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Joshua #7

Sermon Summary #7

Who Really Fought the Battle of Jericho? Joshua 5:13-6:27

The famous story of the collapse of the city of Jericho is all about **faith**. That isn't my interpretation. It isn't a conclusion that I came to simply because I wanted to emphasize the subject of faith. That this narrative we've just read is all about faith comes from Scripture itself. Let me explain.

As you probably know, Hebrews 11 is a list of numerous OT men and women who displayed remarkable faith in their relationship with God. People such as Abel and Abraham, as well as Noah and Moses, together with Isaiah and Isaac and Samson and Samuel are mentioned in the chapter often called, "The Hall of Faith." But of greater interest to us today is the statement we find in Hebrews 11:30. There we are told that *"by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days."*

The walls of this formidable city fell because Joshua and the people of Israel believed God. It's just as simple as that. The Israelites honored God by trusting him to act on their behalf and whenever God is honored God acts.

But what exactly did they believe? Their faith certainly wasn't a blind leap into the dark. This couldn't have been an ill-founded act of desperation on their part. In what or in whom did they put their trust? If we take into consideration much of what we've already seen in the book of Joshua, it appears that there are three answers to the question, all of which are true.

(1) They trusted or believed in God's presence. We must remember that the ark of the covenant was the place of God's presence. The presence of the ark meant the presence of God. And no fewer than ten times is the ark mentioned in Joshua 6. They put their hope and all their confidence in the presence of their God.

(2) They also trusted in God's power. I grew up in Sunday School singing a silly little song that I won't sing for you now, that went something like this: "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho; Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came a tumblin' down!" Technically speaking, that's not true. Joshua never raised so much as a hand against Jericho. He never launched an arrow or even threw a rock in the direction of the walls of this city. God "fit" the battle of Jericho! It was his power and his alone that accounts for what we read in this chapter.

(3) They also had faith in God's promise. According to Joshua 6:2, the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor." And this, of course, was simply one more affirmation of the promise that God originally gave to Abraham, that he would grant Israel entrance into Canaan and possession over its cities, such as Jericho.

It was their faith in God's presence and power and above all else in God's promise that accounts for victory. Despite overwhelming odds and against all reason, contrary to what could be seen from a purely human point of view, they clung tenaciously to God's promise that he had *already* given them Jericho.

If you think about it you will see that virtually every issue in life, as well as every obstacle, circumstance, or problem comes down to a question of faith. This is **not** an endorsement of what is known as the Word of Faith movement, which argues, incorrectly and unbiblically, in my opinion, that if you will simply believe hard enough and banish all doubt from your thinking and then speak forth the "word of faith" you will automatically and as a matter of course receive what you believe.

The sort of faith I have in mind is the kind displayed by Job, who declared: "though he slay me, yet will I trust him." I'm talking about the kind of faith displayed by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3 who put their trust in

God even should it turn out that they are not delivered from the fiery furnace. I'm talking about the kind of faith we see in the prophet Habakkuk, who declared:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places (Hab. 3:17-19).

So let's turn our focus to the faith of Joshua and the people of Israel to see what we might learn from them.

After the crossing of the Jordan River, God ordered Joshua to have all the men circumcised who had been born during the wilderness wandering. This was a way of reaffirming the covenant with Abraham and severing all ties with Egypt. You will be pleased to know that I have chosen not to preach on that passage today. But if you are interested, and I struggle to believe that any man would be, you can read about it in Joshua 5:1-12.

In any case, war loomed large on the horizon. The Jordan had returned to flood stage, thereby cutting off all hope for retreat by the Israelites. The only direction for them to turn was toward the city of Jericho which lay directly in front of them. There must have been a good measure of fear, understandably so. They no doubt had their questions and their doubts as well.

It's understandable, then, that Joshua would have needed some time alone to seek God and his guidance. It was probably at night, while he was praying, that he suddenly heard something; he detected movement; he raised his eyes with his heart pounding in his chest and saw a man “standing before him with his sword in his hand” (Joshua 5:13).

Who was this? Was it a literal man, or perhaps an angel, or something else? On the one hand, a good case can be made that this was indeed an angelic being who, as God's representative and spokesman, is so closely identified with God himself that one struggles to differentiate between them.

However, I'm convinced that this was in fact the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, appearing in human form. Theologians call this a *Christophany*, a word that simply means that God the Son has made an appearance or manifestation. This is not an incarnation. God the Son did not take to himself permanently a literal human nature, flesh and blood. He simply assumed, for a short time, the appearance of a man, indeed a warrior. I draw this conclusion from three things:

(1) In Exodus 3 we read that Moses encountered the Lord on Mt. Horeb in the burning bush. Yet it also says that it was “the angel of the Lord” that appeared to him. But when the voice spoke to him from the bush, he identified himself as God and told Moses, “take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). Those are the identical words that Joshua hears in 5:15.

(2) We are told in Joshua 6:2 that when this “warrior” spoke it was “the Lord.” Thus “the commander of the army of the Lord” in Joshua 5:14 = the Lord himself in 6:2.

(3) Finally, the fact that Joshua fell to the earth and worshiped is best taken as an indication that he knew this was no mere angel but the Lord God himself in human appearance.

But why does he appear to Joshua in this way? The drawn sword suggests battle readiness. But when asked, “Whose side are you on: theirs or ours?” he responds, “Neither!” You surely have heard the famous words of Abraham Lincoln when asked if God was on the side of the North during the Civil War: “Sir, I am not so concerned whether or not God is on my side; rather I am concerned whether or not I am on his.” The “commander” here in Joshua 5 says: “I am here to fight God's battle. Whose side are **you** on, Joshua?”

And how will he fight this battle? The answer is found in his identity. He is the commander of the Lord's “**army**” or the Lord's “**hosts**”. This is clearly a reference to **angels**! See 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 103:21; 148:2; 2 Kings 6:15-17.

Two stories should illustrate this point. In the Andes mountains there was a pastor from among the Quechua Indian tribe named Camilo. A plot was hatched against him, to take his life, but nothing ever came of it. Camilo reported that one day their neighbors asked his wife: "Is it true that you take soldiers to your house every night to guard you?" "No," she replied, "why do you ask?" "Because when your enemies came to kill your husband they saw them and were frightened away, never to return!" Angels!

In June 1920, the people of Shansi, China, were warned of bandits coming. There was great concern for the safety of one female missionary who led a school with 40 girls in attendance. Upon hearing the warning, they prayed fervently. Although there was considerable slaughter in the town itself, no assault was launched against the school. "No wonder," the villagers reported. "The bandits did not dare molest you. On the corners of your compound walls, standing guard, we saw four angels with drawn swords in their hands!"

The *instructions* given to Joshua and the people in 6:2-5 almost strike us as silly. For the first six days of the siege they are told to walk around the city one time each day. They are told to keep their mouths shut and to say nothing. First is the procession of soldiers, followed by priests with rams' horns, then the ark of the covenant, then more soldiers, and the people. On the seventh day, however, they are to walk around the city seven times, at the close of which Joshua will give instructions for them to shout, at which time the walls of the city will collapse.

Can you imagine the reaction among his soldiers and officers when he revealed the strategy to be employed? "Joshua, have you lost your mind? The soldiers of Jericho are strong and powerful. The only way to defeat an army of this size and strength is with brute force. Blowing trumpets and walking circles around them and then having the people shout will only make them laugh at us! We need to scale the walls with ramps and ropes and bombard them with everything we have. We need battering rams and archers and spears and swords. If nothing else, Joshua, at least let us lay siege to the city and cut off their water and food supply."

No, said Joshua, you will do precisely as I have instructed.

Although from a strictly military point of view it seemed absurd to follow this plan, *Joshua and the people put their faith in God: his presence, his power, and his promise to them.*

Let's not forget that when the spies entered Jericho for the first time, Rahab told them that everyone in the city was afraid and their "hearts melted" within them. We have heard about what happened in Egypt, said Rahab. We heard about the parting of the Red Sea. And according to Joshua 5:1, when they heard about how God parted the waters of the Jordan to let the people into Canaan, "their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them."

No wonder, then, that Joshua 6:1 indicates that they were "shut up inside and outside" of Jericho and "none went out, and none came in." On the other hand, if God can control and manipulate natural phenomena, such as the Red Sea and the Jordan River, what makes them think he can't overcome manmade structures like a walled city? But of course, what makes us think they were thinking?!

Whatever lingering fear the Canaanites had of the Israeli people, I doubt if it lasted very long. As they marched around the city, the people of Israel stayed just out of range of the archers on the walls of Jericho but still within earshot of their taunts. Try to imagine the catcalls, the hoots, the scorn, the laughter and ridicule heaped upon them by the people of Jericho:

"You dumb Israelis! Cowards! Idiots! Sticks and stones may break our bones, but marching around in circles ain't gonna' do anyone any harm!"

So why did God order his people to march silently around the city? ***First, he wanted to test their faith, to let it be known if the people were truly trusting in his promise.*** After all, marching in silence without firing so much as a single shot (or arrow, as the case may be) would force them either to mock in unbelief at God's strategy or to trust him ever more fervently. ***Second, I suspect that this was designed to give the people of Jericho an opportunity to repent.*** In other words, it's possible that God called for six days of silent walking for the same reason he told Jonah that Nineveh had 40 days before judgment would fall: it was an expression of his longsuffering and compassion. ***Third, God undoubtedly wanted to make it clear to everyone, both the Canaanites inside the city and the Israelites outside, that when the walls finally collapsed the only explanation is that God did it.*** No one would have attributed

this miracle to the people of Israel. No one would ever have thought that walking in silence could accomplish anything. It was only their faith in the power of God that explains what happened.

But why the silence? Notice that the silence was comprehensive: “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” (v. 10). In other words, no talking in line!

Given the fact that what God had commanded seemed utterly ridiculous, some would have been tempted to murmur and complain and question the order. The silence was designed to reinforce the principle that once God has spoken, all talking must end. Just shut up and obey! It’s as if Joshua was saying to them:

“You know God’s will. So do it. You’ve heard his promise to you. So keep your mouths shut. Endure the ridicule of your enemies. Leave it to God to vindicate you in his time and in his own way.”

The “**great shout**” (v. 20) that came forth on the seventh day was no casual cheer or silly scream or guttural grunt. It was a shout of praise, a loud declaration of confidence in God! “Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (Ps. 32:11).

Clap your hands, all peoples!
Shout to God with loud songs of joy!
For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared,
a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.
God has gone up with a shout,
the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises!
Sing praises to our King, sing praises!
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm!
God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted! (Psalm 47)

So what caused the walls of Jericho to collapse? I’ve read scholars who insist it was an earthquake. Others say that the pitch of the trumpets and the shout of the people combined to create tremendous vibrations that crumbled the walls. Others argue that Israel marching in step created shock waves beneath the walls. Oh, come on! Give me a break! God did it!

And what connection, if any, is there between what happened 3,500 years ago and our lives today? The answer, I believe, is found in 2 Corinthians 10. It’s hard not to believe that the apostle Paul had the destruction of Jericho in mind when he wrote these words to the Corinthians:

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For ***the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds***. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

There is a sense in which we all encounter our own “Jericho’s” in life: challenges, obstacles, opposition from people, Satan, false beliefs, temptations, seemingly insurmountable strongholds, etc.

In such instances, what can our weapons do? They destroy “strongholds” or “fortresses” (NASB). What does Paul mean by this? Verse 5 gives the answer.

First, the “strongholds” we face are “arguments,” which is to say the thoughts, plans, and intentions designed to justify one’s calloused disbelief in God (cf. 2 Cor. 2:11; 4:4; Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 3:20). He is saying that our weapons “destroy the way people think, demolish their sinful thought patterns, the mental structures by which they live their lives in rebellion against God” (D. A. Carson, 47).

Second, our weapons are effective in bring down “every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God,” or, “every pretension that sets itself up against the kingdom of God” (NIV). People will often appear humble in their appeal to intellectual doubt as a way of keeping God at arm’s length. Others “display a supercilious and condescending cynicism” or claim “an intellectual independence that loves to debate theology without ever bending the knee in adoring worship” (Carson, 48). But we have been graciously equipped by God with the necessary weaponry to overcome every arrogant claim, every haughty or prideful thought, every pompous act that forms a barrier to the knowledge of God. We are fully empowered to address every argument used to rationalize sin and to justify unbelief and to delay repentance.

The ultimate aim, of course, is to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (v. 5b). The picture is of “a military expedition into enemy territory, an expedition so effective that every plan of the enemy is thwarted, every scheme foiled, every counter-offensive beaten” (Carson, 50). Whatever ideas of the unbeliever hindered faith, whatever notions or plans were barriers to repentance, they are defeated, captured, and graciously transformed, to be brought under the authority of Christ and ultimately to acknowledge a new loyalty, a new allegiance.

So what then are our weapons of warfare? What is it that Paul utilizes to bring about this triumphant result? Surely he would point to the same armaments he cited in Ephesians 6:13-18, such as truth and righteousness and unyielding proclamation of the gospel and faith and the glory of salvation and the Word of God and persistent prayer. These may not seem formidable, especially when one considers the political power and financial resources available to those who stand in opposition. But they are enough. And they are effective.

Some believe the “strongholds” here are demonic beings, but Paul clearly identifies them as *ideas and arguments and philosophies and excuses that are antithetical to the kingdom and glory of God*.

Yet, again, it is worth asking: *Who is behind these thoughts? Who inspires and energizes such anti-Christian arguments and philosophies? What gives them the force that they appear to exert on the human soul?* We mustn’t forget that it is “the prince of the power of the air” who is even now “at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2; cf. 4:17-19; see 2 Cor. 4:4; Acts 26:18; 1 Tim. 4:1).

Do ordinary Christians today have strongholds that need to be demolished? Yes. Such intellectual, philosophical, and moral enemies to the knowledge of God don’t automatically and altogether disappear when we get saved.

I once heard someone define a stronghold as “a mindset impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable something we know is contrary to God’s will.” What he had in view are negative patterns of thought that cripple our ability to obey God and thus breed feelings of guilt and despair. They are often burned into our minds either through repetition over time (such as occurs in an abusive, incestuous relationship) or through a one-time traumatic experience, or even more commonly through the influence of false teaching and a skewed theology.

Whatever the case, no matter the opposition, the good news is that we have access to powerful and effective resources, adequate to prevail over all resistance and to defeat every enemy (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:20-24). We must dedicate ourselves to thinking and meditating on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent and worthy of praise (Phil. 4:8) and entrust ourselves to the power of the Spirit who can overcome the influence of every negative and destructive thought.

As with the people of Israel, so also with us today, it comes down to a matter of faith: in God’s presence (he will never leave us nor ever forsake us), in his power (we serve a God who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly beyond all that we ask or think according to the power at work in us), and in his promises to us in Christ (and our God cannot lie or fail to fulfill his word).