

The Battle Belongs to the Lord

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Covenant Church. Wonderful to be with you as always. God's grace and peace to you as we gather as his people. We will be in a very familiar scripture today, which is Joshua chapter six, the battle of Jericho, as God's people begin their march into the promised land.

And as always with scripture, we remember that God's word is alive. It is active and it speaks directly into our lives today if we have ears to hear.

So I invite you to be considering, are you in the midst of any sort of battle in your life today? Let's pray that the Holy Spirit would be at work in our midst. Let's pray.

Oh, Lord, loving God, thank you for gathering us together as your people. How we need your blessing. How we need you to speak into our lives.

Father, we thank you for the promise that as your word goes forth, you will sovereignly accomplish all you have purposed for it. We also ask that in the midst of so many distractions and other voices, burdens and concerns that we carry, that you would give us ears to hear, that you would speak truth, challenge and comfort into our lives, all to the glory of your name. And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 23] I'm just noticing how beautiful the snow is. We had a tantalizing taste of spring about a week ago, but then it is February and we live in Wisconsin. If you'd like to turn in your Bibles, we will be again in Joshua six, verses one through two.

Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out and none came in.

And the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have given Jericho into your hand with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once.

Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times and the priests shall blow the trumpets.

And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout. And the wall of the city will fall down flat.

[2 : 25] And the people shall go up, everyone straight before him. But Joshua, the son of Nun, called the priests and said to them, Take up the ark, the covenant, and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord.

And he said to the people, Go forward, march around the city, and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the Lord. And just as Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the Lord went forward, blowing the trumpets with the ark of the covenant of the Lord following them.

The armed men were walking before the priests who were blowing the trumpets, and the rear guard were walking after the ark while the trumpets blew continually. But Joshua commanded the people, 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. Then you shall shout. So he caused the ark of the covenant to circle the city, going about at once, and they came into the camp and spent the night in the camp.

Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took the ark of the Lord. And the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of the ram's horns before the ark of the Lord walked on, and they blew the trumpets continually.

[3 : 40] And the armed men were walking before them, and the rear guard was walking after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually. And the second day, they marched around the city once and returned into the camp.

So they did for six days. On the seventh day, they rose early at the dawn of day and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times.

And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction.

Only Rahab the prostitute and all who were with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. But you keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them, you take any of the devoted things, and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction, and bring trouble upon it.

But all silver and gold, every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the Lord. They shall go into the treasury of the king. So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blowing.

[4 : 49] Soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So Jericho, a remarkable story unto itself, but of course also part of God's much bigger redemptive story.

It begins way back with the Exodus, God's people in slavery in Egypt, crying out to the Lord in the midst of their suffering. And of course, God raises up Moses to lead his people out of their slavery. And as we know, with signs and wonders, God delivers his people from Pharaoh, and brings them out into the wilderness, as they begin their journey towards the promised land. Interesting to note, that for a group this size, scholars estimate, it would have taken only two to three weeks, for the Israelites to make the entire journey, from Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the northern wilderness, and to the cusp of the promised land.

We know that life rarely goes exactly as planned. The people arrive at the edge of the promised land, that first time, so far so good. But before they enter, Moses, of course, sends in twelve spies, to scope out the land.

[6 : 18] They're gone for forty days. And when they return, they have good news. It truly is a land, flowing with milk and honey. And just look at the size of these grapes we've brought back.

But there's more. Cities are fortified, with huge walls, and the land is crawling with giants. If we go in, they'll squash us like bugs.

Well, two of the twelve, Joshua and Caleb, try to rally the people, with reminders of God's faithfulness and power. Remember all that he has done for us.

But fear has already taken hold. Fear is contagious. It is sweeping through the Israelites, and they shrink back into the wilderness. For how many more years?

Forty years. Well, the people of God needed to be refined, and tested, and purified. They needed to establish relationship with the living God.

[7 : 22] And it took forty more years. Until everyone, from that earlier disbelieving generation, had died in the wilderness. And a new generation of God's people took its place.

Led by Joshua and Caleb, the only two who had believed. And here, at the beginning of Joshua, this new generation is ready to enter into the promised land.

And inherit God's promise. Nothing has changed about the promised land. The fortified cities are still there. The land is still crawling with giants.

But God's people have learned and grown through forty years in the wilderness to trust and to depend on God's power and provision.

And as they prepare to enter, Joshua receives a powerful encouragement from the living God. And it's familiar words to all of us. Let's say this together. Have I not commanded you?

[8 : 23] Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Jericho will be the first major city they will encounter. But on their way, they may camp first at a place called Gilgal, a place about five miles north of Jericho.

And it is a place of rich symbolism. The root of Gilgal is the Hebrew word goal, which means to roll back.

As the people are entering the promised land in faith and obedience, God was rolling back the reproach of slavery in Egypt, the sin of disbelief in the wilderness.

For the people of God, the promised land marked the beginning of a brand new chapter of life. life unburdened by the guilt and the shame of previous generations.

[9 : 21] Even the manna stops coming because they're stepping into a land of promise and provision. It's forgetting what lies behind. Of course, the first test of faith would be one of the most daunting.

Conquer Jericho, the physical and spiritual gateway into the promised land. Jericho lay at the base, the lower Jordan Valley. And of course, it was famous for its walls.

Jericho had stood for generations as a wealthy hub of commerce from all directions. In dramatic contrast to its desert surroundings, Jericho thrived as a fertile spring-fed oasis.

In fact, it's often referred to as the city of palms for its abundance of palm trees. As one of the very oldest cities in the world, Jericho had witnessed civilizations around it come and go, even as it remained, successfully resisting all attempts to conquer it.

And over time, a pride and a hubris grew among the people of Jericho. We are safe. We are secure. We are masters of our own domain.

[10 : 36] We know from archaeological evidence that Jericho's famous wall was most likely a two-walled system of fortification, a towering exterior structure of about 15 feet high, followed by another inner wall.

Even if invaders were to scale that first wall, well, they'd find themselves trapped in a pit and looking up to the second wall, full of defenders hurling spears and shooting arrows down.

It's interesting to consider how to attack a city like Jericho. By human reasoning, it would seem almost impossible, and it had been for generations.

A worldly strategy really only included two options. A blunt force attack, whether ramming the wall with implements or catapulting stones into the city or seeking to build a ramp to go over the top. Well, the Israelites, fresh out of the desert, had no resources for strategies like that, and it would have brought extremely heavy losses to them. The other human approach was the siege mentality, which would mean simply surrounding the city until its inhabitants inside starve.

[11 : 58] But we know that Jericho was on fertile land, and the king had probably stockpiled enough supplies and provisions to last for months, if not years.

But God, we know that his ways are not our ways, and that as people of faith, the battle belongs to the Lord.

This is the clear testimony of Scripture from beginning to end, isn't it? Not only Jericho, but the whole word of God. That all kinds of battles will come, and our human wisdom and strength, our resources, simply aren't enough for every battle that we face to fight, much less to win the battle. But in God's economy, there's a certain grace that comes from realizing it, because we're compelled to look to the Lord and his resources, that the battle is fought and won by God himself. Of course, that is the truth that 10 of the 12 original spies forgot. Look at these impossible odds, they said. We can't take this land.

[13 : 10] Joshua and Caleb's response, you're right. We can't, but God can, because it's his battle. Well, to get ready for this battle, for this new generation, God called his people to spiritually prepare.

I don't want to rush through this, because often, when a battle is coming or we're in the midst of the battle, what are we meant to do to focus on the Lord, to prepare for the battle that is coming, to set our hearts and minds on him and to remind ourselves of this truth?

So there at Gilgal, before marching on Jericho, the people celebrated together the Passover festival. What would they be remembering? God's great power and deliverance from their slavery in Egypt, his faithfulness through 40 years in the desert and the miracles of provision and sustaining his people.

This is the great God that we serve. Psalm 105 reminds us, look to the Lord and his strength. Seek his face always.

Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles and the judgments he pronounced. And the Lord does a work in our hearts as we remember, as we rejoice in his faithfulness during past seasons of life.

[14 : 36] Well, it revives our faith for today's challenges. God had one more divine appointment, a reminder specifically for Joshua, the leader of the people right before the battle.

So Joshua is at the cusp of the battle but he's out for a walk, maybe a prayer walk and he's looking out over the city of Jericho a few miles away. He's preparing for battle when suddenly a mysterious figure appears.

Joshua looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, are you for us or for our enemies?

Interesting how battles in life can sometimes give us tunnel vision. Our adrenaline is flowing, our perspective narrows, everything becomes kind of black or white.

Are you friend or foe? Are you with us or against us? The heavenly visitor's response, neither, he replied. As commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.

[15 : 43] Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked him, what message does my Lord have for his servant? The commander of the Lord's army replied, take off your sandals from your feet for the place where you are standing is holy and Joshua did so.

So Joshua's heart was with the Lord. He had faith in God but there was still a part of Joshua that was looking at Jericho and the battle to come with human eyes from a horizontal perspective.

But this heavenly commander lifts Joshua's perspective to the heavenly perspective. I'm not on your side or their side for I represent a far greater authority as this commander.

The only question is Joshua, whose side are you on? whose wisdom will you follow? It's a good reminder for all of us in the midst of life's battles and they come that our hearts need to be aligned with God's purposes.

He is sovereign. He's the driver. He's the initiator. He's the king of kings and we get in line with him.

This mysterious commander of the Lord's army, who is he?

[17 : 01] Is he an angel? A strong case could be made that this is actually a theophany and is the pre-incarnate Christ himself, the son of God appearing to Joshua in human form right before the battle.

Notice, he doesn't dispute Joshua's worship, which angels always do, but he does command Joshua to take off his sandals where the ground is holy. That probably sounds familiar.

When God, the great I am appeared to Moses from the burning bush. Have you ever thought of the battleground?

Think of a battle as holy. Think about it. If you are in the midst of a battle in your own life, one that may even seem impossible, can we recognize the battleground as holy ground?

Why? Because God himself is right there with us and he declares that the battle belongs not to us but to him if we only yield our hearts.

[18 : 05] Listen to God's word in chapter 6, verse 2. See, I have given Jericho into your hand with its king and mighty men of valor, the promise of victory even before the battle begins.

Shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once, that this you shall do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets from the ram's horn before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times and the priests shall blow trumpets.

And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people will shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.

So God's not only giving Joshua the battle plan in advance, he's telling him exactly how it will play out, and the victory belongs to the Lord.

Which brings us to our second point, our response, trust and obey. The Lord wins every battle, undefeated record, but according to his providence and his grace, God often uses us to accomplish his divine purposes.

[19 : 21] Joshua, since the days of being just a lad in Egypt, had witnessed the Lord's miraculous provision and power all the way back from the Exodus in Egypt, and Joshua had learned to trust completely in the Lord's ways.

What does the word of God say? Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. Trust the Lord. The Lord's battle plan for Jericho would not seem an effective strategy, at least by human wisdom.

But with Joshua leading the way, the people of God do exactly what the Lord commands. They march around the city each day, speaking not a word, as the priests blow the trumpets, as they march.

And then on the seventh day, God fulfills his promise. And the walls of Jericho, impenetrable for generations, come crumbling down, flat, as the scripture tells us.

What is impossible for man is possible for God. And from there, the soldiers stream into the city and take it. Only Rahab, who had earlier assisted the spies and her family are spared.

[20 : 39] And here, in scripture, from beginning to end, as we see in scripture, we witness the uncompromising connection between God's deliverance and our faith and obedience.

Hebrews 11 says, by faith, the walls of Jericho fell after the people had marched around them for seven days. So often in the 40 years of wilderness wanderings, the people's faith had wavered and wobbled and failed.

But here in Jericho, they do exactly as the Lord commands. They trust in him and his promises. And God delivered Jericho into their hands. So just quickly by way of review, conquest of Jericho, number one reveals battle belongs to the Lord.

That has been the case through salvation history. And it continues to be the case in our lives and world today. When we are facing a battle, especially a battle that seems impossible, too often our human eyes remain on the horizontal plane.

We see the difficulty of the battle. We stand before the immovable mountain and we judge in our own wisdom that our resources are not enough. But Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

[22 : 11] There's no way the Israelites could have defeated Jericho in their own strength. But with God's help, the walls come tumbling down. Jericho also reveals our role in the battle.

It's to trust and to obey. It's interesting to remember, this is a little depressing when you think about it, that the Israelites could have taken possession of the promised land 40 years earlier.

God had brought that generation through the wilderness. If only they had faith then that the battle was the Lord's, they could have entered and taken possession of the promised land, just as Joshua and Caleb had told them.

But they shrank back in fear. God says it in his word, my righteous one will live by faith and I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.

But by God's grace, this new generation was given another chance to walk by faith, not by sight, and to learn by trusting God that he is always faithful to his promises.

[23 : 20] And then finally, Jericho reveals the holy justice and the loving mercy of the Lord. Over 500 years before Joshua, God spoke to Abraham, Father Abraham, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

But he also promises Abraham that his descendants someday would return to inherit this land of Canaan that Abraham was dwelling in. The sin of the Canaanites in Abraham's day, and that included Jericho, was already great.

But rather than immediately destroying Jericho in the time of Abraham, God chose to wait to bring judgment upon them. That's mercy, not getting what our sins deserve.

And that mercy, that divine mercy, is a golden thread of God's character throughout all salvation history. His long-suffering patience and kindness towards sinners.

I think of the prophet Jonah. Remember him? Dispatched to the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh. And Jonah is a bit of a hothead, frankly. He's excited for their destruction.

[24 : 37] If anyone deserves the wrath of God poured out on their heads, in Jonah's mind, it was the wicked heathens of Nineveh. But lo and behold, after running away and then finally being restored to ministry, Jonah preaches to the Ninevites, and they repent.

They turn to the Lord. Worst possible news for Jonah. Jonah is angry. Jonah is angry. He's angry. And he accuses God. I knew that you're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Well, that sounds like it should be worship and praise, right? But it's a bitter accusation from Jonah. Why are you so slow to anger? Why aren't you pouring out your wrath on these sinners?

Perhaps because God is more merciful than we are. Because he loves this world and everyone in it, including us, when we sin.

It's because our God desires that none should perish, but that people and cities and nations repent of their evil ways and turn to him in faith.

[25 : 48] That is God's heart. words. Jericho wanted nothing to do with that. With their impenetrable wall, their crooked dealings, their willful disobedience, the sin of the Canaanites

continued to grow and grow and grow until the cup of their iniquity was full.

It crossed a threshold of wickedness that apparently precluded repentance. And it was time for God's wrath to be poured out on their sin. That's a scary threshold to reach, isn't it?

Where people have repeatedly sinned and seared their conscience to the point where there's no longer any desire, much less opportunity to repent.

And after generations of God staying his hand of judgment, Jericho's sin had reached its full measure. And God's own people were the instruments of his divine justice.

Does that speak to our world today? It can be tempting to ask and to wonder, does God notice the sin and rebellion in our time?

[27 : 00] Are we ever tempted to despair that evil is going unpunished or wonder why the wicked seem to prosper? We can be assured that God sees it all.

He is holy. He cannot abide sin. And there will come a day when the wrath of God will be poured out on all unrighteousness. And yet, praise the Lord, that he is so loving and so merciful and gracious.

We are living today in an age of tremendous grace and spiritual opportunity. God is holding back his hand of judgment because he desires that people turn to him in repentance and be saved from the wrath to come.

We see this grace in action with Rahab, an inhabitant and a participant in the wickedness of Jericho. And yet saved from the day of destruction because she turned to the Lord in faith.

And how in God's hands is this beautiful redemptive story that faith brings about a wonderful kingdom ripple effect because that same Rahab was not only saved from wrath, but by God's grace was welcomed into the Lord's covenant family, becoming the great grandmother of King David, which of course is also our Savior's family.

[28 : 25] Let me ask you, how is God's word speaking to your life this morning? Perhaps you're in a battle of some kind right now and your strength is not enough.

Sometimes we try to fight the battle in our own strength until we just run out. But be encouraged today to give your battle to the Lord, knowing it belongs to him.

Maybe there's a conviction in your heart that your faith has grown dim recently, buried under life's burdens and distractions and temptations and busyness. We just entered the season of Lent, a wonderful time to refocus our hearts and minds on the living God and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Is God perhaps calling you back to his throne of grace to put him first? Isaiah the prophet reminds us, seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call upon him while he is near. And then finally, as we consider God's mercy and grace towards Rahab, be considerate. Is there someone that God has put in your life who needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ?

[29 : 39] Christ. You just may be the ambassador that God has appointed to share Christ, that person. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you with grateful hearts.

We're thankful for your word and for the reminder that the battle belongs to you. We confess sometimes we try to fight in our own resources and wisdom, and it is not enough for many of the battles that we encounter.

Think of Jesus' words, in this world you will have trouble, but also the encouragement. Take heart, for I have overcome the world. And so, Lord, we confess, I believe, but help my unbelief.

Help us to put you first. Lord, I pray for anyone who is just face down in the ditch and discouraged, that you would raise them up. That you would lift all of our hearts and minds and eyes towards you, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Lord, we thank you for this wonderful season of Lent, an opportunity to confess that we fall short in so many ways, but that the forgiveness and grace and victory belong to you. Help us to put Jesus first in all things.

[30 : 52] We pray it in Christ's name. Amen.