

The Salvation of the Gibeonites

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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Is anybody here a Hivite? Is anybody here today from Gibeon? I recently watched an encouraging series by Pastor Doug Batchelor on the life of Joshua, which included a sermon on the Gibeonites, and I am indebted to him for many of the ideas and concepts that we'll share today.

There is a reason why we open the pages of this book called the Holy Bible, and that is because even though it was written centuries ago, it speaks to us today. We experience the same battle against sin and self that people did long ago and even though we dress and drive differently than they did, in many respects the conflict that rages within us is very much the same. The Bible, more than any other book on earth, addresses those issues and presents the facts that we have been born in sin, since the Fall of Adam and Eve, but there is a loving and powerful God Who wants to save us from ourselves and prepare us for a life on this earth that is richer and more meaningful than we would have otherwise, and to prepare us for life to come that is grander than we can even imagine.

Satan designs to blind our eyes from this grand plan and get us focused on anything but the eternal realities that the Bible brings to light. To this purpose he has invented a million and more distractions and deceptions, with which he has successfully shielded the eyes of most people in the world from the glory of God's program. One of his most successful deceptions is to cloud people's minds so that they don't really see themselves as they are, lost sinners apart from God's grace. He gets people thinking that they are really okay, really quite good; at least better than that fellow over there. In this way he leads people to not discern their true condition and their very real need of a Savior. Today's story addresses that way of thinking.

In many of the Old Testament accounts, which focus on the nation of Israel, we find ourselves walking in the sandals of His people, the "chosen race." In today's study we will find ourselves walking in the path of some who were not members of the Israelite family. This in itself is important to see, because it reminds us that God is the God of all families on earth, whether they were born as children of Abraham or not. The reason He chose the nation of Israel was so that they could deliver the Good News to the whole world. Christ's salvation on the cross was to benefit the entire human race.

Let's go back then some 3400 years, to the time period when Israel entered the Promised Land. Historians provide the date of 1405 B.C. to be the date of their crossing of the Jordan and coming into Palestine. The Lord worked in a mighty way to make this happen, including the halting of the Jordan waters during the spring flood stage, in order for them to cross over and the falling of the walls of the well-fortified city Jericho.

He had given them strict command that when they came into possession of the land they were not to make any covenant of peace with any of its residents. They were to completely destroy them and dispose them from the land. If you're tempted to think that this was cruel and harsh, remember that God had given these people light and wisdom through the witness of Abraham, who was told that he was not to possess the land of Canaan, but live there as an alien and stranger. The reason given was this: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years (which began with Hagar's mocking of Isaac and continued through the Egyptian bondage). And also that nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age (he was at age 175). But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." Genesis 15:13-16.

By Joshua's time, God had given the inhabitants of Canaan 400 years to receive and apply truth. Now that these 4 centuries had passed, their probation had come to a close and they were to be destroyed. Joshua's eye was not to show any mercy. Just a short time before this, when Moses gave his farewell speech, he had impressed the Lord's will on the minds of the people. "When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them." Deuteronomy 7:1, 2. Notice particularly the inclusion of a group of people called the Hivites. In Deuteronomy 20:10-15 Moses gave further instruction, allowing them to make peace with nations that were "very far from you."

The miracles that accompanied the departure of Israel from Egypt and which continued through their wilderness wanderings were well known among the Canaanites. They had heard of the plagues that befell Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna and the water from the Rock, and then more recently the victories God had given this nomadic group of people, not known for their skill in warfare, against Sihon, a king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan, territories south and east of the Dead Sea. These were great and mighty kings, and it mystified the peoples of Canaan how the escaped slaves from Egypt could defeat them. They had heard, and some of them

might have been close enough to even see how the stalwart walls of Jericho had mysteriously fallen and its kingdom had collapsed. These stories sent chills of fear and foreboding down the spines of the citizens of Canaan. It was evident that a Supernatural power was attending these people.

There was one group of them however, who came up with a survival plan. They would negotiate for peace. The people of Gibeon came up with an idea. It appears that they were acquainted with the instruction that Moses had given Israel before he departed, as we will see in the story as it unfolds in Joshua chapter 9, which begins with these words. “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 of it, that they gathered together to fight with Joshua and Israel with one accord.” Joshua 9:1, 2. That was the approach that most took against the invasion of Joshua; they mustered their forces to repel and withstand him. This despite the record of how other mighty nations had failed in this attempt!

On the other hand, we read of another approach taken by one of the people groups. Here’s what they did. “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.’ But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, ‘Perhaps you dwell among us; so how can we make a covenant with you?’

“And 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 (notice that they were acquainted with the special and unique name of Yahweh, spelled LORD with all capital letters); 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.”’” Joshua 9:3-13.

Later when asked by Joshua why they had resorted to this deception they replied, “Because it was certainly told your servants 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.” Joshua 9:24.

Evidently these people had come to a different way of thinking than the other nations which were going to gather against Joshua in war. They were convinced that that would be futile, so they concocted this other approach. They knew that if they presented themselves as residents close by, which they were, that that wouldn't work, because the Israelites were prohibited from making an agreement with those within the country. Gibeon was about 8 miles northwest of Jerusalem, and only about 15 miles from Gilgal, where Joshua and the encampment of Israel were at the time. However, they were allowed to form an alliance of peace with the cities that were “very far” away.

So they made an appeal and put together the worst of their garments and baggage. Anyone having a wineskin that was so old that it leaked could bring it out from the closet. Anyone having sandals that were ready to fall apart was asked to donate them to this project. Someone who had forgotten that loaf of bread baked last week contributed his moldy offering. Then they made their way the short distance, to visit Joshua and appeal for peace.

Our story today is not about how Israel should have reacted to this situation. The Bible tells us that they erred in that they “did not ask counsel of the LORD.” Joshua 9:14. That's another topic. Nor is it about the evil of deception, which is clearly proscribed by the Bible. Rather, the lesson for us today is the manner in which the Gibeonites recognized their only way of salvation, their only hope of survival. In this respect, there is a Gospel message in this story, something from which we can learn and take encouragement.

It was absolutely true that the armies and kingdoms of Canaan didn't stand a chance against God. The thickest walls were as a fence of straw to His angels who excel in strength. The sharpest swords and the fiercest chariots of iron with their knife-like extensions from their axles, which acted as scythes to mow down the enemy, were nothing to Him. So with what could the Gibeonites approach Joshua and negotiate peace with him? Could money buy their freedom? That wouldn't work. Would they succeed in battle against the forces assisted by God Almighty? No! What could they do? What could they bring with which to barter?

There's only one thing they could do. They could present their poverty. They could present their helplessness and need. That was it! Torn sandals, moldy bread, broken wineskins and worn clothes were the bargaining chips they brought to the negotiating table! Not the usual fare for striking a deal. But it was all they had. And it worked! But when it was discovered that they were actually neighbors, living close nearby, “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.” Joshua 9:27.

We are in this story. This time we're not the children of Israel, but we're the Gibeonites, who also were called the Hivites. This may shock some people, but it's true. Like them, we have absolutely nothing with which to earn God's favor. Not our education, not our money, not our accomplishments, not anything. The Bible describes all of our righteousnesses as being filthy rags. Isaiah 64:6. There will be a group of people who approach God at the last day and present their good deeds saying, "Haven't we done this, and haven't we done that?" But they will be rejected, because they never established a personal relationship with Christ. "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified." Romans 3:20.

But there is something we can present to God, and that is our need. There is one way by which we can approach God, and that is the way demonstrated by the publican who prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The Pharisee had proclaimed his own goodness before God while praying in the temple, while the publican had presented his need. Which, according to Jesus, was accepted and justified? It was the publican, wasn't it. The publican was a New Testament Gibeonite, coming only in his tattered rags. He was like the prodigal who came knowing that his own behavior had earned him nothing but reproach and shame. Do you feel like you're a lost sinner? That qualifies you for His grace!

Let's take a closer look at the things that the Gibeonites brought that day as evidence of their poverty. They had old wineskins. Back then they didn't have plastic or glass containers, so they stored and carried their beverages in the skins of animals. They would tie off the legs and arms and these skins became their bottles. But through age, the skins would become dry and brittle, and the bottles would leak.

Does the Bible talk about old wineskins? Notice what Jesus said. "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins." Mark 2:22. The "new wine" to which He referred is the true Gospel based on the blood of Jesus, the Good News that God loves us and saves us from our sins. The new wineskins are the new hearts into which God pours His Good News. The point is that there's no purpose in trying to put God's Good News into our old "skin." We have to have a new heart put within us. It's not like God takes our old lives and puts a patch or a Band-Aid on here and there and that's it. No! We become "a new creation" when we are in Christ. II Corinthians 5:17.

The Gibeonites had old wineskins and they had old bread, so old it was dry and moldy. I can remember back in my college days buying bread from the PUC bakery; lovely bread, baked in cylinders so the loaves came out round, perfect for round veggieburgers. But sometimes I would try to save time and buy more than I could use immediately. What happened then? It went to waste. It turned a lovely shade of green. It was no longer fit to eat.

The lesson of the moldy bread they brought is similar to the lesson of the old wineskins. "Bread" in the Bible stands for teaching or doctrine. The true bread is Jesus Christ, the living Word, as He is revealed in the written Word. He said, "I am the true Manna, I am the Bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger." John 6:35. It is the teaching of Jesus revealed in His inspired Word that brings life. He is the true Bread which nourishes our souls and protects us from the deceptions of the devil. If Eve had relied on the Word of God instead of what the devil told her, the story of Planet Earth would have turned out very differently.

There's a lot of other "bread" out there. There are many other doctrines other than what the Bible teaches. The devil has put thoughts into men's minds, leading them to spread about things that are not true. This is like dry, moldy bread. It leaves a sour taste in your mouth. It doesn't nourish. There's only one true Gospel, and that is centered in Jesus. It's sad to see today that many are becoming more and more attracted to the religions of the world that are based on mysticism and spiritualism, myths and fabrications. This should not be! Why should this enlightened society, blessed by so much light, go back to the beggarly superstitions of paganism?

The Gibeonites had sandals that were old and torn. In the Bible sandals or our feet represent our walk, our lifestyle. Here again, in ourselves we have nothing with which to recommend ourselves to a holy and righteous God. Our "walk" is stumbling and crooked. We've strayed from the path all too often. Our feet have led us into ways that dishonor our heavenly Father. When the prodigal returned home, with great rejoicing the father called for new things to replace the tired and worn out or lost articles which had belonged to the son. Among those things the Bible tells the father asked for were sandals. Luke 15:22.

When we come to Christ we are given these new "sandals" that represent a new walk, a new way of living. Included in that is a desire to share what we've learned with others. Paul encouraged the Ephesians with these words: "Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel." Ephesians 6:15. He was probably thinking of Old Testament passages like Isaiah 52:7, which he quoted in his letter to the Romans. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation." Nahum 1:15 says something very similar.

When we see ourselves apart from Christ and recognize our true condition, we know that the wineskin is old and brittle, the bread old and moldy, the sandals old and torn, and our clothes old, tattered and worn. Clothes in the Bible represent works. When Adam and Eve were created, they were made in the image of their Creator, of Whom we read that He clothes Himself with light as with a garment. Psalm 104:2. The beautiful covering of light which adorned Adam and Eve, made in their Maker's image, was forfeited by sin and they recognized their nakedness, attempting to cover themselves with fig leaves.

Throughout the Bible clothes, or lack thereof, tell the sad state of humanity in moral nudity before a holy God. At least the Gibeonites, put forth an accurate picture, coming in their worthless garments. How sad it is when men and women think they're okay in their own "clothing." But when the searching eyes of the Infinite God come upon them, they will discover that their covering was totally inadequate. The coat of skins made for Adam and Eve; the prodigal's new robe when he returned; the bride's festive gown at the great wedding, all tell the Gospel story that Christ has provided us a garment, even His own righteousness, which covers our sinful nakedness. It is the only thing that will. He offers it to us freely, though its cost cannot be calculated.

There is nothing we can bring to the table to recommend ourselves to God. Our only hope is to present our need and plead mercy. This He is only too willing to give, if we come in sincerity and humility. This is what the Gibeonites did. Joshua (the Old Testament name for "Jesus") told them that their lives would be spared. The Gibeonites said, "'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." Joshua 9:25-27.

When Joshua discovered that the Gibeonites had deceived them, he told them they were "cursed." But God turned the curse into a blessing. Their job was to cut the wood that became the fuel for the altar, and to draw the water which bathed the priests and sacrifices. They were "woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God." They were to continue to be servants with these tasks for the remainder of their days.

That wasn't so bad! Besides having their lives spared from destruction, they became the ones who kept the fire burning and the water flowing. Isn't that what you and I want to do? Is there a higher position than being a servant of the Most High God, of serving in His house of worship? If we do our small part to keep the fire burning and the water flowing so that the news of Christ's love and sacrifice can be shared with others, we will be greatly blessed and bring honor to the name of our Lord. Are you a Gibeonite?