

Victory by Faith: Joshua 6

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We're back to our study of Joshua this morning, and we come to a very exciting chapter, a very well-known story. It's the account of Jericho's walls falling down. As we're going to see, it's a story of victory by faith. The Israelites experience a most astounding and complete victory over the city of Jericho. But it's not by their own might that they gain this victory. It's by faith in God. God is the One who fights for them. God wins the battle. The Israelites simply do what the Lord tells them to do. They wait on Him, trust in Him, and He acts mightily on their behalf.

“From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.” (Isaiah 64:4, ESV)

That's precisely what is happening in this event. And thus we see the mercy and kindness of our great God. We, too, will experience victory by faith. In the spiritual battles we face, as we trust in the Lord and His power, He will go before us and show His power to conquer evil and fulfill all of His promises to us.

God's commands. Israel's faith. Enemies destroyed.
Promises kept.

MAP

To give you the geographical context of these events, here's a map showing the main lines of advance as the Israelites invaded Canaan. Before crossing the Jordan River they gained some land on the east side of the Jordan. Now they have crossed the Jordan and are ready to attack Jericho.

Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world. It is referred to in the Bible as the city of palms. The place is an oasis, so it's easy to understand why people would be attracted to living there. It's estimated to have been about 10 acres at this time. So it wasn't a huge city. What they really had going for them was the city wall.

Another thing to know about Jericho, and about the geography of this region, is that Jericho is one of the lowest cities in the world (almost 1,000 feet below sea level). And it's about 3,500 feet below Jerusalem, which is just 17 miles away. And that shows us the very steep ascent from Jericho up to the hill country just west of the Jordan River valley.

I tell you this so you can understand the necessity of conquering Jericho. This city was like an entry point into the land of Canaan. And if you were going to conquer Canaan, you would have to conquer Jericho. You couldn't just bypass Jericho and begin the ascent into the hill country, because then you would have an army at your back. Jericho must fall. Then they could proceed to Ai at the top of the hill, giving them a vantage point to divide and conquer the rest of the land. There will be a southern campaign, and then a northern campaign.

God's Commands

Notice that God's commands at the beginning of Joshua 6 are accompanied with a promise. Verse 2, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor." In other words, the victory is yours. It's as good as done, because I said it will happen. God is promising to fight on their behalf, and He's reassuring Joshua of this.

And this is interesting in juxtaposition to verse 1. Verse 1 highlights the difficulty of taking this city. Jericho was shut up inside and outside. The people were scared, yes. But they had quite a structure to hide in. They had a fortified city. They were surrounded by these tall, strong walls. And they were all huddled up inside their fortress. Nobody was going in or out.

So verse 1 serves to emphasize the magnitude of what God is about to accomplish for His people. It's like the parenthetical comment in chapter 3:15, "now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest." That helped us to realize what an amazing miracle it was for God to stop that water from flowing so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground. Something impossible from a human standpoint. It was no difficulty for God.

Again, here at the beginning of Joshua 6, we encounter a scenario that seems very difficult from a human standpoint. But it is no difficulty for God.

The Lord gives Joshua these curious commands in verses 3-5. If you're very familiar with this story, you may not be struck by how curious these commands are. Familiarity can sometimes dull the shock value of many Bible stories. But let us be struck afresh by how odd these commands are. What kind of battle plan is this? March around the city. Then the next day march around the city again, then again, then again, then again, then again. 6 times, over 6 days. Then on the 7th day march around the city 7 times. Blow the trumpets and shout, and the wall will fall down. Then you take the city. What a strange, strange battle plan!

But it's certainly God's prerogative to do things as He pleases. He has lessons to teach His people. And He is doing this all for His own glory, to display His great power as He both punishes a wicked people for their rebellion against Him and rewards an undeserving people whom He has chosen to bless.

God is creative, isn't He?! I think we should appreciate that about Him as we consider this story. God does some of the wildest things sometimes, things that leave us scratching our heads. But He certainly makes His point. Israel is to wait on Him, and He will work for them. He will fight for them.

There are some other commands from God in this chapter that I'm going to deal with more fully next Sunday. In verse 17 and following Joshua gives commands to the people, commands which came from God, Himself (recorded in Deuteronomy 20), commands to devote everything to destruction. Verse 21 says that they did just that, "They devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword." That's a difficult verse to read, especially in light of the fact that God commanded it.

I'll mention some things this morning that help us to think through this biblically. But I also want to use next week's sermon to more fully wrestle with the concept of holy war in the Bible, and this concept of devoting things to the Lord for destruction. We need to remember that these are commands given specifically to Israel as they were taking possession of the Promised Land. This is also a very unique judgment God was bringing upon the inhabitants of Canaan.

I encourage you to give some thought to this over the course of the next few days and I hope you'll be back next Sunday when we will consider these questions more thoroughly.

Israel's Faith

The strangeness of God's commands, and Israel's precise obedience to those commands, provides us a striking picture of faith. We think of the many negative examples Israel gives us. They were so often unfaithful. They were a stubborn, stiff-necked people. Even here, as we'll find out in chapter 7, there was not perfect faith or perfect obedience. But still, it's extremely encouraging to see this act of faith on the part of Joshua and the people. They pressed on toward Jericho and did as the Lord told them.

Imagine if you were among the men of war marching around the city. How would you have felt after the 5th or 6th day? There has been absolutely no progress, it would seem. The walls are still just as strong as they were on day 1. They have not weakened in the slightest.

And maybe you've had to endure taunts from the soldiers of Jericho who are perched on top of that wall. They have made fun of you, day after day, for thinking that this marching is going to somehow defeat them. What good is this doing, after all?

Do you ever feel like that? Maybe you feel exactly like that when it comes to certain areas of your life. God's commands seem so strange, sometimes. And the ridicule of others can wear you down, especially when you can't clearly see the benefits of doing what God has told you to do.

Being godly and honest and kind in your work place may seem strange to some. And you may even watch as others pass you up for promotions, people who are ungodly, dishonest and unkind. But somehow they've weaseled their way up the ladder. They know how to step on others to get what they want. And you're left wondering if your godliness is of any value.

Sexual purity is scoffed at in our culture. As a young person to say that you're waiting to have sex until you're married may sound just as strange as marching around the walls of Jericho day after day. It may not make sense sometimes. You may wonder what you're really accomplishing as you seek to obey God's commands.

The world perceives things from a very limited vantage point. The soldiers of Jericho must have wondered what was going on. This is very strange indeed. The Israelites must have wondered what was going on, too. How is this actually going to work? What's going to happen?

The encouraging example for us in this text is that the Israelites pressed on even when there were no visible signs of victory. They continued to follow God's orders even when it appeared to be doing absolutely no good. Their trust was in the Lord. They had faith that the Lord would do as He said He would do, that He would win this battle for them.

And what did they have as a symbol of God's presence with them? Another thing to observe in this chapter is the prominence of the ark, the ark of the covenant.

When we analyze the details of what was done, what God commanded them to do, we realize that this is not so much a military campaign as it is a worship service (of sorts). There are the priests with their rams' horns marching in front of the ark of the covenant. And trailing behind the ark was a rear guard of armed men. And these trumpets were blowing continually as they circled the city. It was a kind of marching worship service. The focus wasn't on the soldiers, but on the ark of the covenant.

The wording of verse 11 is interesting. After recording Joshua's instructions, it says in verse 11, "So he caused the ark of the Lord to circle the city . . ." What's really happening here is the Lord is circling Jericho. The ark, representing the Lord's presence, is surrounding Jericho. Remember, the battle belongs to the Lord. He's the One who's going to destroy this city and grant Israel access to the land He had promised them.

Another curious feature of this procession is that it was conducted in complete silence, other than the trumpets. The trumpets blew, but the men were all silent. Joshua gives those instructions in verse 10, "You shall not shout or make your voice heard, neither shall any word go out of your mouth, until the day I tell you to shout." We know what was going to happen at that point, when they all shouted. But for the first 6 days, and most of the 7th day, they marched in reverent silence. This was no normal march. They weren't responding to the taunts that may have been coming from the soldiers of Jericho. They weren't discussing with one another, speculating what might happen and when.

They were, in effect, accompanying the ark of the covenant around and around and around that city. Their faith in God was not a blind faith. It was not an ungrounded faith. This was not some superstitious ritual, like they were counting on their lucky number 7 to win the day. They were trusting in Yahweh, following His instructions, and waiting for the victory He would accomplish.

What have they just witnessed, just days before? They watched as this same ark of the covenant was carried into the raging waters of the Jordan River, and then the waters stopped. And as the ark was held there in the midst of the dry river bed, all Israel walked across on dry ground.

Now they are trusting that God's presence among them is going to burst forth in great power yet again. This is a moment for the highlight reel of Israel's history. Their faith was shining brightly on this occasion.

Israel's faith in this event is recorded for us, not only here in Joshua 6, but also in Hebrews 11:30 where it says, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days." This is victory by faith. They experienced miraculous and amazing victory that day. But they couldn't take any of the credit for themselves. It was all God. It was the God who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.

Enemies Destroyed

Let's look at this from a different angle now, and consider the enemies who are destroyed. What do we know about these people? Well, we know that they were a very wicked people, indeed. Their sins were even more heinous than most. We know that all people, apart from Christ, are totally depraved and capable of despicable acts. We also know that God graciously restrains evil, among believers and unbelievers, so that nobody is as bad as they could be. But in some places God allows sin to run rampant. And that seems to have been the case among the peoples of Canaan.

The hearts of these people were hardened against God, and they were involved in such things as incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual acts, and bestiality. Leviticus 18 gives many prohibitions about sexuality, forbidding incest, adultery, sacrificing children to idols, homosexual acts, and bestiality. Just prior to this list of commands, the Lord says, "you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes" (v. 3). And following all those prohibitions, the Lord says, "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean . . ." (v. 24).

It is clear that the people of Canaan had sunk very low in their sexual perversions and idolatry. Now they are receiving the judgment they deserve.

Going back to verse 1 of Joshua 6, the description of Jericho being shut up inside and out gives us a picture not only of the physical state of the city, but we could think of it as a description of the spiritual condition of their hearts as well. The people of the city were spiritually closed. Rahab's window was open, with the scarlet cord hanging down. That was the one opening, the one place where there was openness to the God of Israel. But the rest of the city remained shut up, hardened against Yahweh.

Now, an important thing to note here. I have described the wickedness of the Canaanites. But it was not the wickedness alone that made their destruction certain. It was their hardness of heart, their refusal to repent, their refusal to make peace with Yahweh. They resisted Him to the very end.

The reason I say this is because Rahab was spared destruction in spite of her wickedness. She was a prostitute, after all. So it's not like she had set herself apart from the other inhabitants of Jericho in terms of morality. It's not like she was virtuous, and therefore she was saved. No, she was saved because of her courageous faith in the God of Israel.

We need to be reminded of this again and again. The contrast between Rahab and the rest of the city is not a contrast between holy living and wicked living. It's a contrast between faith and rejection.

The city of Nineveh gives us helpful contrast as well. Nineveh was another very wicked city in ancient times. But after Jonah preached there, the city repented. And God did not destroy them. The same might have been true for Jericho, if they had all responded like Rahab, if they had responded like Nineveh.

The people of Jericho were destroyed for their stubborn rebellion against the One true and living God. And in God's providence, the destruction they deserved was also the victory He had promised to Israel.

Promises Kept

A Promised Curse

At the very end of the chapter Joshua pronounces a curse on the man who rises up and rebuilds Jericho. In doing this thing, he will lose both his oldest son and his youngest son.

“In [the days of Ahab] Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.” (1 Kings 16:34, ESV)

We're not given many details there. We don't know how these sons died, or what exactly the connection was between the building of the city and their deaths. But the point is very clear.

What God says will happen, will happen. Whether it's a blessing or a curse. This should cause us to take the warnings of

the Bible seriously. When God says, “Don’t do such-and-such . . . or else,” He means it. The “or else” will come to pass, if you arrogantly and rebelliously disregard His warnings.

A Promised Blessing

But the kept promise I want to emphasize at the close of this sermon is the promise kept to Rahab that she would be spared the destruction which came upon her city.

As much as we might wrestle with the fact that God ordered the complete destruction of Jericho, the other main feature of this chapter is the salvation of Rahab. If you read from verse 16 to verse 25 you’ll notice the narrative goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth between the destruction of the city and the salvation of Rahab. Richard Hess, in his commentary on Joshua, even did a word count in the Hebrew and found that there is almost as many words given to describing Rahab’s rescue as there are given to describing Jericho’s ruin. He concludes, “The salvation of Rahab was as important as the destruction of Jericho” (page 134). 86 words describing Rahab’s rescue, 102 telling of Jericho’s destruction.

Verse 22 references the promise that had been made to Rahab. It’s fitting that Joshua allows the same 2 men who had spied out the land to be the ones to go and rescue Rahab and her family. Joshua tells the 2 spies, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring out from there the woman and all who belong to her, *as you swore to her.*” Rahab had identified herself with the people of Israel, God’s chosen people. She had a reverent fear and awe of this great God who parted the Red Sea and gave the Israelites victory over their enemies. Rahab affirmed (in Joshua 2:11) that “the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” She was putting her faith in the God of these Israelite spies. And she risked her own life to identify with the Israelite people, to protect those spies.

And now, in chapter 6, she experiences the deliverance promised to her. She is brought out of Jericho to dwell with the people of Israel.

Several weeks ago when I was preaching about Rahab from chapter 2, I mentioned how Rahab’s story is our story as well. We have received a promise of deliverance. We know that judgment is coming. Destruction is coming upon our city, upon our world, upon all those who continue in their rebellion against God. But when that day of judgment comes, those of us who are united to

Christ by faith and thus identified with the One true and living God, we will be spared.

Imagine Rahab and her family gathered in that house, which was built into the wall. Imagine them peeking out the window as the Israelites marched around and around the city. Rahab and her family knew that the God of Israel was capable of destroying Jericho. It may have seemed silly that Israel's army was just marching around the city. But Rahab believed in the power of their God, who was now her God as well. She knew that Israel's God could part the Red Sea, could stop the Jordan, and could certainly destroy Jericho as well.

She also believed another thing. She believed in the power of God to save. She knew that destruction was coming. She also believed that she and her family would be spared that coming destruction. So they waited in that house, with the scarlet cord hanging out the window. They waited for their deliverance from destruction.

In many ways, Rahab's situation during that time parallels the Christian life in this world. We have been promised deliverance, and we are awaiting that future deliverance from destruction.

We look forward to that day when we will be gathered among the people of God to enjoy His presence forever.

In closing, let me apply this story very directly to your life and mine. You must understand that God hates sin. His justice requires that He punish sin. And because sin is such a serious offense against a perfect and holy God, the only just punishment for sin is an infinite punishment. A slap on the wrist will not do. Nothing short of eternal damnation is required. We may cringe at the utter destruction that came upon Jericho. We may ask ourselves, "Did they really deserve that?" Yes, they did. And so do I. So do you. We deserve to be completely destroyed because of our rebellion against Almighty God.

But here's the Good News. God is merciful. He is a God who saves. He delights to save those who put their trust in Him. Rahab is a picture of this. She wasn't good enough for God. She didn't get her life all cleaned up and then present her good deeds before God. No, she was just an immoral woman who believed in the power of God to judge and to save. She cast herself on His mercy, and she was saved.

The same can be true for you. Cast yourself on the mercy of Jesus Christ. He died on the cross to bear the infinite punishment we deserve. By trusting in Him, by asking for His forgiveness, you will be identified with the people of God. You will become a child of God. And you will have the future inheritance of heaven to look forward to.