

# Joshua 5–6

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[ 0 : 00 ] A reading this morning is from Joshua chapter 5 and verse 13. Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he 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? Neither, he replied, but as commander of the army of the Lord, I have now come.

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, for the place where you're standing is holy.

And Joshua did so. Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. Then the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men.

March round the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Make seven priests carry trumpets of ram's horns in front of the ark.

[ 1 : 22 ] On the seventh day, march round the city seven times with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, make the whole army give a loud shout.

Then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in. So Joshua, son of Nun, called the priests and said to them, Take up the ark of the covenant of the Lord and make seven priests carry trumpets in front of it.

And he ordered the city, advance, march round the city with an armed guard going ahead of the ark of the Lord. When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the Lord went forwards, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the Lord's covenant followed them.

The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time, the trumpets were sounding.

But Joshua had commanded the army, Do not give in a war cry. Do not raise your voices. Do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout.

[ 2 : 39 ] Then shout! So he had the ark of the Lord carried round the army, circling it once. Then the army returned to camp and spent the night there.

Joshua got up early the next morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forwards, marching before the ark of the Lord and blowing the trumpets.

The armed men went ahead of them, and the rear guard followed the ark of the Lord while the trumpets kept sounding. So on the second day, they marched round the city once and returned to the camp.

They did this for six days. Amen. Good morning, everyone. Let me just introduce myself. My name's Matty, and I'm from Northern Ireland originally.

Hopefully you can still pick up on a trace of a Northern Irish accent. I now live in St Andrews, where I work here at the Free Church as a minister and training, alongside doing study part-time at Edinburgh Theological Seminary.

[ 3 : 45 ] It's one of the great advantages of the current COVID times, that I'm able to be with you without even having to leave the house. Although I did live in Glasgow for a year, and I'm really looking forward to the time when I'm able to get back in the car and over to the West Coast for a visit.

Some happy times over there, and I look forward to reconnecting with that part of Scotland. We are in, as you all have seen, Joshua 5 and 6. We here in St Andrews have been going through Joshua

in our morning sermons recently, and we find it really encouraging.

And I hope and pray that this episode in Jericho is encouraging for all of us this morning too. It's a long, long reading, so thank you for reading the first half of it earlier.

I'm going to pick up the story in Joshua chapter 6, and I'll read from verse 15 to the end of the chapter. So, Joshua 6, 15.

On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day, they circled the city seven times.

[ 4 : 52 ] The seventh time around, when the priest sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord.

Only Rahab the prostitute, and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them.

Otherwise, you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction, and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord, and must go into his treasury.

When the trumpet sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the walls collapsed. So every man charged straight in, and they took the city.

They devoted the city to the Lord, and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it. Men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys. Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, Go into the prostitute's house, and bring her out, and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her.

[ 6 : 02 ] So the young men who had done the spying went in, and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers, and all who belong to her. They brought out her entire family, and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

Then they burned the whole city, and everything in it. But they put the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, into the treasury of the Lord's house. But Joshua spared Rahab, the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent the spies to Jericho.

And she lives among the Israelites to this day. At that time, Joshua promotes this solemn oath, Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild the city, Jericho.

At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations. At the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates. So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.

Now let me lead us as we pray, before we study these words together. Our Father God, we pray that you would speak to us through this part of your word, and that we'd be able to marvel, along with Israel in this passage, at what a great God you are.

[ 7 : 14 ] In Jesus' name. Amen. I wanted to start this morning by thinking about famous battles from history. I don't know what your congregation is like.

Here in St Andrews, I can think of maybe two or three people who'd love nothing more than to spend all day talking about military history. We're not going to do that. Because not everyone is interested in that type of thing.

But there are certain battles throughout history that they're so famous, they've crossed over into the popular consciousness. Most people, even if you're not particularly interested in history, know the key players and the outcomes.

So maybe a good example would be, William the Conqueror fought the Battle of Hastings, and the Normans took over Britain. Or maybe slightly closer to home, Robert the Bruce fought the Battle of Bannockburn, and he sent the English homeward to think again.

And if you like, you could insert a joke here about that recent rugby match, which may be of interest to you. More recently, the Allies fought the Battle of the Bulge, and drove the Nazis into retreats.

[ 8 : 23 ] Maybe you could suggest a few more of mystery. But I think if you grew up in Christian Sunday school, or going to summer Bible camps, one that you might add to that list is Joshua fought the Battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down.

And if that's the case, if the last you heard of Joshua was in the kids' song, it may have been a surprise to you as we read this passage together to find that Joshua, he doesn't really do much fighting at all.

Joshua 6 is not the story of a really tense, protracted battle with Joshua sweeping into dramatic victory like Gandalf at Helm's Deep.

Now, the lyrics to the children's song draw the conclusion in the last verse that there's none like good old Joshua. I think that we'll see, in looking at it together, that actually, in Joshua 6, we're being drawn to conclude that there's none like the Lord.

The story of Jericho is a passage which draws us to praise God as it shows us that he is mighty, to give victory to his people, patient and unjust in bringing judgment on his enemies, and wonderfully gracious to save undeserving sinners.

[ 9 : 51 ] So there we have three aspects of God's character, three reasons to praise him, and so I'm sure it will come as no shock that we're going to look at this passage under three headings, and the first of them is this, God gives victory to his people.

And the first clear sign we're given that this is a passage that's all about God's victory is in the appearance of the commander of his armies, right at the tail end of chapter 5 there.

And so having established exactly who this strange visitor is, Joshua then makes the appropriate response to meeting a representative from God.

We read it there in verse 14, that Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence, and asked him, what message does my Lord have for his servant?

Now the fact that Joshua worships him means that this isn't just an angel, this is an appearance of the Lord himself, and Joshua therefore he's right to worship, and to ask what the Lord has to say to him.

[ 10 : 53 ] And at this point, once again, we might be surprised. To set up the context, Israel have just crossed over the Jordan, they've celebrated the Passover, they've finally entered the promised land where they've been dreaming of, and heading for years and years, they're finally here.

And so Joshua's asking, what's the big plan? What's the strategy? What should Joshua do to get the troops ready for the conquest to come? And there's the surprise in verse 15.

The commander of the Lord's army replied, take off your sandals, for the place where you're standing is holy. And Joshua did so. Maybe not quite what we're expecting, but this brief encounter, it's an example of a pattern that gets repeated throughout this section of Joshua.

Joshua chapters 5 to 12, the big message of that is that Israel are taking possession of the land. And in those chapters, again and again, we read that the Lord makes a command and Joshua obeys that command.

And the commandment here at the end of chapter 5 is an example of another big repeated theme throughout that section of Joshua. Because God himself is bringing the victory.

[ 12 : 12 ] His main concern for his people is their holiness and not their fighting ability. It's something that we see time and again. He wants his people to be spiritual people, not military people.

So it's shown here at the end of chapter 5 in the fact that the only requirement made of Joshua at this point is the right response to encountering a holy God that we see throughout the Old Testament taking off his sandals because he's on holy ground.

And God's victory, God's concern for his people's holiness rather than their warfare capabilities. It's seen in the instructions that God then goes on to give Joshua regarding Jericho.

if we read from verses 2 to 5 of chapter 6. The Lord said to Joshua, I have delivered Jericho into your hands along with its king and its fighting men.

March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Make seven priests carry trumpets of ram's horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times with the priests blowing the trumpets.

[ 13 : 22 ] When you hear them sound a long blast of the trumpets, make all the people give a loud shout. Then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up every man straight in.

The writer of Joshua clearly doesn't care at all about plot spoilers because we see a big one here in verse 2. The drumbeat, in fact, of this whole section of chapters 5 to 12.

God has given the land, God has given Jericho into Israel's hand. The battle is over. Not a spear has been thrown, not a sword has been thrust, but the battle before it's even begun is over.

And that's why the instructions he gives Joshua in military terms are almost comical. I said earlier you don't need to be an expert in military history to have heard of some of those battles.

You certainly don't need to be an expert in military strategy to know that shouting and blowing trumpets and walking are not the kinds of tactics that people tend to win medals for in modern warfare on the front line.

[ 14 : 35 ] And yet, from verse 6 onwards, Joshua takes great pains to ensure that these strange commandments are followed through to the absolute letter.

All the phrases that God uses in his commands are repeated in the following through of those commands from verse 6 onwards. You can maybe imagine how you'd feel as an Israelite soldier. Maybe you've been full of adrenaline, just ready to get going, vaulting over the Jordan with your sword drawn, ready to do some conquering of the land. You've been waiting for this moment for ages, and now you've finally come outside the first city, the eve of the first battle, and your great leader, Joshua, he's just been having a conversation with God, and he comes to give you your instructions.

He says, gather round, this is the plan, we're going to march around the city blowing our trumpets for a week. How might you be feeling on day one, as you marched noisily around Jericho and nothing happened?

How might you be feeling by day six, as you go home to your family and they ask you how did it go today? You say, well, we just marched and blew our trumpets again. The definition of madness is doing the same thing again and again, but expecting different results.

[ 15 : 55 ] You might be starting to think maybe it's time to just change up the tactics a little bit. So I think it would be a great relief, as well as tremendously exciting to see on day seven, lo and behold, as God's appointed leader drives you forward in carrying out his instructions, God himself actually brings the walls tumbling down.

Maybe you were suspicious or frustrated before, but wouldn't that drive you to marvel at how great, how mighty your God is?

That seems to be the point, really. God has promised that he brings the victory. And that means that all he's concerned about for his people is that they trust him and marvel at what he is doing. He gives the victory. They participate in the work that he's doing through trusting him and listening to his commands. As we move to think through what this means for us then, presumably the Israelites recounting the story would be getting really excited.

Maybe they're sitting around at the time of the judges saying to one another, hey, remember how God brought down the walls of Jericho with just a big noise. Isn't it amazing that he's so mighty to save?

[ 17 : 26 ] And we should share in that excitement. This is really, really great news. God takes the initiative. It's his divine work enacted through his appointed leader that defeats the enemy who cannot withstand.

Does that story sound familiar? It's because it's a story that we see a few times throughout the Bible. A seemingly insurmountable foe vanquished through God's unlikely action.

We see it in the Exodus story. We see it again and again in the book of Judges like in the story of Gideon. We see it in the life of David. And we see it in the great last battle of the book of Revelation where those who stand against the Lord are ultimately brought down forever.

All of these things, this story comes up again because all of these things are pictures of the ultimate victory over sin and death that God has brought about in sending Jesus.

So where is that good news for us today? I want to suggest it's good news for us as we continue to see the effects of the ultimate insurmountable foes of sin and death.

[ 18 : 40 ] Just think of the untold pain and misery that human sin causes day by day. The news stories that we see about oppressed or starving or exploited people around the world.

Even closer to home, think of how easy it is to despair when we find ourselves battling the same sins we've struggled with for years and years as if we're never going to beat the habit.

Isn't it wonderful to know that the ultimate enemy has been defeated? That one day we'll be completely overthrown and that this is something that God himself has taken the initiative in.

We don't make any contribution to it. So often that's something I need to be reminded of in my own desire to fight sin and pursue holiness.

Yes, listen to God's commands, battle sin, put it to death, strive towards growing in holiness and godliness, but do so knowing that God himself has won the decisive victory over sin already.

[ 19 : 53 ] It's profoundly good news for us and it's also good news when we look around at any earthly power that seems to be thriving over and against God.

And that brings us to our second point. God judges his enemies. It's similar to what we've just been looking at in our first point. We see here though that Joshua 6 is not just about God bringing about victory for his people.

He very specifically in doing so enacts judgment on his enemies. enemies. So if you read from verse 6 of chapter 6, the seventh time round, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, shout, for the Lord has given you the city.

The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Then again down in verse 21, they devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it, men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys.

And then again in verse 24, they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord's house.

[ 21 : 09 ] This isn't a narrow victory. The defeat of Jericho is decisive and it's utterly devastating. And this kind of passage can make us feel a bit uneasy.

But how do we swear the complete destruction of Jericho with a compassionate and loving God? That may well be a question we find ourselves grappling with and it's certainly the kind of question that's likely to get thrown at us by unbelievers.

So surely passages like Joshua 6, the story of Jericho, they're just evidence in favour of the new atheist claims that God is bloodthirsty and capricious.

It's a big question. It's one that really deserves a full-length sermon in its own right and we don't have time for that this morning. So for now let me just say a couple of overarching principles to address that particular elephant in the room in Joshua 6.

First of all, it's worth noting that Canaan, including Jericho, are not exactly innocent. But nor is Israel particularly special.

[ 22 : 23 ] Throughout the Old Testament, God has been commanding Israel to drive out the inhabitants of the land precisely because of the wickedness of the Canaanites. They're abominable practices, as we're told elsewhere.

And he wants them to do this because he doesn't want Israel to be polluted by them. Because he knows that Israel have got a checkered past as it is. They're not exactly brilliant.

Some references should appear on the screen now of where we see that elsewhere in the Old Testament leading up to Joshua if you want to chase down some of those examples yourself.

So that's the first thing. Canaan isn't innocent. Israel isn't especially special. And then secondly, note that God has known about the wickedness of this land for hundreds of years and is only now bringing judgment on them.

He first mentions all the way back in Genesis 15 that the promised land is full of sin and iniquity and that he will bring judgment on it. So he's not volatile and capricious.

[ 23 : 30 ] It's not that he woke up one morning and suddenly thought he'd wipe out Jericho. No, he is patient and perfectly just in enacting judgment, having given people plenty of time to repent and turn to him.

Those are just a couple of important pieces of the wider Old Testament context. But even aside from that wider context, right here in the passage, it's worth noting that the tone is more celebratory than it is apologetic.

Because it's actually really good news for Israel that God is a God who really brings judgment on their enemies. This is a stark passage and some of those questions we were just thinking about are real ones that we may have to grapple with and it's good that we can do that seriously.

But I think even if we do find it difficult to comprehend, even in a stark passage like this, I think we can all see some ways in which there is good news for us, along with Israel.

Because just think about how you feel when you yourself encounter injustices or even outright evil in the world. There's been a few times here in St Andrews where I've been walking down the main street and I've seen people harassing or exploiting or making fun of homeless people.

[ 25 : 04 ] Maybe you've had similar experiences. Doesn't it just make you sick? Or when you read news stories about corporations, even governments, who have exploited the poorest in society for their own gain.

Just the other week I saw a news headline about a Nazi prison guard who's finally being extradited from America to Germany to face trial 70 years, 80 years, after his initial offence.

Don't things like that just make you long for justice to be done. What about when evil and injustice are more closely connected to the church?

There's so many times where it can feel like wickedness and evil are going unpunished. In this country, that's likely to come in the form of the so-called culture war, where there's increasing pressure for Christians to remain silent while other ideologies get shouted from the rooftops. Christians to see you. But for our brothers and sisters around the world, it's easy to look at militant groups or violent regimes which are imprisoning, torturing, even killing people just for following Jesus.

[ 26 : 25 ] Think how good the message of Joshua 6 is for them, that God judges his enemies justly, patiently, yes, but really, and decisively, it's something they can take heart in, it's something that we can take heart in this morning.

These things may well be difficult and sobering to think about, I think it's only right that they are, but that's why it's really wonderful that the final word on Jericho isn't doom and gloom, it's mercy and grace, and that's our final point.

God shows grace to the outsider, I said that Jericho is completely destroyed, actually, it isn't really, is it, if we read the narrative, there's one very important caveat to Joshua's commands to destroy everything, as we see in verses 22 and following.

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her in accordance with your oath to her. So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters, and all who belonged to her.

They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel. And in verse 24, then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord's house.

[ 27 : 54 ] But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute with her family and all who belonged to her because she hid the men Joshua had sent the spies to Jericho. And she lives among the Israelites to this day.

Back in Joshua chapter 2, as the spies go out to investigate Jericho, it's Rahab who tells them that both she and the whole of Canaan have heard of the God of Israel and what he's done for his people.

Well, we're told here in chapter 6, verse 1, that Jericho is securely barred, literally shut up because of the Israelites. That's the wrong response to hearing of God's mighty deeds and fearing him, trying to shut him out and ignore him.

Rahab, on the other hand, is an example of the right response. Her fear of God leads her to say to the spies, count me in. And there's a harking back to the request she made of the spies here. She asks them in Joshua 2, that you will spare, literally, save alive, my father and mother, brothers and sisters and all who belong to them, that you will save us from death. And here we see that it's all who belong to her.

[ 29 : 14 ] Joshua spares or saves alive. So in other words, Rahab fears God and turns to trust in him.

And as a result, she is saved from the judgment she deserves because of the actions of God's appointed leader. And not just her, her entire family too.

They don't get mentioned as living with her in Joshua 2. So presumably, her trust in the Lord, this oath that she's made with the spies, it's led her to go out and find her mum and dad, her brothers and sisters, their family, and to bring them into her house that they too might be saved.

The Rahab episode, then, is a very important reminder in a passage where we see God enacting just judgment that he is an endlessly gracious God.

because, again, there's nothing particularly special about Rahab. She just trusts God and asks for mercy. It's something that presumably anyone in Jericho could have done.

[ 30 : 25 ] But one of the commentators points out that the difference between Rahab and the rest of the city is one of devotion. You can be devoted to destruction by ignoring God and trying to shut him out, barring the gates against him.

Or you can be devoted to the Lord, just like Rahab and her family, and be saved. And this is all because God is an endlessly, wonderfully gracious God, as he's revealed himself to be all the way throughout the Old Testament up to this point.

And as we know he has proven himself to be across the whole of the Bible. people. And so as we try to apply this for ourselves today, the Rahab story is a really great place to end.

I think there are three ways in which we ought to hear this story today. First of all, maybe you're listening this morning as someone who isn't yet a follower of Jesus.

If that's the case, then Joshua 6 may well have brought up many more questions than I've given answers for. And so I'm sure that people over in New Mills would love to chat more with you about this Christmas if you like.

[ 31 : 41 ] But do hear loudly and clearly this morning that God is a gracious God. Just as Rahab trusts in him and is saved from the utter destruction going on around her, the judgment that's rightly warranted by Jericho, well you too can be saved from the judgment that's rightly warranted by all of us if you trust in Jesus.

Maybe you think well I'm just not a good enough person for that. I'm very far from God. Rahab wasn't a bastion of moral virtue. But as we see in Joshua 2, she's not only saved, she's also called out by name in the genealogy of Jesus himself when we're to read the start of Matthew's gospel. There's no one who's beyond God's ability to graciously see him. He takes someone not particularly special like Rahab. She fears him, she trusts in him and he weaves her into his ultimate salvation plan which culminates in the coming of his own son, the Lord Jesus.

So do hear that and do trust in the Lord Jesus yourself this morning if you're not doing so already. That's the first way to hear this passage.

Secondly, there's a word of encouragement for all of us listening in if we are trusting in Jesus.

Rahab serves as a helpful reminder for all of us that it is only by grace that we're saved.

[ 33 : 23 ] because maybe passages like this can make us look at the wicked world around us and start to feel just a little bit holier than now. Well there's a helpful corrective here that none of us are any better at heart.

The same wickedness and evil at large in the world resides in the hearts of each and every one of us. I'm not a regular listener of Radio 4 but I do love Desert Island Discs, the show where people recount their life story by saying which eight songs they would take to a desert island.

I was listening to one a while back where Ian Wright, the former footballer and current pundit, was sharing his story. In it he reveals to Lauren Laverne, the interviewer, that he had a really rough upbringing.

Home life was really tough. He's from a very damaged home and that meant that at school he would play up and cause trouble. Most of his teachers had just let him get on with it, they didn't care.

But one of them, Mr Pigden, he took it upon himself to really invest in a young Ian Wright. He would give him little jobs to do around school to instill discipline.

[ 34 : 37 ] He would encourage him to channel his energy into football and Ian Wright credits this one kind teacher with his subsequent successful career.

And there's a moment in the interview with Lauren Laverne where he really tears up. He breaks down remembering this teacher and he says, I don't know why he chose me, but he loved me and I owe him everything.

And similarly for us, there's no particular reason why God should love us. We're not special, but he does. It's an amazing, staggering thing that God loves us so much that he'd find a way to save us from the grace.

And we should be rightly humbled and profoundly thankful for that. That's the second way to hear Joshua 6. And finally, the story of Rahab is a helpful spur to action.

She hears of God's amazing deed, she fears him, trusts him, tells her family about him and they're all saved. Isn't that a helpful reminder for all of us that God saves and that we should tell people about him?

[ 35 : 51 ] I find sharing the gospel a really scary prospect. I very rarely find myself actively wanting to do it. But I'm always so pleasantly surprised that after I've done it, no matter how it's gone, I never regret it.

We all deserve judgment, but God in his mercy has made a way to save people from it. Who could we share that good news with this week, maybe even today?

Or to frame it another way, isn't that just the message of hope that people so desperately need to hear now more than ever after the year that we've had? So maybe the next time a friend or colleague or family member has been doom scrolling through the BBC News app or social media and is feeling pretty blue about the state of the world, well maybe we could take that as an opportunity to offer to share with them a slightly more hopeful, a profoundly, let's not kill ourselves, more hopeful message than what's on offer from the world around us.

That's a great place to end up at the end of this chapter, wanting to tell people about the mighty God, his patient judgment and his endless, gracious mercy.

Those are three reasons we've seen this morning to praise God and as well as just giving thanks for those things, hopefully seeing them more clearly helps us to remember that this is our God, a God we can delight in this morning and a God worth sharing with a world which longs for his victory.

[ 37 : 37 ] his patient justice and his gracious salvation. With those things ringing in our ears let me lead us as we pray to close.

Father God thank you for what a great and mighty God you are. We thank you that you do give victory over the ultimate enemies that you see and you care about evil and injustice and you bring your judgment on it and yet even though that's a judgment we deserve.

You're so gracious, so loving, you find a way to save us. Father we pray that you would take these truths plant them deep in our hearts this morning and drive us to marvel at who you are and spur us on to take the news of who you are and what you've done out to the world around us.

I pray these things in Jesus name. Amen. Thank you for having me this morning. I hope you have a really great rest of Sunday and to see you again sometime soon.