saved them (Josh 4:7). Similarly, during the Exodus God instituted a memorial for the people of Israel to remind them of God’s salvation. Exodus 12:14 states that the Passover day was to be for them “a memorial day” to be kept “as a feast to the Lord; throughout [their] generations, as a statute forever.”

Moreover, as they were passing over the Jordan River and setting up a memorial, the frequent use of the phrase “the Lord your God” (Josh 3:3, 9; 4:5, 23[2x], 24) reminded them that the Lord was their God, their personal Savior.

Circumcision of a New Generation

The people of Israel have just passed over the Jordan River. They are in enemy territory. Now, the Canaanites and Amorites were afraid because they had heard what the Lord had done—that He had dried up the Jordan River so that the people of Israel could pass over. At this point, God asks for something that goes against every human logic. In Joshua 5:2, He says, “Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” Verses 4-6 stress the reason why this was necessary. “All the men of war who came out of Egypt” had been circumcised but

they died in the wilderness. Those that were born in the wilderness had not yet been circumcised. Yet, why, at such a crucial point, would you circumcise and thus debilitate all the people who can fight? Could He not have asked them to do that before they pass over the Jordan River, while they are not yet in the land of their enemies? Instead, after the great manifestation of divine and miraculous power, He asks them to debilitate themselves and make themselves completely vulnerable, thereby showing their trust in His divine protection. If the Canaanites and Amorites wanted to attack, the best time to attack would be at this point and the next couple of days before the Israelites are healed again. Our human instinct tells us that it is stupid to debilitate ourselves, but God asked those Israelites to do exactly that. When God instituted the rite of circumcision in Genesis 17:10, He wanted to make sure that each generation of Israelites knows that circumcision is more than just a sign. It is an expression of trust in divine power to produce the promised seed, the Savior. Similarly, after Moses had an astounding encounter with God at the burning bush, God made sure that Moses' sons are circumcised before he begins his mission of delivering the people from Egypt (Exod 4:24-26).

The First Passover in the Land of Canaan

After the people of Israel manifested their trust and confidence in the Lord to save them, they celebrated the Passover (Josh 5:10-12). During the forty years of wanderings in the wilderness God had provided them with manna, yet as they celebrated the Passover, they also ate, for the first time, of the produce of the land (Josh 5:11). As they arrived in the land of Canaan and ate of the fruit of the land, there was no need any more for the manna and thus the next day it ceased (Josh 5:12).

This was the first time after the Exodus that they celebrated the Passover. Once again, they went through an experience that their forefathers had experienced during the Exodus (Exod

12:1-28, 43-51). The original Passover was linked to their trust in God's protection from judgment and their deliverance from bondage and oppression. Celebrating it again reminded them of God's mighty acts in the past as he delivered their people. As the first Passover marked the beginning of the Exodus, the second Passover marked the end of the Exodus. Finally, they had arrived.

A Divine Encounter

As Joshua was near Jericho, he saw a man with a drawn sword in his hand. He asked him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" The answer of the man is surprising. He said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Joshua fell on his face and worships. When you meet the Lord the question is not whether He is on your side. The question is whether we are on His side. Joshua then asks, "What does my lord say to his servant?" (Josh 5:13, 14). The answer of the commander of the Lord's army is reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3:5, 6. He says, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy" (Josh 5:15). Once again, Joshua as a representative of the people is led through an experience akin to one that Moses as the leader of the people went through in connection with the Exodus. It is not just enough to hear what God has done in the past. It is not just enough to put your trust in the Lord that He will protect you from harm. And it is not just enough to make a covenant with the Lord and accept his mercy and grace. We need an encounter with the Lord that brings us to our knees and prepares us for what is coming. We need to cling close to Him. Is it not amazing how God, step by step, led the people of Israel to re-experience the experience of their forefathers? Thus, it is no longer just the experience of their forefathers but it becomes their experience.

Taking the City of Jericho and the Land

After the promise that God would be with Joshua as He was with Moses for forty years; and after two spies bring a faithful report like the two spies forty years earlier; and after Israel passed over the Jordan River “on dry ground” as Israel did when they passed over the Red Sea forty years earlier; and after Israel set up a memorial as a reminder of God’s deliverance like their forefathers did forty years earlier; and after Israel circumcised themselves, thereby showing their trust in God’s power to save and protect; and after Israel celebrated the second Passover as they entered the Promised Land like the Israelites forty years earlier as they were leaving Egypt; and after Joshua had a divine encounter with Jesus who appeared to Moses forty years earlier in the burning bush, the Israelites finally began to march around Jericho (Josh 6). Instead of besieging the city or running against it with human power, they followed God’s pattern of creation of six days and a seventh day that was set apart. Unlike the creation week however, this event was not one of creation for Jericho but one of de-creation. For Israel, on the other hand, it was a creation of something new, an event for which they had waited for decades, even centuries. The following chapters show the failures and struggles, the victories and successes of God’s people to trust in the Lord. We want to expect that everything went well afterwards, but it did not. The story of God’s people is filled with examples of pride, selfishness, the desire to control, the desire to please. Yet the story of God’s people is also filled with examples of God’s intervention, patience, mercy, and deliverance.

The stories show the mercy and accommodation of God to those who do not seem to know better, for example, as in the case of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9. They believed the stories of God’s mighty acts and deceived the Israelites into a covenant with them. Now the Gibeonites were another ethnic group, a Canaanite tribe, doomed for destruction. However, when the Gibeonites became the target of their neighboring kings because of their peace treaty with the

Israelites, Israel honored the covenant and fought for the Gibeonites. Even God honored that covenant by intervening in numerous miraculous ways (Josh 10:1-15). When people choose to ally with Him, He does not ask them what nation they belong to or what race they are. He fights for them. God's mercy and grace is just astounding.

Joshua's Farewell and Covenant Renewal

As Joshua came to the end of his ministry, he called together the leaders and the people of Israel. In his farewell speech in Joshua 23, he reminded the elders, heads, judges, and officers of God's ability to protect them too and lead them as well. Joshua stressed that as God has fought for them in the past, He will fight for them also in the future. In his speech, he repeats one phrase over and over again—"the Lord your God." He does not say "the Lord my God" or "the Lord our God." He says "the Lord your God" thirteen times in fourteen verses, which suggests that Joshua really wanted to make a point with his. The phrase is not used either in the previous chapter or in the following chapter. In fact, forty percent of the occurrences of that phrase in the book of Joshua appear here in this chapter. Thus, we can assume that Joshua used the phrase "the Lord your God" intentionally, to make a point. He is about to leave and he wants to leave behind a legacy; he wants to encourage the leaders to make the Lord their personal God. The Lord is not just supposed to be the God of the people, or the church as we might say. He is supposed to be their personal God, which means that they should develop a personal relationship to Him. This is further corroborated by his instruction what they should do—first, to "cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day" (Josh 23:8); second, "be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God" (Josh 23:11); and third, do not "cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you" and intermarry with them so that they become a snare to you (Josh 23:12-13).

Joshua encouraged them that all of the good things that God had promised them have come true (Josh 23:14-16).

In his speech to the people in Joshua 24, Joshua serves as the mouthpiece of the Lord. The most frequent word until verse 13 is the word “I.” The Lord describes how He led their forefathers out of Egypt and how He led them from the Red Sea into the Promised Land. He fought for them. He protected them. He delivered them. He caused them to harvest fruits that they had not sown and to live in cities that they had not built. Sometimes we think that we harvest what we sowed and that we are responsible for the growth in the church. No! God is the greatest Benefactor. We are just the recipients and co-workers. In fact, we are really servants. The next section in Joshua 24, verses 14-28, Joshua admonishes the people to serve the Lord, yet he leaves the decision up to them. Then the people state their desire to serve “the Lord our God” (Jos 24:16, 24), yet one wonders if they are aware of the fact that they do not have the strength to do that. Without divine help they cannot do it.

The book of Joshua concludes with the death of Joshua. Thus, in Joshua 23:31 it says, “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.” That statement is repeated in Judges 2:7 where it says, “And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel.” Those who saw and knew what God had done for His people served Him. They had not just seen it. They had experienced it. They knew that God was alive and that He had saved them, protected them, led them, made them His instruments, and used them to bless others. Judges 2:10 uses a similar language but presents a completely contrary picture, “And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the

Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” The result of them not making the Lord their personal God is apostasy, idolatry, and a turning away from the Lord (Judg 2:11-15). The problem did not begin here but already earlier on. Did the younger generation see a living, experiential faith that exudes other-centered love? Or, did they only see programs, policies, and rules that do not change hearts? The Book of Judges then presents us with a downward spiral that does not even spare the judges that God called. The Old Testament presents us with people that are broken, imperfect, selfish, and the list goes on. Selfishness and sin are ever-present in the experience of God’s people in the Bible and the need for salvation even more. Thus, I need to ask myself, “Do I know the Lord or the work that He has done for our church?”

Experiencing the Past

In the Old Testament, God frequently urged his people to tell their descendants the stories of His mighty and wonderful acts (Deut 6:20-23). In the book of Joshua, we saw that the Israelites went through several experiences that their ancestors already went through at the Exodus. Thus, God did not just remind them of the way He had led their people in the past but He actually made them experience those experiences for themselves.

The Meta-Story of Scripture

We can see this pattern throughout the Bible. There is often a creation, a fall, an exile, the appearance of a leader figure, an exodus, sometimes a time in the wilderness, a return into the land, and a recreation. We see that pattern on the national level with Israel coming out of Egypt and coming out of Babylon. We see that pattern on an individual level in the lives of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Naomi/Ruth/Boas, David, Elijah, and Elisha. In the book of Revelation, we see similar patterns for the church. In fact, this story of a fall, an exile, and a return into the land is our personal story and it is the bigger story of humanity. Jesus, in his own life, went through that

experience but without sinning. He experienced it but He broke the pattern. In fact, He is the ultimate leader figure who brings His people back into the land, the Heavenly Jerusalem and the New Earth. We all are waiting for that. Amen!

Moses began the Exodus and Joshua, who in Hebrew is called *Jeshua* and in Greek is called *Iesous*, completed it. The powerful preacher Elijah began the work of leading the people of Israel back to God, and Elisha, the man of God, worked so many miracles. In his death, he seemed to have the power of life. One year after he died, a dead person's body was thrown into Elisha's grave and when it touched Elisha's remains the man became alive again (2 Kings 13:20, 21). The powerful preacher John the Baptist began to sow the gospel seed, yet through his own death, Jesus delivered us from death and sin, and made it possible to return eventually into the Promised Land.

The Meta-Story of Adventism

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have walked through similar experiences. Under the preaching of the first angel's message through William Miller and other Millerite preachers in the early 1840s, the believers yearned for their Savior and Friend Jesus to return and take them to himself. For their belief and preaching, many of them were expelled from their churches and as a result, others left their churches voluntarily. Charles Fitch interpreted this antagonism of the popular churches against the Second Advent message as a renunciation of Jesus—they did not want Him to come. Thus, Fitch began to sound the second angel's message in the fall of 1843. However, Jesus did not come back in October 1844 as expected and the believers experienced a major disappointment. In order to understand what they had missed, they went back to their Bibles and studied them. They discovered the biblical truth about the heavenly sanctuary, the seventh-day Sabbath, the third angel's message, the sealing, etc. As those truths were integrated

and interconnected, Sabbatarian Adventists found in their Bibles a prophetic identity (Rev 12:17; 14:12), a message, and a mission that pushed them to share these newly-found beliefs with others to the ends of the earth.

Nevertheless, it is not enough that we listen to and read the stories of the Bible or the stories of our Adventist pioneers. Those of you who have been able to pay a visit to the boyhood home of Joseph Bates at Fairhaven, Massachusetts may have an idea how the museum will gradually take shape and will take visitors into a multi-visual experience that may influence lives. This is mission work. This is evangelism. Their stories fascinate and inspire people to stand up for something they believe in. Their stories teach people about our beliefs. But beyond that, when we read and learn about the lives of our Adventist forefathers, we find people to whom we can relate. We find people that went through struggles and successes, like those that we experience. We can see how God worked in their lives, how He strengthened, guided, corrected, and blessed them. “Be strong and courageous” (Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18)—as God led them, He wants to lead us too. God led Joshua the way He had led Moses. The same way, God wants to lead us as He led our early Adventist pioneers. Yet they all were in need of divine grace. Joseph Bates shared the Seventh-day Sabbath more widely than anyone else did in the late 1840s, yet this “real founder of Seventh-day Adventism,” as James White pointed out, failed to make the merits of Christ the foundation of our salvation. James White, the principal architect of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, who united people into one organization, suffered several strokes because of overwork. The resulting nervousness caused tensions even with his wife, yet they were able to reconcile. Uriah Smith, who served as editor-in-chief of the *Review and Herald* for thirty-five years and was therefore the principal educator of the church, still needed to be educated on matters of righteousness by faith. A. T. Jones of 1888 fame, highlighted Christian

freedom and perfection in the Holy Spirit as the central motif of organization, yet his controlling leadership style reflected more of self than of the Spirit. George Butler, who had to carry the burden of succeeding James White as General Conference president, tried to defend theological orthodoxy and protect the church from apostasy in the face of real Sunday laws. Yet the prophetic messenger Ellen White reproved him for his attempts of centralizing power and hampering theological study and growth. Even Ellen White herself, who had special insights in the deep things of God and a precious relationship to Jesus, conceded her sense of insufficiency, lacking knowledge, and failure. By making herself vulnerable, she becomes a real and authentic person. As we look through our history, there is not one person who did not need God's grace and mercy, His longsuffering and patience. In fact, there is actually one person who did not need forgiveness and grace—our Savior and Friend Jesus. Yet, every day even He asked for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. How much more then, do we need the daily infilling and unifying grace of the Holy Spirit? Our Adventist pioneers were not faultless. They made mistakes. Human brokenness did not spare anyone. Wherever you look in the history of our church, you find people who needed Jesus. They yearned for God to lead them but it did not make them omniscient or flawless. God's testimonies through Ellen White testify to that reality. The highest place that they could reach was when they became vulnerable and conceded their wrongs, insufficiencies, and need at the foot of the cross. Authentic people become examples to others, not because they never make mistakes, but because they are honest with themselves, with others, and with God, and because they admit their constant need of Jesus. Thus, the lives, experiences, and stories of our Adventist pioneers may fascinate and inspire us to follow their examples in our personal lives and how we relate to one another. We too need God's grace every day again.

As we review the history of the Bible and as we review the history of Adventism, we find people (spies) who have promised that the Heavenly Canaan is a worthy and wonderful place. By accepting Jesus as our Savior, we have embraced the merits of a crucified and risen Savior, the true Passover lamb. Through our baptism, we have walked through the water, or in other words, crossed over. Jesus' death is a memorial of salvation for all times and it is tied closely to the death that we have died to our old selves as we were buried in the water. Our hearts have been circumcised. Yet have we had a personal, direct encounter with the commander of the Lord's army?

In December 1892, Ellen White sent a letter to the brethren at the General Conference, which was read at the General Conference session about one month later. In this letter, she said,

In reviewing our past history, having travelled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what the Lord has wrought, I am filled with astonishment and with confidence in Christ our leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history. We are now a strong people, if we will put our trust in the Lord; for we are handling the might[y] truths of the Word of God. We have everything to be thankful for. If we walk in the light as it shines upon us from the living oracles of God, we shall have large responsibilities, corresponding to the great light given us of God. We have many duties to perform because we have been made the depositories of sacred truth to be given to the world in all its beauty and glory.¹

As we gather here at this annual council, let us not focus on each other. Let us focus on "the Lord our God," serve Him, follow His leading, embrace His sweet spirit, and remember how He has led our forefathers through their struggles so that their successful experience with Him may be our experience.

¹ Ellen G. White to the Brethren of the General Conference, December 19, 1892, Lt 32, 1892, EGWE, reprinted in Ellen G. White, "We Had a Hard Struggle," *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, January 29, 1893, p. 24; Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White: Being a Narrative of Her Experience to 1881 as Written by Herself, with a Sketch of Her Subsequent Labors and of Her Last Sickness* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), 196.