

“Holy Ground”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2018 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

In the plan of God, judgment and grace intersect on holy ground, at the cross.

Joshua 6:15-27

October 7, 2018

Holy ground

When we left the story of Joshua last week, having crossed the Jordan River into the promised land, all the people of Israel shared together in two important rituals at Gilgal – circumcision and Passover. They needed to be united in their identity (circumcision) and remembrance (Passover) after they crossed the Jordan River and before they began their occupation of the land at Jericho.

Before we get to today’s reading about Jericho, we can’t pass over a story that takes place between Gilgal and Jericho. It probably happens while the vast majority of the men are healing from their circumcision. Joshua, who was born in Egypt, had been circumcised early in life, so presumably he had some time to kill. When he ventured near Jericho, he was startled by a man holding a drawn sword (Joshua 5:13-15).

Joshua asks the imposing soldier, “Are you for us or against us?” The man replies, “Neither, but as commander of Yahweh’s army I have now come.”

Joshua falls down in reverence and asks, “What message does my lord (not the word for Yahweh) have for his servant?” Joshua doesn’t worship, but he honors this man as having God’s authority and speaking God’s word.

The commander replies, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” Joshua obeys. There’s much about this story we don’t know – and many have hazarded guesses. What we do know is that at this critical moment in the story, (1) Joshua has experienced the presence of God like Moses did, (2) There’s an invisible divine army at work, and (3) God’s message to Joshua is that God’s not taking sides. You may misunderstand Joshua 6 if you skip over that story.

Devoted to the Lord

The telling of Joshua 6 ranges from a children's Bible story to one of the most complex and difficult passages in the entire Bible for grownups to understand and explain. I want to tell the Jericho story the way the narrator himself tells it. I don't want to downplay the difficult part of the story, but neither do I want to give that part of the story any more emphasis than the Bible itself gives.

The Israelites are poised to repossess the land God had promised to Abraham centuries earlier. God had promised that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the shore, and they would occupy the land of Canaan. God had said, "Not yet," because he was waiting for the sins of the people in the land to get so bad that their destruction would be warranted (Genesis 15:6).

Here we are centuries later. The descendants of Jacob went down to Egypt to avoid death by famine, where they multiplied so much that Pharaoh enslaved them. God brought them out of slavery through plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, then parted the Red Sea for them, gave them his laws and provided water and food, and brought them right to the edge of the Promised Land where they rebelled in fear. God made them wait another forty years to inherit the land, but now it's time.

Verse 1: The first city to be taken will be Jericho, a relatively small city about the size of Corinth's main campus, but still considered impenetrable because of a double wall. As we open chapter 6, the city's gates are shut and barred. The wall is the inhabitants' security and the attackers' impediment.

Verses 2-5: Yahweh has a message of assurance and instruction for Joshua. We don't know how he communicates it, any more than we knew in previous chapters. "I have delivered Jericho into your hands," God says, mentioning especially "the king and its fighting men." Joshua is told to assemble *all* his army. If we take Numbers 26:51 literally, that's about 600,000 soldiers, an army that would have been overwhelming and terrifying to those in Jericho. The soldiers are to leave Gilgal, march to Jericho, circumvent the city once with seven priests carrying shofars in front of the ark of the covenant, then return to camp. They are to do this for six days, then on the seventh day march seven times, blow the shofars and shout, and watch the city wall collapse.

Verses 6-7: Joshua instructs the priests to carry the shofars in front of the ark, and instructs the soldiers to precede and follow the ark.

Verses 8-11. In keeping with Hebrew style, we get a little more of the story unfolding each time it's retold. Now we learn the priests are blowing their shofars on the first six days as the army marches around the city, but the soldiers are specifically told not to "give a war cry," "raise your voices," or even "say a word" until commanded by Joshua. This would likely have been a very unusual military strategy.

Verses 12-14: On Day 2 the same thing happens. We see the forward guard, then the priests blowing shofars, then the ark, then the rest of the soldiers marching in complete quiet. If you're wondering why Jericho doesn't attack, remember that their best and only defense is their wall. They hope the wall will intimidate the army. How will they ever get up and over it, no matter how many there are?

Verses 15-19: On the seventh day, Joshua gives more specific instructions, but he apparently doesn't tell anyone what God told him – that the wall will collapse. The people are to obey in faith. They circle the city seven times. Remember that the city is not that large. I can walk around the outside edge of our campus easily in ten minutes, although admittedly with tens or hundreds of thousands of people it would take longer. If you've always pictured this story with a small group of Israelites circling a huge, well-populated city – like a David and Goliath story – it's just the opposite.

Joshua tells the army to "Shout!" on his cue, and that they are to devote (that's an important word) the entire city to God except for Rahab and her household, because she spared the spies. Everything else is devoted to God's and those who take God's stuff will not only suffer God's wrath themselves but bring judgment on the whole Israelite camp. Precious and practical metals – silver, gold, bronze, and iron – are to be removed and dedicated to God.

Verses 20-21: The shofars sound, the army shouts, and the entire wall collapses. It doesn't fall out or in; it falls down. But the crumbling wall doesn't kill the inhabitants. The cloud of dust and dirt simply allows the army to penetrate from every side. The miracle is in the wall crumbling; the battle is fought by soldiers in hand to hand combat. Israelites fight their way into the city and with their swords kill "every living thing – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys."

Verses 22-23: Joshua instructs the two spies who had been hidden and spared by Rahab to go "to the prostitute's house" and bring her and her family out, as they had promised her. There's no mention of the wall near Rahab's house remaining intact. When Rahab's family is located and brought out of the chaos and dirt and blood, they are given safe passage to Israel's camp at Gilgal, but given a place outside the camp since they weren't Israelites.

Verses 24-25: The entire city is then like a burned offering to God. Now instead of dust flying everywhere, it's smoke. Everything that can be burned is burned, including bodies of people and animals. The only exceptions are the precious and practical metals and Rahab and her family. Rahab is now mentioned for the third time in the story, with the additional note that "she lives among the Israelites to this day." So at some point between the fall of Jericho and the time of writing Joshua, Rahab formally converted. One Jewish tradition said that she became Joshua's wife. We don't know.

Verses 26-27: Joshua curses the city of Jericho. Anyone who tries to rebuild the city will lose his oldest son when he starts the project and his youngest son when he

finishes. (That's what happened in 1 Kings 16:34.) Now, having actually won his first great battle, Joshua's reputation spreads not only in Israel but throughout Canaan because this day makes it very clear that Yahweh is with him.

God Lessons

I love the Bible and trust the Bible. That's what makes this story difficult on the one hand but on the other hand makes me want to dig deeper. It's important to say that I'm speaking to believers. Others have written apologetically, speaking more to skeptics.¹

The story is difficult for modern ears. The word "modern" is important because I'm not sure it was difficult for past generations. There's no defense of it in the New Testament, for example, but neither is there condemnation. Until the last hundred years or so, most people in most places would see it as a war story. Wars have to be fought. Winners write the rules. Innocents die. Even as recently as World War II, the United States itself dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing about 200,000 people, mostly non-combatants.

That doesn't take away the fact that it's difficult for us. We are moderns, and the principles of warfare have (thankfully) evolved, especially in the decades since World War II. Some of you may struggle mightily with this passage, but most of us in the room are believers. We know there are hard things in the Bible and in our faith, but our faith says there are some things we'll never fully understand this side of heaven. Most of you know I'm not going to say anything about this story that makes you or me feel good about this chapter in the Bible where not only soldiers but women and teenagers and children and babies and even animals all become a burnt offering.

It's not my goal to have you feel good about the story. If I may humanize him for a moment, I don't think God feels good about the story. I believe heaven wept that day, and heaven weeps still. Judgment is not pretty.

Still, as a modern I want to find some perspective here. Here's my perspective: From a biblical perspective, this event is unique and not so unusual. I know that sounds contradictory, so let me explain.

The conquest of Jericho is unique in that the Bible presents this story as a once-in-history event. It falls in the larger plan of God, which revolves around the Jewish people – the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's entire plan of redemption in the Bible is for, in, and through the Jewish nation. A nation must have land, and God always planned that their land be at the crossroads of the continents. They were to live there in a strategic place that God knew would be in the cross hairs of

¹For example, *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God*, by Paul Copan and Mike Flannagan.

conflict among most of the world's empires. God needed the Jews in this place, and so it wasn't about a random or oft-repeated, capricious decision on his part.

Though unique, however, this story is in another sense not unusual. There are many places in the Bible where God causes mass death, including for children – the great flood, the death of Egyptian firstborn, earthquakes that swallow entire groups in the wilderness. Jericho bothers us more than other judgment stories because it's about the unthinkable (to us) use of swords and soldiers to kill. But if we really believe there is a God in whose hands is all of life and death, then in a sense every death is God's fault. He either caused it or directed it or allowed it. Thank God it's rare for him to do it in this way.

I've said several times in our studies of Joshua that these stories are not about Joshua, not about Rahab, and certainly not about you or me. They are stories about God. If Joshua 6 is about God, what does it teach us about God? That he is callous and cruel? No. This passage instead reinforces a number of biblical themes.

First, God's sovereignty and plan. Remember that story about the commander of the Lord's army? God is above this story. Joshua needs to know God's not on his side or the Israelites, nor is he against the Canaanites, not in this ultimate sense. I wouldn't have thought to say it if it weren't right in the context of this story. The commander of the Lord's Army says when you fight a battle or even read this story, be careful that you don't have a vision of God that is way too small or limited.

I'm going to say something perhaps even more startling. God isn't for or against the Israelis or the Palestinians or the Americans or the Russians or the Muslims. God wasn't for the South or the North in the American Civil War, or for or against the Allies or Germany or Russia or Vietnam. That doesn't mean he's not on the side of what's just and right. It means that God is so much more interested in people than he is in nations that rise and fall. His vision of what he's doing in the world is so much larger than we at any moment can see or understand, even in retrospect as we look at history.

Second, God's holiness and justice. This too is uncomfortable for moderns, but this story is about the judgment on sin and wickedness. We think we'd like God to be consistent on this, and from a human perspective he's not. He rarely exterminates sinful people and cultures, but he hates and judges sin. He hates what we do to ourselves and our societies. The larger picture is that God hates idolatry and abuse and violence and war and sexual immorality and greed and anarchy. Some of these stories in the Bible are vivid examples of how a grieved God directly or indirectly judges sin. That story line runs from Genesis (the flood story) through Revelation (the seven trumpets and other judgments). Joshua 6 is just one example.

God's judgment on sin is a warning to the wicked, but it is also a comfort to those who believe. Do we really want wrong and injustice to continue through eternity?

Joshua 6 is just one place in the Bible that teaches God will eventually and ultimately not only judge but eradicate all sin and wrong.

Finally, God's patience and grace. Even in this slaughter, we see a God who waited centuries from the promise to Abraham until the judgment on this people. In the story itself, we have not only Rahab but her family. In this horrible scene of judgment, we see a light of mercy. The writer doesn't want us to miss that. There's as much if not more about Rahab's salvation as there is about Jericho's destruction in Joshua 6. Her story line indeed becomes part of the Great story line of the Bible. As the ancestress of King David and Jesus, Rahab not only carries the scarlet thread of God's salvation through this story. As a Gentile believer she sets the stage for God's inclusion of the ends of the earth.

A principle I teach in my Sunday School class is the progress of God's self-revelation. God doesn't change, but God's ways of dealing with people change. We're reading a startling event very early in the story of the Bible. All of the Old Testament is a setup for the New Testament. Israel's story is preparation for the Gospel, for the cross.

So we gather today on holy ground, around the Lord's table. In the plan of God, judgment and grace intersect at the cross. Never again will we see another Jericho, another God-ordered slaughter and land grab for judgment and salvation. Instead, we see God's wrath poured out on Jesus Christ and a command to spread that Gospel of salvation by grace through faith to the whole world. Amen.