

Receiving Your Inheritance

Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 6

Initial Success
Joshua 6:1-27
(Read vv. 1-5, 15-27)

Introduction

The story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. It is a staple of Sunday School lessons and Bible story books, and for good reason. It is a classic tale of a virtuous underdog going up against an impossible foe and winning a spectacular victory. This victory resulted in Joshua's fame spreading throughout the whole land, and indeed throughout all of history. This story usually is used to teach that faithfulness to God leads to success – and this is without doubt a central lesson here. But there is much more for us to see in this familiar chapter.

The Strategy

We left off last week with Joshua facing a dangerous opponent. Against all reason he had ordered all the Israelite men to be circumcised. So there they were, the whole army of Israel, laid out in enemy territory but unable even to get up and walk – except for Joshua and Caleb. Joshua took the opportunity to look over his first campaign, and as he approached Jericho he was accosted by a man with a sword, drawn and ready to strike.

Do you remember the command given to Joshua when he was appointed leader of Israel? Moses, God, and the people all charged him to be strong and courageous. We saw earlier this semester that courage is an essential ingredient in faithfulness to God. Now here we see Joshua exhibiting magnificent courage. Rather than run away or hide, Joshua approached this alarming figure and demanded to know his business. It was then that he learned, just as Moses had at the burning bush, that God was indeed present in the land. God had promised to go before Israel into Canaan, and He showed this as the ark of the covenant, God's special earthly home, went into Canaan with them. Now God showed Himself more vividly to Joshua appearing in a human form. Now we can see why Israel was safe even though all her men were incapacitated. God was patrolling the camp! Joshua asked the stranger whether he was friend or foe, but the man replied that was the wrong question. The real question is whether Joshua would follow *Him* or not. *He*, not Joshua, was the true commander of the Lord's army, and he was present to give the battle plan.

We are told that Jericho is sealed up. God had terrified the Canaanites by rolling back the Jordan River, even though it was at flood stage, so the Israelites could cross. They remembered that when this happened during Israel's escape from Egypt, the entire Egyptian army was wiped out. The Canaanites took this to be a sign of impending doom, so they locked themselves up safely in their cities. This is important information. Militarily, this means that the campaign must be a siege – at least at first.

Now Jericho, like all major cities of Canaan, was protected by huge, impenetrable walls. Inside, the inhabitants stored provisions sufficient to endure a siege of many months – long enough for their allies to amass a vast army and attack the Israelites. Jericho would be a very difficult city to take, so God begins by encouraging Joshua with the promise of success. The city, the king, and all the best warriors will fall to Israel. Now, the strategy to bring this about.

And the strategy was... a worship service! What? Is God out of His mind? How in the world will a motley crew of men, women, and children marching around Jericho and blowing trumpets cause the city to

fall? Come on now, isn't this really silly? Suppose God asked you to do something similar. Suppose He appeared to you and said that you would get an "A" in chemistry if you marched around your professor's office playing a trumpet once a day for a week. What would you think? Would you say, "Sure, Lord. Sounds good to me." Or would you doubt your sanity – or God's? I bet you would at least ask for some clarification, or proof. Maybe you would be like Gideon later in Israel's history and ask for a sign to show God is serious. But look at Joshua here. Again and again he simply obeys. Even the nation of Israel obeys. Time after time God makes seemingly ridiculous demands, and every time they obey – without question and without hesitation.

Trusting God

You see, the lesson here is not *merely* that obedience to God leads to success. It is that God can be trusted, even against all human understanding. If God asks you to do something that seems foolish or impossible, you can trust Him to know what He is doing, and bring success out of it.

I have seen this principle at work many times – like when I was a student and we were planning to operate an ice cream stand at the university Spring Fair. The Spring Fair was a gigantic affair. The campus was taken over by carnival rides, food vendors, and side show booths. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over Baltimore would come to campus for that weekend. Our Christian fellowship had previously put up a book table as an outreach effort, but we decided we could do better. We thought that if we offered food we could attract many more people to our booth. And we could make some money to use for camp and conference scholarships. So we applied for a spot and got busy with preparations. We bought lumber and built a booth. We rented a freezer and bought several thousand dollars worth of ice cream. By Thursday night we were ready.

Then disaster struck! We found that we needed a health permit in order to operate. What initially seemed like a great outreach plan and moneymaker instantly turned into a huge financial loss. Most of us were busy with classes and preparing the booth Friday morning, but Bill was able to go downtown to the health office to get a permit. We just hoped he would succeed. About 10:00 I got a call from downtown. "Dave," Bill said, "They won't give me the permit."

What do you do? Give up? Operate without a permit – i.e. illegally? Give away hundreds of pounds of ice cream? Who should absorb the loss? Or would you pray? Could prayer make a difference in this situation?

I said, "Bill, go back there, and don't return until you have the permit." After I hung up we prayed for God to grant the permit. Meanwhile Bill (he is the hero of this story) went right back to the same office and asked again. The rest of us had too much to do to wait around. I still don't know what happened, but by afternoon we had the permit. And were selling ice cream. We made \$900 that weekend and passed out a lot of evangelistic literature.

The point here is that Bill was willing to do something that, humanly speaking, looked ridiculous. The health office unmistakably said no, but he was willing to trust God to change their minds. He probably looked rather foolish showing up again, but he was pretty sure that God had led us in this project, and would do something to solve the problem. Because he trusted God to help him, Bill was willing to do something that appeared impossible and was surely embarrassing. And God did not let him down.

Well, it's no surprise that God's strategy worked for Joshua. Israel marched around Jericho every day for seven days, and on the last day they marched around seven times. At the end, the priests blew their trumpets, the people shouted, and the walls fell down. What should have been a six month siege or more

God accomplished in seven days. The men of Israel stormed the city. They completely destroyed every living thing there and took all the valuables for God's temple. But as the spies had promised, Rahab and everyone in her house were rescued. She had made the decision to switch sides and trust God, and He did not let her down.

Total Annihilation

Everyone loves this story because the good guys win in spite of incredible odds. Just like *Star Wars*, *Mission Impossible*, and all popular stories. But there is one dark aspect to this story – the ruthless murder of everyone in the city. We might accept the killing of all the men, but what about the women, the children, and the animals. Even the babies were killed! To 21st century ears, it sounds horribly unjust. If this happened today there would be an international inquiry – hey, isn't this what happened in the Balkans last decade? Milosevic is on trial right now for killing whole populations in the war between the Serbs and the Kosovars. We call this genocide. It is illegal and immoral. So how did Israel get away with this? Furthermore, what kind of a God would require such a thing? Who would worship someone with such a twisted mind?

Some people read a passage like this and are so revolted that they reject God out of hand. They cannot worship a God who desires people to die, especially innocent people. But this is a rash and unsupportable position. For all through the Bible God shows, over and over, His extreme patience and mercy with people – including wicked people. In the beginning, Adam and Eve deserved to die for breaking God's command, but He let them live – for almost 1,000 years! The whole human race should have perished in the flood, but God let Noah live and start over. God called Abraham to follow Him, and even when Abraham sinned, God was faithful to him. The nation of Israel was so rebellious, any of you would have zapped them if you had been God. But no – God bore with them for 40 years while they learned to obey. As for us, we look at the supreme proof of God's incredible love and mercy on us in Jesus Christ. God became a man and suffered here on earth, eventually dying a horrible death for us – all because He loved us. And we were unworthy of His love. We still are. We sin every day. Every hour we do things that He has plainly said we must not do, but He persistently tolerates us. No, He doesn't tolerate us. Far more – He loves us! He showers innumerable blessings upon us all day, every day. So you see, all the evidence points toward God's attitude as one of incredible mercy and patience. But if this is so, whatever happened at Jericho?

Pastors and theologians traditionally point to the sin of the Canaanites as justification for their utter destruction. God told Abraham that He would wait to give this land to his descendants. You can read about this in Genesis chapter 15. In Abraham's day the inhabitants of the land were not so sinful to justify taking their land from them. God said He would give them four generations, and then the Amorites would be so sinful that they would need to be removed. Like Nineveh years later, God gave them a chance to repent of their sins and turn toward Him. But they refused. It's not that they didn't know better. Abraham taught them about God. So did Isaac and Jacob. But in the end they grew worse and worse. When four hundred years were up, they were so wicked, they deserved to die.

The point here is that this was not a happy tribe who happened to worship a different God. The Canaanites were a perverted, bloodthirsty society. They burned their children alive, fornicated promiscuously, oppressed the poor, and did it all for pleasure. They created some beautiful artwork and built some impressive buildings, but Canaan was a miserable, ugly place in which to live. They were so far gone, God had to do something – so He gave their land to His chosen people.

Now perhaps this seems reasonable so far, but what about the innocent people? Why kill the oppressed? It was a patriarchal society. Why kill the women, when they weren't responsible for the sin? And what about the babies?

Part of the answer to these questions is to recognize that not all the innocent are so innocent. It's true that the women did not sit on the town councils, but women are not incapable of taking matters into their own hands. Right here in this chapter we have an example of a woman who escaped the slaughter at Jericho, and saved her men as well! Rahab switched sides and lived. Others could have done the same, but they didn't. The Bible is full of stories of people who saw that their own society was headed in the wrong direction and joined God's people. Caleb was one. He was not a descendant of Abraham, but joined Israel from the Kenite nation. Several of King David's chief warriors were foreigners who joined him rather than stay with their own country. And of course there is Ruth. You see, there is a long list of people who did what Rahab did. But most of the Canaanites preferred to stay with their friends and run the risk of dying. These people were killed for willingly participating in an evil society.

But another part of the answer lies in the nature of human society. We here in the west, especially America, have drunk so long at the spring of individualism, we can hardly grasp that we are not mere individuals. God created humanity as a race, and He built into us a collective nature. This means that we share the fate of our brothers and sisters. Furthermore, God places rulers over us, and we share the rewards or punishments for their behavior. Think of our own society. Even in America, home of rugged individualism, we reap the rewards of the actions of our leaders. If the president and Congress declare war, we go to war. It doesn't matter if you think it is a poor choice, you are going to be affected by this decision. Taxes, use of your land, the way you conduct your business – these are matters that our leaders decide, and we reap the rewards or suffer the consequences. These days we don't like to think that fathers are head of their households, but the whole family's happiness is determined by the father's choices. President Bush's daughters did not run for office, but they live with the consequences of their father's role as president. The point here is that society necessarily has the principle of representation built into it. Everybody benefits or suffers from the decisions of the king, president, and father. To American ears this sounds very unfair. Why should I benefit or suffer for what someone else does? But the problem here is not the principle of representation – it is us. Clearly our idea of what is fair is out of line. God designed the human race this way. He is far wiser than we, and we ought to learn *how* this is fair, rather than rebel against it.

Returning to our text and applying this principle to Jericho, the babies died because their king and their fathers sinned. Did they go to hell? God doesn't tell us. What we do know is that God Himself died for wicked people, and we can trust such a God to do what is right.

Holy War

But there is still another aspect to the total annihilation of the Canaanites. We don't have time to go into it in detail tonight, but there are signs that this war is entirely different than any other war. And as such, it has an entirely different purpose.

The war against Canaan was unique in history. It was a holy war, a war against sin, and it was conducted unlike all other wars, in the Bible or elsewhere. It's uniqueness is not that God was involved. God is involved in all wars. He is the sovereign, the ruler of the universe, and nothing happens without His involvement. Neither is it that moral issues were at stake. This has been true for many, many wars. What made this war unique is it's prophetic role. This war is a sign of God's judgment on sinful man. God tells us over and over that if we do not obey Him, we will perish. From Adam to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Through all the prophets until Jesus came, God warned the nations to repent and obey Him, lest they perish. Those nations which persisted in rejecting God were eventually destroyed, but it became clear that the real punishment is reserved for the life to come. Like the destruction of those two evil cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, the conquest of Canaan is a permanent picture of what happens in eternity to those who refuse to obey God.

When Jesus came He preached the same message. All through the gospel of Matthew He warns us that those who refuse to believe Him will be cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Read especially the parables in chapters 21 to 25. Over and over Jesus warned us of the peril of eternal torment. In chapter 10 He says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." The annihilation of Jericho is a vivid picture of what happens to men and nations who will not heed Jesus' voice.

But there is one more aspect to this war. Unlike the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah God used His own people to carry forth the death sentence, and in the end He gave the land to them. This also is a picture of the course of history. In the beatitudes Jesus said the meek shall inherit the earth. Christians generally tend not to believe Jesus here. We are so heavenly minded we cannot grasp the simple promise Jesus makes. But it's true, folks. Those who follow Jesus will own the earth. Unbelievers will be wiped out and only believers will remain. This will be accomplished by a war, but not the kind with swords and guns. It is a spiritual war. Christians don't kill anyone, but they do attack unbelief with the weapons of God's Word and prayer.

Conclusion

What is happening here never happened before or since. Therefore all comparisons with other wars are totally invalid. Even Israel never fought this way again. The land had been polluted by the sin of the Canaanites, but God invaded and made the land holy. Remember, that is why Joshua took off his shoes when He saw the man with the sword. A land ruined by sin was cleansed for God's people to live in. They were given the whole land to live in peace.

God used this invasion to give His people a place to live, but it is also a picture of a larger spiritual reality. This is the story of the human race. We all have sinned. We have ruined the earth God gave us. God gave us time to repent, but we refused. Finally, God went to war. God attacked sin in the world. He sent the man with the drawn sword to lead His holy army. This army is even now defeating all its enemies and making the earth safe for God's people. Everyone has a chance to join God's army, like Rahab – but those who refuse will be destroyed.

The man who met Joshua was Jesus. They are companion characters. The name Jesus is the anglicized form of the Greek version of Joshua. Just as Jesus led His people in Joshua's day, so He came to earth in the flesh to lead His people. First He called the apostles, then He called the crowds, and now He calls the whole world. That includes you! He attacked the demons and the false teachers. He revealed God and promised the whole world to His followers. In Matthew He said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Jesus attacked Satan and won every encounter. At last He was killed, but this was His greatest victory of all. For in His death, Jesus broke the power of sin and death, and destroyed the power of Satan forever. Jesus rose and continues to lead His army.

Jesus is engaged in a holy war, but this war is not fought with swords of steel. He gave us an even sharper weapon – His Word. In Ephesians and Hebrews we read that the Word of God is our sword. And in Revelation 19 we see the mighty Jesus riding at the head of His army, sword coming out of His mouth, slaying every nation on earth.

You see, Jesus wars against every person ever born, and He always wins. Some surrender and join His army. Others resist and are destroyed. Which are you? Have you surrendered to Jesus? Is He your commander? Or are you in charge of your life? When you hear His Word, do you repent of your sin and pray for strength to obey? Or do you block out and forget what He says to you? And if you claim to be a Christian, are you in the battle?

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