

In the face of injustice

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[0 : 0 0] When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his sword drawn in his hand.

And Joshua went to him and said to him, Are you for us or for our adversaries? And he said, No, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord.

Now I have come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said to him, What does my Lord say to his servant?

And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy. And Joshua did so. 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.

[1 : 0 0] You shall march round the city, all the men of war, going round 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 round 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.

And the people shall go up, everyone straight before him. So Joshua, the son of Nun, called the priests and said to them, Take up the ark of 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 round 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 was 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.

[2 : 3 6] Then you shall shout. So he calls the ark of the Lord to circle the city, going round it 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 up the ark of the Lord.

And the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord walked on, and they blew the trumpets continually. 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 round 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 then, 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 are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.

[3 : 56] 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 and every vessel of bronze and iron are holy to the Lord. They shall go into the treasury of the Lord. So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown.

As 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.

Then they devoted all the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, donkeys, with the edge of the sword. And to the two men who had spied out the land, Joshua said, Go into the prostitute's house and bring out from there the woman and all who belong to her as you swore to her.

So the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers and all who belong to her. And they brought all her relatives and put them outside the camp of Israel.

[5 : 21] And they burned the city with fire and everything in it. Only the silver and gold and the vessels of bronze and iron they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.

But Rahab, the prostitute, and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua laid an oath on them at that time, saying, Cursed, before the Lord be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates.

So the Lord was with Joshua and his fame was in all the land. Well, I wonder if you know the old story of the police inspector who went to visit a primary school where he was asked to take an RS lesson.

He began by asking, who knocked down the walls of Jericho? There was a long silence as the children shuffled nervously in their seats. Eventually, a young boy put up his hand and said, please, sir, my name is Bruce Jones.

[6 : 41] I don't know who did it, but it wasn't me. Well, the policeman thought that reply was a bit cheeky, so he reported the incident to the headmaster. After a pause, the headmaster replied, I know Bruce Jones.

He's an honest chap. If he said he didn't do it, then he didn't. Well, the inspector was now exasperated and wrote to the Department of Education to complain. Eventually, he received this response.

Dear sir, we're sorry to hear about the walls of Jericho and that nobody has admitted causing the damage. If you send us an estimate, we'll see what we can do about the cost. A silly story, but it does illustrate something of the biblical illiteracy that's so common today.

And not just outside the church, because even for many Christians, the Old Testament is a closed book. Sure, perhaps we remember some of the stories from our childhood, but I wonder if we really understand what they're designed to teach us or why they're in the Bible.

This morning, we're going to be looking at the account of the fall of Jericho, I guess the best-known story in the book of Joshua. And then next week, we'll be looking at the chapter which follows, a disturbing chapter which never makes the cut when it comes to children's Bible storybooks, but which nonetheless is equally important and forms something of a pair with chapter 6.

[8 : 0 4] And together, these chapters show us a God of remarkable holiness and remarkable grace who both judges justly and deals mercifully with his people.

This morning, we're looking at Joshua 6 and we're going to notice three things from this chapter. Here's the first. The surprising manner of God's victory. The surprising manner of God's victory.

Joshua 6 is a curious chapter in a number of ways. What immediately strikes the reader is how little time is actually spent on the destruction of Jericho and its inhabitants.

If a director were making a film of Jericho's fall, I guess it would be an 18 certificate and there's little doubt the focus of the movie would be on the collapse of the walls and the slaughter that followed.

And yet, in a chapter of 27 verses, only two, verses 20 and 21 deal with these events. They may be dramatic. They may be what our Sunday school lessons focused on.

[9 : 0 9] But they're clearly not the author's main concern and therefore ought not to be our primary focus either. You see, Bible writers show us their emphasis in part by the amount of time they devote to particular events.

And here, most of the ink is spilled on what happens before Jericho's demise, some ink on Rahab, more on her later, and relatively little on the destruction of the city.

And it seems, therefore, the author wants particularly to draw our attention to the surprising manner of God's victory, the way Jericho is defeated. Because, you see, although the people here dress for war, there's never any battle.

Instead, there's a strange repeated ceremonial procession with marching and trumpets, and then the wall just collapses. Some of us may remember the old African-American spiritual song.

I remember singing it at church when I was a child. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. It was covered by Elvis Presley. It goes, Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down.

[10 : 1 9] But do you see, that's precisely not what happened. In fact, it's the exact opposite of what the author's at Paine's to tell us. Or with that silly story about the police inspector that we began with.

When he asked who knocked down the walls of Jericho, I imagine he expected the answer, Joshua. But Joshua was no more responsible for doing so than that kid, Bruce Jones.

Joshua didn't fight the battle of Jericho. The walls collapsed without him so much as lifting a sword in battle. From start to finish, it was God's victory.

Now, before we explore that further, let's just get our bearings as to where we are in the book, because I realize we've just jumped into chapter six of a book tucked away in the Old Testament. So the book of Joshua begins at the end of the wilderness years, during which the Israelites had wandered around in the desert after being rescued from slavery in Egypt.

They're finally on the verge of entering the long-promised land of Canaan, with Joshua appointed as their leader after Moses' death. Then in chapter two, before the people enter the land, Joshua engages in a bit of ancient Israelite espionage.

[11 : 35] But it seems the two spies in question weren't quite on the same level as their descendants in Mossad, and things nearly go wrong when their stay at the house of a prostitute named Rahab is rumbled. Rahab, however, agrees to shelter them on condition that she and her family are protected when Israel invades, and the spies manage to escape.

They return to camp with positive reports, and in chapters three and four, the people finally enter the land when God creates a miraculous pathway through the river Jordan, as he'd done through the Red Sea a generation earlier, assuring the people that God would be with them and with Joshua as he had been with his people and with Moses at the time of the Exodus.

And we pick up the story near the end of chapter five at verse 13, with the people camped near Jericho, the first major Canaanite city inside the borders of the land.

And we're wondering if God's promises about the people taking this land will be able to stand in the face of conflict with its inhabitants. But before we find out the answer, in verse 14 of chapter five, Joshua stumbles across a mysterious figure called the commander of the army of the Lord.

Now some people have quite definite views concerning the identity of this individual. Some think it's God himself, perhaps a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, and they make much of that.

[13 : 06] And that may be true, but I don't think we're told for certain who it is. And I don't think this individual's precise identity really matters. The point is, this individual has divine authority.

The command to Joshua in verse 15 to remove his sandals because he's on holy ground echoes the same command to Moses at the burning bush at the start of his ministry in Exodus 3 when God met with him.

So what's going on here? Well I think the writer is telling us the impending battle will be God's battle. God himself will be leading Israel into Jericho.

The battle the Israelites will engage in will be God's battle, his means of judgment and salvation. He will secure the land for them. And of course that's the emphasis that we meet throughout chapter 6.

I wonder if you notice as we read the chapter that the Ark of the Lord, the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned 10 times. It's first mentioned in verse 4. We'll have a look at Joshua's words in verse 6.

[14 : 14] He says, take up the Ark of the Covenant and let seven priests bear seven trumps of ram's horns before the Ark of the Lord. Or in verse 7, go forward, march round the city and let the armed men pass on before the Ark of the Lord.

And the Ark appears again in verses 8, 9, 11, 12 and 13. And as the Israelites march round the city on seven consecutive days, the priests carry the Ark right in the middle of the people.

Now the Ark was the symbol of God's presence with his people. So again, the presence of the Ark at Jericho at the heart of the army shows us this is God's battle.

The victory is his. I guess that's also why the walls come tumbling down without any military activity at all. God wants his people to be quite clear this is his mission, that he'll be fighting for them and he will be responsible for the conquest of the land they'll enjoy.

Israel aren't so much warriors as spectators in the fall of the city. So that's the great theme of the chapter, the emphasis the author wants us to note.

[15 : 27] And of course it's summarised in God's own words right at the beginning of the chapter. Have a look down with me at verse 2. We're told, And the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have given Jericho into your hand with its king and mighty men of valour.

Now just notice what God doesn't say there. Notice first of all he doesn't say you will defeat Jericho. No, God will be the victor, not Joshua. But nor also does he actually even say I will give Jericho but rather I have given Jericho into your hand.

The outcome was so certain God could speak of it already in the past tense. Well, so what? What's this all got to teach us?

Well, I guess it's a reminder to us that ultimately our safe passage to the promised land to which Canaan points, to heaven, doesn't depend upon us.

It's God who delivers us and protects us and keeps us going this side of heaven. We're simply the recipients of the victory God has won as the Israelites were.

[16 : 45] You see, our salvation, our place in the new creation is not down to us. It's all of God. The Israelite army could, I guess, never have crossed the Jordan by itself.

They never could have penetrated the thick walls of Jericho on their own. They could never have defeated all their enemies in the land. But God gave them the victory in a surprising manner.

And in the same way, we could never have rescued ourselves. We could never have earned our place in heaven. And we could never keep going by ourselves. We could never defeat the temptation to sin or to give up if we simply relied on our own strength.

But God has won the victory for us. And again, he did so in the most surprising way. Because who would have thought that at the cross, through the shameful death of his son, which we'll be remembering later as we take the Lord's Supper, our salvation would be secured.

And yet it was at the cross that Jesus took upon himself the full penalty for our sin that we might enter the heavenly city. And Jesus is now with his people by his spirit, strengthening us to fight against him, just as God was with Israel at Jericho.

[18 : 04] Now, of course, it's not always the case that God wins the victory in this kind of way, without using human means. As we see in some of the other battles in Joshua, often we are the means God uses to save and keep us.

Just as the Israelites often did need to fight, we must play our part in fighting against temptation and sin. But this first triumph in the land teaches us nonetheless that ultimately it's God who brings the victory.

And it assures us that he is able to keep both his promises and his people. And I think that's very encouraging when we so often feel the pull of sin and the power of temptation and wonder if we'll ever be able to make it to heaven.

The book of Joshua teaches us that God is able to bring his people safely into the land he's promised despite battles, obstacles, and hostility along the way.

So that's the first thing we learn from Joshua 6, the surprising manner of God's victory. But then secondly, notice also the shocking nature of God's judgment, the shocking nature of his judgment.

[19 : 14] And let's pick up the story at verse 20. So the people shouted and the trumpets were blown. As 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.

Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys with the edge of the sword. It's actually horrific, isn't it, what's going on here?

A massacre of everyone in the city. And quite understandably, it doesn't sit easily with us in a world which has witnessed terrible massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda and Syria in recent decades.

And it's led people to charge God with a kind of ethnic cleansing. Listen to these words from Richard Dawkins. While discussing passages like Joshua 6, he writes this about the God of the Old Testament.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction, as he understands the Old Testament. Jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving, control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

[20 : 45] And while we may not use such strong language, if we're honest, we perhaps can feel the force of what he's saying. At first reading, the events of verses 20 and 21 and similar ones elsewhere in Joshua look like divinely sanctioned genocide.

So what are we as Christians to make of all this? How are we to respond? After all, we can't just explain this away as being in the Old Testament because as I hope we know, the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New.

Well, I think there are a number of things we need to remember. For one thing, far from this being a case of the extermination of an innocent people, the Canaanites were a wicked people.

Listen to these words from Deuteronomy chapter 9. Looking ahead to the conquest of the land, Moses says to the people, Do not say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust the nations out before you, it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land, whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you.

Do you see what he's saying? The Canaanites were wicked people and the Israelite conquest of the land was God's means of judging them for their wickedness. We know from elsewhere that the Canaanite peoples were far from innocent.

[22 : 09] They were guilty of the grossest forms of sexual immorality. They practiced the occult and they even killed their own children as human sacrifices. These were wicked people by any standard.

So the people of Israel were simply God's agents in the exercise of the rightful judgment these nations deserved. And it wasn't as if God was flying off the handle either.

There had been plenty of time for these nations to repent. Those of us here in growth groups may well remember looking just before Christmas at God's promise to Abraham of the land of Canaan in Genesis 15 where he was told that neither he nor his descendants would receive that land immediately.

There would be a long wait, a delay. And verse 16 of Genesis 15 tells us why. Let me read it. God said to Abraham, your descendants shall come back here in the fourth generation for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. Do you get the point? God wouldn't allow Israel to enter the land until the day when the inhabitants' sin was so great that judgment could wait no longer.

[23 : 22] God had actually been incredibly patient with these peoples. He tolerated their sin for 400 years but finally enough was enough and it was time for God to act. You see, the real surprise here is how long God's views was that he delayed acting in judgment for so long.

And it's not as if these people couldn't have repented. It's clear from Rahab's words in chapter 2 that the people of Jericho knew God had promised to destroy them. They knew all about Israel's God.

They had been warned and if only they had trusted him as Rahab did, they also could have been saved. And the very fact that Rahab, one of their people, was saved shows that what's going on here can't be ethnically motivated anyway because God rescues a Canaanite.

The issue here wasn't one of race wickedness, but wickedness. Indeed, Israel themselves had driven out of the same land centuries later when God's patience had run out with their sin in turn.

So as hard as it may be for us to stomach, probably because we fail to realize the true seriousness of sin, what we have here isn't unjust or immoral.

[24 : 40] These people got what they deserved. But nonetheless, it is still shocking. The destruction and death is absolute and appalling.

And so Joshua 6 does teach us the shocking nature of God's judgment. It's awful. You see, we can't take God on and win. I don't know, maybe there are one or two of us here this morning who think we can just keep God at arm's length or continue to indulge unrepentantly in a particular pet sin.

But do you see, God's patience won't last forever. Justice will catch up with us eventually and it will be both terrible and irreversible.

Did you notice that haunting prophecy in verse 26? Have a look. Joshua says, curse before the Lord to be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.

At the cost of his firstborn should he lay its foundation and at the cost of his youngest son should he set up its gates. And that prophecy was tragically fulfilled in 1 Kings 16:34 when the chap rebuilds Jericho at the expense of his sons.

[26 : 01] Jericho was to be destroyed forever. So can we see how this passage acts as a warning for us? The devastating, total, and final nature of Jericho's destruction are designed to teach us about the final judgment that will occur for those who don't know Jesus.

Just as Israel's taking of the land was accompanied by judgment, so our salvation will also coincide with divine judgment, a judgment that will be no less horrific than what we see here.

Sure, we may find this chapter hard to stomach, but it's not really any different from the end of the Bible from the judgment that we find at the end of the Bible when Jesus returns.

Let me read some verses from Revelation 19 that as at the end of Joshua 5 depict God in the person of his son as a mighty warrior. We're told this about the judgment that will occur when Jesus returns.

I saw heaven opened and behold a white horse and the one sitting on it is called faithful and true and in righteousness he judges and makes war and the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen white and pure were following him on white horses.

[27 : 15] From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written king of kings and lord of lords. You see Joshua 6 is a picture of what will happen to those who defy God.

They will suffer his just but terrifying and irreversible judgment. It's interesting actually that in Revelation 19 the peoples of the earth gather together for battle against God but as at Jericho there's actually no battle recorded.

They're defeated before we know it because no one can take God on and win. So if any of us here know we haven't yet made peace with God if we're still at war with him can I urge us not to presume on his ongoing patience any longer but to accept the peace treaty he offers before it's too late.

In other words to be like Rahab and she's the subject of our final heading more briefly. The unexpected recipient of God's grace. The unexpected recipient of God's grace.

[28 : 34] Let me read from verse 22. Have a look. But to the two men who had spied out the land Joshua said go into the prostitute's house and bring out from there the woman and all who belonged to her as you swore to her.

So the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her and they brought all her relatives and put them outside the camp of Israel and they burned the city with fire and everything in it.

So one family is rescued and it's the most unlikely family. Rahab was a prostitute perhaps one of the most depraved people in a city that was being judged for its wickedness and yet God saves this Gentile prostitute.

You see amidst all this destruction and judgment we have here a glimpse of grace. Even a Rahab can be saved from judgment. Not because she deserves it not because she was any better than her fellow citizens far from it but as is clear from chapter 2 because she trusted the God of Israel and begged for mercy.

So perhaps the real shock here isn't the just destruction of a wicked people but the gracious rescue of a wicked woman. And isn't that a wonderful truth for us to hold on to?

[29 : 54] I don't know maybe it's not hard heartedness that is keeping someone here from coming to Jesus. Perhaps it's heavy heartedness a conscience weighed down with guilt.

But do you see if even a prostitute like Rahab wasn't beyond God's forgiveness then there's hope for us all. Even the most unexpected people even wretched sinners like us can be recipients of God's grace.

And I love the fact that Rahab doesn't disappear from the Bible story after Joshua 6 because she reappears in an unexpected place in Jesus' genealogy his family tree where we're told that Rahab was the father of Boaz Ruth's husband and was the great great grandmother of King David.

She's in Jesus' family line. Without her rescue Jesus would never have been born. Unexpected grace. So if we're feeling weighed down by sin this morning let's take heart.

God specialises in saving Rahabs. And what an encouragement for us as we think about whom to invite to the real lives talks later this week. this month. God specialises in saving Rahabs.

[31 : 07] He can save even the most unlikely people. Well we're nearly done but as we finish I want us to look at another New Testament reference to Joshua.

So would you turn with me as we close please to Hebrews chapter 11. This is on page 1212 to Hebrews chapter 11 as we've I think been seeing in our growth groups it's always a good model isn't it to see how the New Testament understands Old Testament events that we're looking at.

So this is where we'll finish. Page 12 12 and sorry that we probably had more cross references than we needed this morning. Hebrews 11 and verses 30 and 31.

Let me read those verses to us. The writer to the Hebrews tells us by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. So the application of Joshua 6 for us ought to be to exercise faith.

[32 : 11] The big application of all these Old Testament characters in Hebrews 11. You see while the people of Israel may have been mere spectators when the wall collapsed while Rahab may have depended on those two spies to rescue her they and she still had a role to play in what happened.

They needed to exercise faith. The people must have thought it a very strange military strategy simply to march around the city walls for a week and blow trumpets.

They could easily have thought they knew better and tried to lay siege to the walls themselves or got their battering rams out. Rather than exercising faith by welcoming the spies, Rahab could easily have tried to save her own skin by handing them over to the authorities.

But by the people simply trusting what God had said and Rahab identifying herself with God's people, they were saved. And we need to exercise the same kind of faith.

We can easily slip into thinking that we need to contribute to our salvation somehow or that we need some extra spiritual experience or technique to be able to keep going in the battle with sin against the obstacles we meet in order to make it to heaven.

[33 : 22] But like the Israelites and Rahab, we simply need to have faith, to trust the gospel that saves us, keeps us, and strengthens us to persevere.

And if we continue to do that, we can be as sure of entering the land as the people of Israel. Shall I lead us in prayer? we're told in the New Testament that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our Father, we know that we too will be engaged in battle and meet many obstacles along the way if we want to be those who make it to the promised land. And so we thank you for the wonderful encouragement this morning that you go before us, that you win the victory for us, and that you are more than able to keep us and secure the land for us.

And we pray that as we remember and understand that, we would be those who exercise the same faith as the people in Joshua's day and as Rahab did, and that we would trust in what Jesus has done for us, which enables us to safely reach that promised land.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.