



THE BATTLE OF FAITH

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 6:1-27

Eighth Message

John Hanneman

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According to Abraham Heschel, the central theme of the story of the covenant presented in the Bible through Israel is the promise of the land to Abraham. The land was a holy place where the nation encountered God. It was the holy space where they hoped to return from slavery and exile to the Garden of Eden. To the Jews, the land is sacred. For the church, the person of Jesus lies behind the image of the land. When we enter into Jesus, we enter the land, the place where we encounter God, the land flowing with milk and honey.

However, there are enemies in this land that must be rooted out so that believers can possess life in Christ. General Douglas B. MacArthur once said that there are four prerequisites for military success. First, an army must have morale, a will to win, a cause worth dying for. Second, an army must be strong. It must have adequately trained and well-equipped personnel. Third, it must have an adequate source of supply. Life lines must be kept open. And fourth, an army must have knowledge of the enemy. General MacArthur placed great emphasis on this fourth prerequisite. He said, "The greater the knowledge of the enemy, the greater the potential of victory."

When we enter into life in Christ, we enter a military campaign in which we face various spiritual enemies, things like sinful habits, selfish desires and terrifying fears. General MacArthur's prerequisites for success find their parallel in the spiritual realm. A knowledge of the enemy and his tactics will help us greatly, but the book of Joshua says there is something even more important. To succeed in the spiritual battles we face it is essential that we know our God. Worship is the first priority, not war. If God is in command of our lives, and we are willing to follow him into battle, like Israel we will be successful. Once we are prepared, then we are ready to take on our foes.

In our study of Joshua we come now to the first battle which Israel faced following their entry into the land. At last the nation is prepared for war. They have been encouraged by the Lord and by the two spies who lodged with Rahab in the city of Jericho; they have partaken in the miraculous crossing the Jordan; they have been consecrated through circumcision and the Passover. Now they are ready to enter the battle at Jericho.

We find the account in chapter 6, starting with verse 1:

Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in. (NASB)

Jericho means "moon city." The city probably was dedicated to the moon god. In many ways, the battle at Jericho is a polemic. The battle pits Yahweh, the God of Israel, against the moon god, the god of Jericho. The city was strategically located in a large oasis, in a region where water was precious; also, the city controlled the main roads into the interior of the land.

According to the text, however, Jericho was "tightly

shut." The phrase is emphatic; it is further amplified: "no one went out and no one came in." The same words are used in chapter 2 to refer to the time when the two spies entered the city. Then Jericho was shut down, so the spies could not escape. Now it is shut down because the sons of Israel are bearing down on it. This takes us back to verse 1 of chapter 5. There we noted that the enemy was demoralized and already defeated. Symbolically, the fact that the city was shut indicates that the inhabitants had rejected the God of Israel. They could have opened their gates and welcomed Israel and her God—they had heard of all the great things he had done—but they rejected the opportunity.

However, this phrase also highlights the seemingly hopeless situation confronting Israel. The walls of Jericho were very formidable. They could have been as much as 50 feet wide and 60 feet high. (We have already seen that the window of Rahab's house was located on the city wall.) Further, these walls were fortified with mounds of dirt spread out at their base. How could Israel possibly defeat such a stronghold?

This brings us to the Lord's most unusual instructions. Verses 2-5:

And the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors. And you shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And it shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up, every man straight ahead."

Joshua might have expected to receive this battle plan on the occasion when he encountered the captain of the Lord's army, but the only instruction he got then was to take off his shoes. Now, the Lord reminds him that the city is already his; it has been given into his hands. Jericho would resist, but their armies were as impotent as Satan and his host before Christ and his church.

According to the plan given Joshua by the Lord, during the first six days the people were to go around the city one time with the ark and the priests blowing rams' horns—a trip of about six hundred and fifty yards. The King of Israel intended to mark out the city as his possession. In view of the huge number of marchers, the head of the column probably had long returned to the camp while the others were still marching. On the seventh day they were to go around city seven times, blowing rams' horns. Then, at the sound of the shophar, all the people were to give a

great shout, and the walls of Jericho would fall down flat. That would be the signal for them to attack, proceeding straight up into the city.

The number seven, the number of perfection and completion, is prominent in the text. The seven days of the march would correspond to the seven days of the feast of Unleavened Bread, which begins the day after the Passover. During that week, no leaven was to be eaten, a sign of Israel's consecration to the Lord (Exod. 12:14-20). In the course of this week Israel set forth from Egypt and witnessed the defeat of the Egyptian army. The combination of the march around Jericho and the Passover of chapter 5 recalls the first Passover. God would destroy Israel's enemies and consecrate the nation to himself. Also, seven matches the number of the days of creation. On the seventh day, the Sabbath, the Lord would work on the people's behalf and Israel would have rest from her enemies.

Joshua now relays these commands to the people. Verses 6-7:

So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant, and let the priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the LORD." Then he said to the people, "Go forward, and march around the city, and let the armed men go on before the ark of the LORD."

The orders are repeated to the priests and to the people, but here they receive further information. The ark would be preceded by the priests carrying trumpets, and the armed men in front. The troops would create fear in the hearts of the inhabitants of the city, as the ark represented God's presence with his people, God leading his people into battle.

Next, Joshua's orders are carried out. Verses 8-14:

And it was so, that when Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the LORD went forward and blew the trumpets; and the ark of the covenant of the LORD followed them. And the armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard came after the ark, while they continued to blow the trumpets. But Joshua commanded the people, saying, "You shall not shout nor let your voice be heard, nor let a word proceed out of your mouth, until the day I tell you, 'Shout!' Then you shall shout!" So he had the ark of the Lord taken around the city, circling it once; then they came into the camp and spent the night in the camp.

Now Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. And the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the LORD went on continually, and blew the trumpets; and the armed men went before them, and the rear guard came after the ark of the LORD, while they continued to blow the trumpets. Thus the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp; they did so for six days.

The pace of the story quickens as the procession of the first day begins. Verse 10 says that the armed men were commanded to complete silence. What a forbidding sight! The inhabitants of Jericho watched this huge procession, but the only sound they heard was the shuffling of the feet of two million people. In a football game, some players jump up and celebrate after every play. That does not im-

press me. The guys who get up from the pile without a word and walk silently back into the huddle are the ones that have to be feared. So for six days, the people of Jericho watched in dread as a huge multitude of people circled their city in absolute silence.

And now the fall of the city. Verses 15-21:

Then it came about on the seventh day that they rose early at the dawning of the day and marched around the city in the same manner seven times; only on that day they marched around the city seven times. And it came about at the seventh time, when the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city. And the city shall be under the ban, it and all that is in it belongs to the LORD; only Rahab the harlot and all who are with her in the house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things under the ban, lest you covet them and take some of the things under the ban, so you would make the camp of Israel accursed and bring trouble on it. But all the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD." So the people shouted, and priests blew the trumpets; and it came about, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, that the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight ahead, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.

After the people had circled the city seven times, Joshua gave the command, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city." This war cry would intimidate their enemies and encourage friendly forces. The shout is used in connection with the ark in 1 Sam. 4:5, and 2 Sam. 6:15. Ps. 89:15 tells us that those who know this triumphant cry are called blessed.

The sound of rams' horns and shophars is a reminder of other great triumphs in the Bible. We think of Gideon, whose men blew their trumpets and shouted, "For the LORD and for Gideon" (Judg. 7:20). The book of Revelation makes reference to seven angels and seven trumpets. We also recall the great triumph described by Paul in 1 Thess. 4:16-18: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words."

Jericho and its people and everything in the city is placed under a curse, a ban. The word means, "devoted to God for destruction." This is the central thought of the text. Only Rahab and her family will survive. The reason for this mass destruction, according to Deuteronomy, was to prevent Israel's spiritual contagion (Deut. 20:16-18; 1 Cor. 5:13). "Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you, in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things

which they have done for the gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God" (Deut. 20:16-18).

The first city in Israel's path received the harshest penalty. Everything was to be destroyed. If the nation disobeyed this ban, then Israel herself would be cursed. All captured silver, gold, bronze and iron were to be declared holy; they belonged to the Lord, for his treasury. The first fruits of the conquest are the Lord's.

When the people shout, the walls fall down, and every man goes straight ahead, destroying everything with the edge of the sword. Major earthquakes are common in the Jordan Valley; they occur an average of four times a century. Excavations have revealed clear evidence of the collapse of at least one mud brick wall. God's timing was perfect.

Verses 22-27 give the epilogue to the story.

And Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there, as you have sworn to her." So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives, and placed them outside the camp of Israel. And they burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Then Joshua made them take an oath at that time, saying, "Cursed before the LORD is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his first-born he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates." So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.

Notice the contrast between life and death, the destruction of Jericho and the salvation of Rahab and her family. The text forms an A-B-A-B-A-B pattern. Rahab and her family inherit life and salvation. Initially, they were outside of the camp because they were unclean; but now the text says that they "lived in the midst of Israel to this day." Jericho is utterly destroyed and forever cursed: "a curse is put on anyone who rebuilds Jericho." According to 1 Kings 16:34, "In his (Ahab) days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his first-born, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun."

As a result of this astonishing victory over the heavily fortified Jericho, Joshua's fame spread throughout the land. This is one of the recurring emphases of the book (1:5; 3:7; 4:14). Thus is the leader of Israel exalted.

What can we learn from this ancient account of Israel's first victory over her enemies in the land to which God had brought them? I will make three points of application.

Here is the first point: The land is given, but the enemy has to be removed. In order to possess our life in Christ we must dispossess enemies, which are ripe for judgment. Our enemies, of course, are spiritual: the world, the flesh, and the devil. These, too, can be compared to walled cities, like Jericho, with no way in or out. They control important

roads on which we are meant to travel. Merely because we are Christians, these enemies will not go away. We can't escape them; they have to be faced, because there is no compatibility between evil and holiness.

When we first become Christians, the enemies of the flesh are obvious. They are things like behavior problems and sin issues: compulsive, addictive and controlling behavior, immorality, drunkenness, anger, illegal activities, etc. But these are merely symptoms of deeper issues and fears. Sin has wreaked havoc deep within us, affecting our emotions and relationships. Hurt and pain causes us to become angry. Fear makes us want to control people and circumstances. Loneliness and a desire to be loved lead us to become involved in immoral relationships. A sense of inadequacy makes us passive.

Like Jericho, a walled city, our hearts shut down. Nothing goes out; nothing comes in. We block out God and people. We build a city based on our own resources and abilities to make life palatable and wall it in to convince ourselves and others of our adequacy, our self-sufficiency. Cain's response to God's judgment was to build a city and name it after his son Enoch. Nimrod built Babylon. The men of Shinar attempted to build a city with a tower that reached to heaven; then they would have no need for God, they felt. We are loath to destroy these places we build and learn instead to trust God for the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven.

Sometimes we deal only with the surface sins, refusing to face the deeper problems. Sooner or later, however, God wants us to confront the deeper pain and hurts so that we might make more and more of our heart available to be possessed by him; so that we might relate to him and to others in a much healthier way. Sin destroys relationships, the very things that God wants to restore. The object of the Christian life is not merely to look like a Christian, but to be filled with the fullness of God. Jericho controls the path into the heart of the land. So that the promises of God can be experienced, the gates of the city have to be opened. And sometimes it takes an earthquake for God to get through our thick walls so that we can rebuild the foundations of our life on him and live in his city.

Secondly, the battle is not won by our own strength, but through faithful obedience. This is what the Scriptures declare over and over. Hebrews 11:30 says, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been encircled for seven days." 1 John 5:4 says, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." Paul prays in Ephesians that we might know the "surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe" (Eph. 1:19).

The battle plan for Jericho was absurd, really. What God asked his people to do was illogical. No doubt Joshua would have devised a very different plan to take the city. The success of the battle, however, hinged on the faith of God's people and their radical obedience to his word. The fact that two million people followed such a plan is amazing. God is the Christian's strength, and faith is the weapon of our warfare. This is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10. I will read from the paraphrase by Eugene Petersen: "The world is unprincipled. It's dog-eat-dog out there! The world doesn't fight fair. But we don't live or fight our battles that way—never have and never will. The tools of our trade aren't for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire corrupt culture. We use our

powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ. Our tools are ready at hand for clearing the ground of every obstruction and building lives of obedience into maturity.”

On one occasion the apostle Peter wanted to use a sword to make a point, but he was rebuked by Jesus. Paul wanted to evangelize the Jews, but God sent him away on a completely different ministry. One common mistake the church makes is using the methods of the world to fight spiritual battles. Here the people of Israel were presented with the impossibility of overthrowing Jericho; they would have to rely on God and him alone to win this battle. Notice that in God’s plan the ark was central in the procession. The people’s eyes would be on God, who was at the very center of their march. If anything positive happened, God had to act. He brought salvation in the past, he would do so again in the future. Notice that during the week of the procession, no leaven could be eaten. The people would have to be content to wait and trust. Faith and flesh cannot be mixed to bring about the kingdom of God.

The obstacles to faith are formidable. That is why we are tempted to build cities to ensure our security. It is hard to have faith when we lose a job, when we suffer the loss of a child, or when our health fails. It is hard to keep our eyes on Jesus when we are reviled and persecuted. It is hard to think that God can do the impossible, so we are tempted to fall back on our own puny resources. If we want to redeem our lives from sin and darkness, what is called for is a wild abandonment to God. If we want to tear down the walls that hold our hearts captive, honesty and trust in God are the prerequisites. If we want the church to be a light to the nations, prayer and faith must be our weapons.

As we learn to walk by faith we must remember that when God delivers an enemy into our hands, we have to burn it to the ground. Be ruthless; take no prisoners. Make a commitment to not allow evil to be rebuilt in your life. Destroy the things of evil before they destroy you. Faith burns the bridges to our past so that we can live fully in the presence of God. And we learn how to walk by faith as we dispossess enemies and take possession of the land.

Thirdly, our victories of faith can redeem lives and exalt the name of our leader.

The people of Jericho shut their gates to Israel. They had every opportunity to open up their city and thus find redemption in the Lord, but they refused, so God used Israel to bring his judgment upon them. The world, like Jericho, rejects God, but it, too, faces a judgment that is very real and very sobering.

The good news is that there is an open window. Even though the city gates were shut, Rahab had a window on the city wall: “By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient.” That window is Christ. By faith in Christ we can be saved from the judgment, the curse of God. The contrast in chapter 6 between death and life, between judgment and salvation, holds out the hope of eternal life. Rahab and all her family would live in the midst of God’s people.

Not only is Rahab saved, but Joshua, who is a type of

Christ, is exalted. God was committed to him, and he promised to be with him. The faith of God’s people brought victory to Israel and fame to Joshua. When we act in faith and destroy fortresses, Jesus is more clearly seen and people kneel in adoration and praise of him.

When we are willing to take on the battles of faith, people will be redeemed in the process and our Lord will be exalted. Imagine if Israel had bypassed Jericho. What if Joshua had skirted the issue and not faced the conflict? How then would Rahab have been saved? Judgment is coming upon the world, and there are many Rahabs whom God wants to save as we engage our spiritual enemies.

Supposing you take a stand for integrity in your job. You refuse to go along with the crowd, and you have to face rejection. But one person in that company sees your ethical stand and wants to know what is behind it. Maybe your marriage is enduring difficult times, but you are committed to one another and are willing to face the battles. At last, God brings life out of death. Imagine the influence that can have in a society where marriages are disintegrating. Perhaps you are suffering from a serious illness, but you have faith in God’s sovereignty despite your fear. Everyone who visits you in the hospital and people working there notice that you are different from others. As you take on your fear and anxiety, the name of Jesus is exalted.

I have a good friend, Marty, who has been involved with me in our Twenty Something ministry since 1990. Marty is a faithful man of God. Over the years he has struggled with being single, but a couple of years ago, he met Karin, and their relationship blossomed. They were married in September. There was only one hitch. Karin is German; she is not a citizen of the United States. They were married in Germany, and from all the information they had, they thought Karin would be able to follow Marty here a few weeks after they were married. It was not to be. When they filed the papers, they learned the process could take up to eight months. Many people advised Marty to bring Karin here illegally; no one would ever know, they said. But Marty has chosen the hard road. He is living by faith, even though it is painful. He is willing to wait it out. One result of their decision is that Karin has spent more time with her parents. Prior to the wedding there was tension between them. At first they were opposed to the wedding, but the time that Karin has had with them has helped to redeem their relationship. This is a direct result of the battle of faith which Marty and Karin are fighting. Their godliness speaks louder than words. Who knows how God might yet use this battle to redeem life?

God is at work, redeeming and saving, as we enter the spiritual battles that are part of our lives as believers. He is calling out Rahabs still today as he did in the days of Joshua and the battle of Jericho. Some of you were called in very dramatic ways. Now you have the opportunity, as you take on the Jerichos of your life, to show the way of redemption to others and introduce them to the God whom they have confined to the perimeter of their lives.

Where is your personal Jericho? May God give you the faith to tear it down and find life as a result.

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