

Heroes of the Faith

Joshua and the Walls of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-6:21)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on June 27, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ Since the start of the summer, we've been looking at "Heroes of the Faith" throughout the OT. We've been considering their heroic actions and heroic faith. So far, we've covered Abraham, Moses, and last week we looked at Rahab in the book of Joshua. The woman who hid the spies as they were surveilling the walled city of Jericho. This morning, we'll focus on Joshua himself and the battle of Jericho.
 - **Now the story of Jericho and its fall is well-known to everyone who grew up going to church.** Whether using flannel graphs, cartoons, or silly songs, we teach our children about the battle of Jericho, and they find the story fascinating. But when we take a closer look at the narrative, we discover some troubling aspects to this battle that are left out of the silly songs and story bibles.

- ❖ **We discover that the walls of Jericho didn't just come tumbling down, leading everyone inside to simply surrender to the Israelites.** No, they were slaughtered by the Israelites. Put to the sword. Men and women. Young and old. Oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword (6:21). And then they burned the city with fire, and everything in it (6:24).
 - **When you factor in all the violence and carnage, the battle of Jericho should probably have a warning label attached to it – For Mature Audiences Only.** This would be a strange bedtime story. At least it would be if you're reading to your kids from the actual bible and not a sanitized children's version.

- ❖ So this morning, I don't want to gloss over the troubling aspects of this passage. There's no point in giving you a sanitized sermon on a sanitized story. **We're going to address head-on the strangeness in this story and the violent nature of this story.** As a church, we believe in the full inspiration of Scripture, down to the very words in the original language. Which means we believe they ultimately come from God. So we have nothing to be ashamed of in this passage and nothing to hide.
 - **That's not to suggest that Christians should never be troubled by passages like this.** That we should never question the violent nature of certain scriptures, especially when that violence is prescribed by God. No, that's understandably troublesome. We ought to pause and wonder how such actions can be justified. We do a disservice to disciples of Jesus if we stifle their questions or shame their doubts.

- ❖ So we are a church that welcomes these questions and tries our best to address these doubts. **We believe Joshua chapter 6 is God-breathed and profitable for our spiritual growth and health.** And we recognize that Hebrews 11:30 points to the battle of Jericho as an example of heroic faith. Like so many of the OT stories of old, they are meant to inspire and model for us what biblical faith looks like in action.
 - **So what can be learned from a story like this?** There is so much violence in this story, and we read of such a strange method of laying siege against a fortified city. What do we make of this battle? There are three observations I'd like to make: (1) let's observe how the battle of Jericho was a religious ceremony, (2) it was a judicial sentence, and (3) it was a theological statement.

A Religious Ceremony

- ❖ The first observation is to notice how – even though we typically call it the battle of Jericho – the story seems to describe a religious ceremony more than a battle. **The battle of Jericho was most fundamentally a religious ceremony.** I think we often fail to grasp the underlying message behind the well-known details of the story because we miss this observation. This wasn't just a battle aimed at fighting. This was a religious ceremony aimed at worshipping.
- ❖ It helps to see the context surrounding chapter 6. In chapters 3-4, Joshua leads the people of God across the Jordan River, which was the eastern border of Canaan, of the Promised Land, the land that the LORD promised to give to Abraham and his descendants. **And right before chapter 6, in Joshua 5:10-12, the Israelites celebrate their first Passover in Canaan.** The Passover is the annual celebration commemorating the Exodus. Remembering God's deliverance of their parent's generation from Egyptian slavery over 40 years ago.
 - **Well, in striking similarity, the beginning of Joshua reads like a retelling of the Exodus story.** Joshua is tapped as Moses's successor. The Lord promises to be with him and work through him just as he did with Moses (1:5). They cross over the Jordan by means of another miraculous parting of waters (3:17). Circumcision is reinforced as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham (5:2). The Passover was just kept (5:10-12). Then at the end of Joshua 5, the LORD supernaturally appears to Joshua in a manner akin to Moses and the burning bush. In both instances, the man of God is told to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground (5:15).
 - **These similarities are suggesting one thing – that the events in the book of Joshua amount to a second Exodus.** Once again, God is on the move to achieve a victory for his people by his own grace and power. As much as God did all the fighting against the Egyptians (and received all the glory), God will do all the fighting against the Canaanites (and receive all the glory!).
- ❖ **So that's why instead of crafting battle plans, it seems more like God is designing a religious ceremony. More focused on worshipping than fighting.** Let's recall the details of this supposed battle plan. There are soldiers positioned at the front and rear of the column. But notice how the focus is *not* on the army but on the priests in the middle and especially on the ark that they are carrying.
 - The ark of the covenant is the holy vessel that represented the earthly presence of the LORD (Yahweh). Throughout their years in the wilderness, the ark would be in the front leading the nation – as if to say to other nations that this is *not* a people who fights for Yahweh. **This is Yahweh who fights on behalf of this people.**
- ❖ Joshua is told to organize the army in a continuous column before and behind a contingency of priests who are carrying the ark. With seven priests blowing seven trumpets made of a ram's horn. Together, they are to encircle the city of Jericho once a day for six days. No one is to speak a word during the entire march. The only sound was to be the sound of the trumpets blowing continuously.

- ❖ Then, on the seventh day, the column is to encircle the city seven times, and after the last time, make a long trumpet blast. Then Joshua will call everyone to raise a mighty shout.
 - **So the image we're given is *not* of a pompous show of force.** They're not taunting Jericho. There's no raucous, bloodthirsty celebrating going on. This feels more like a solemn ceremony. Everyone is quiet as a mouse. The only sound was the sound of the trumpet that, outside of warfare, was used in ritual ceremonies like the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9). **So to an Israelite that day, this sounds and feels more like they're marching to a worship service than to a battle.**

- ❖ **And you might be wondering: Why drag this thing out to seven days?** Is there any significance to that? Remember the context. They just celebrated the Passover, and according to the Jewish calendar, Passover commences the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a seven-day celebration where the Israelites rested from their normal labor and ate unleavened bread as an act of remembrance. Recalling how God delivered them from Egypt so decisively and abruptly that they didn't have time to leaven their bread to take on their journey.
 - **So this seven-day march around Jericho coincided with this Feast of Unleavened Bread.** That was to reinforce the point that what's about to occur at Jericho is another Exodus. **This will be another instance of God fighting on behalf of his people and achieving victory without their assistance.** And thereby reserving all glory for himself. He will be worshipped as the covenant-keeping God who is mighty to save. This is why I'm suggesting the battle of Jericho was more of a religious ceremony.

- ❖ Joshua and his men are armed and ready for battle. **But the instructions given to him require very little fighting and a lot more trusting.** Trusting in God's word, in his wisdom, in his mysterious ways. As a military commander, this strategy of marching in circles and blowing trumpets makes no sense. How is this going to work?
 - **And not only does it raise a host of questions and doubts, this strategy is humiliating.** We're men of war. We're trained to fight with the sword. Ready to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. But you just want us to walk around in a circle in absolute silence, while some priests toot their horns, and then we head back to our tents? The guards on the Jericho walls were probably laughing at them.
 - **And let's be honest, this sounds too good to be true.** We just wait and watch, and somehow we're going to walk right in to this heavily fortified city? That sounds too easy. Too good to be true.

- ❖ **But things make more sense once we realize we're not dealing with a battle plan but a religious ceremony.** Like in a worship service, the goal is to magnify the LORD. To praise him as the Lord of our salvation. So there'll be no question that victory belongs to the LORD.
 - If we consider the LORD's response to Joshua's question in chapter 5:13, we get a better sense. Joshua is confronted with a theophany, a visible manifestation of God, which he thinks, at first, is an unmarked soldier who could be either an Israelite or a Canaanite. So he asks, "**Are you for us, or for our adversaries?**" Look at v14, "*And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD."*"

- ❖ Are you for us or for our enemies? *No*. No, you're for us? Or no, you're for our enemies? *No*. You don't understand, Joshua. I am the LORD. I'm not a tribal god to be invoked in a geopolitical struggle between opposing people groups. This is not a religious war between the holy, righteous Israelites and the wicked, pagan Canaanites. **No, Joshua, I am the LORD over all peoples, all tribes. And the reality is that all of you are my adversaries.** For all of you have fallen short of my glory by your idolatrous, wicked practices.
- ❖ But because I am gracious, I will be for you and for Israel in this coming battle. Not because of your size or strength or spirituality. In fact, like I told Moses back in **Deuteronomy 7:7-8**, *"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers."*
 - In other words, the only reason I am for you is because I chose you. I chose to love you in spite of your smallness and weakness and propensity to stray from me. **So when you experience victory, never forget that that victory does not reflect your strength or worthiness – but the LORD's grace and power.**
- ❖ Church, the same applies to us. The victories we experience in life are a reflection of God's grace and power working on our behalf. **The Apostle Paul describes the Christian life as a good fight, but like the battle of Jericho, it's a good fight of faith.** It's a battle to trust in the LORD – in his Word, in his wisdom, in his mysterious ways.
 - Do you trust God when his way is perplexing? When it doesn't seem to make sense? Do you trust the LORD when his way is humiliating? When it humbles you? Do you trust God when his way sounds too good to be true?
 - If the way forward in the Christian life always made sense, if it depended on your courage and dedication, if it came by the sweat of your brow, then God would not get the glory. You would claim it for yourself.

A Judicial Sentence

- ❖ **In the same way, Joshua and the Israelites would have claimed the glory had victory not come in such peculiar fashion.** So once we recognize that this battle is more of a religious ceremony aimed at glorifying the LORD and his salvation, then the marching in circles and blowing trumpets makes more sense. It seems less strange. But we're still confronted with the slaughter of all the inhabitants of Jericho. The LORD's instructions to devote the city and everyone in it to destruction raises serious ethical question.
- ❖ This is where our second observation will hopefully shed some light. **The battle of Jericho was a judicial sentence against the Canaanites.** There is a particularity to these divine instructions. They were given specifically to Joshua and the Israelites at this particular point in redemptive history. They are time-specific and limited, meaning they do not set a precedent for how God's people should generally treat those outside the faith.

- ❖ The key term in this text is the Hebrew word *herem*. **When something is designated as *herem*, it's devoted to the LORD for utter destruction.** Look at v17, “*And the city and all that is within it shall be (herem) devoted to the LORD for destruction.*” (ESV; cf. 6:18, 21) Other translations use slightly different terms. It shall be “*under the ban*” (NASB). It shall be “*doomed by the LORD to destruction*” (NKJV). It shall be “*set apart to the LORD for destruction*” (HSB). It shall be “*devoted to the LORD*” (NIV). It shall be “*completely destroyed as an offering to the LORD*” (NLT).
 - **What stands out is that *herem* is not a military term but a religious term.** You're not just destroying something. You're devoting it to whichever deity you worship. And this is not unique to Yahweh worship. Other ancient peoples worshipping other gods would devote things to their deities. It could be material objects like gold or silver or an animal or even a person. That which is devoted would either be wholly consumed by fire or given to the priests who serve that deity for their use or consumption. This act of devotion was irrevocable. The object cannot be redeemed once it's been designated as *herem*.

- ❖ Now let's be clear: It was not for the Israelites to decide what is *herem*. Only the LORD can make that designation. And he did just that in **Deuteronomy 20:16-18**. There the LORD explained how the Israelites ought to treat the cities of the peoples living in Canaan, in the land the LORD is giving as an inheritance. He says, “*You shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction.*”
 - Now what are we to do with that? How are we to understand these instructions coming from the LORD? **These are difficult texts, but it's important to recognize this designation of *herem* as a judicial sentence against the inhabitants of Canaan in particular.** This was not a tactic that Israel adopted towards all their enemies or foreign nations in general. In fact, in the same Deuteronomy 20 passage, the LORD says that cities outside the Promised Land are to be treated differently (20:10-15). So the act of devoting cities to utter destruction was not a general pattern of warfare for Israel.

- ❖ Now before we explore further this idea of a judicial sentence against these Canaanites in particular, **I think it helps to point out that this idea of devoting a city to utter destruction – as terrifying as that sounds – in reality never meant that literally every single man, woman, or child was slaughtered.**
 - What we find in Deuteronomy 20 or in Joshua 6 is hyperbolic language that would have been recognized by ancient readers as the language of conquest. It was not meant to be read with a wooden literalism.

- ❖ It's like how we might say that our favorite sports team totally annihilated the opposing team. We completely destroyed them. You get what I mean. **In the same way, ancient readers understood the concept of *herem*, and they could recognize the hyperbolic, exaggerated speech often associated with the language of conquest.**

- ❖ Let me offer some biblical evidence. For example, the first mention of *herem* in Scripture is **Deuteronomy 7:2**. Here Moses tells Israel to devote the people in the land of Canaan to destruction. Treat them as *herem*. But then in the very next verse (7:3), he warns them not to intermarry with a Canaanite. Why would that be a concern if they were to literally wipe off the face of the earth every single Canaanite? **That would suggest that to devote a people to destruction is *not* to be interpreted as a complete genocide of an entire people.**
 - Even in Joshua, at the end of the book in **chapter 23:7 and 12**, Joshua gives final instructions after they've taken possession of the land and devoted the inhabitants to destruction. And even there he refers to the nations still remaining among you and how you should not mix with them or intermarry with them lest they lead you astray into idolatry. And that's the key issue.

- ❖ The concern is idolatry. The idea is to remove the influences of Canaanite idolatry that might lead Israel into apostasy. That's the reason given in Deuteronomy 20:18. **So what Israel was engaged in was *not* genocide or ethnic cleansing as some have accused.** The fact that there were exceptions and people were spared – like Rahab and her household or the Gibeonites in chapter 9 – **demonstrates that there is no ethnic or racial animus behind this concept of *herem*.** You wouldn't have been able to tell an Israelite apart from a Canaanite by simply looking at them. Remember Joshua couldn't tell between an Israelite from a Canaanite just by looking. That's why he had to ask if you're with us or with the enemy.
 - **So there's no ethnic animus behind *herem*, but there is a sort of religious animus.** Canaanites in general are to be devoted to destruction because they reject the LORD and bow down to false gods. But a Canaanite individually, like Rahab, can be spared if she or he recognizes the greatness and glory of the LORD. What this means is that – in these instructions to Joshua and the Israelites – the LORD is carrying out divine justice against sinners who reject his rightful rule over their lives.

- ❖ This is a judicial sentence. Back in **Genesis 15:16**, the LORD tells Abraham that I'm giving you and your kin this Promised Land, but your descendants won't take possession of it until after a long hiatus sojourning in another land for four hundred years. Why? **Because the iniquity of the people in this land is not yet complete.**
 - In other words, they hadn't reached the limit. The LORD was willing to patiently suffer their sinful rebellion. **But there will come a time when their accumulated iniquity will be so great that the LORD will no longer tolerate their presence in the land.** And they will be dispossessed and destroyed by his covenant people. Well, the time is now. The iniquity of the Canaanites is apparently complete. And a judicial sentence is to be carried out by Joshua and the Israelites.

- ❖ **But we must not lose sight of the long-suffering patience of the LORD.** It's clear that his bent is to show merciful compassion towards sinful people. Where he doesn't give people justice – what they deserve. Instead, he gives mercy. That's the norm. That's what we've come to expect.

- **And every so often, these long, patient periods of merciful compassion are interrupted by particular expressions of divine justice – like the Canaanites being devoted to destruction.** And the reason it shocks us is because we have grown so accustomed to God’s mercy that we take it for granted. We assume mercy is what everyone deserves. And that’s why we can’t understand those sporadic moments when we see justice served. When a judicial sentence is carried out by God.

- ❖ **This expression of justice against the inhabitants of Jericho is what stands out and bothers us. But what usually goes unnoticed is all the mercy God has extended to them.** Think about how much time – how many centuries – he gave them to repent. On the final day, Rahab will rise up as a testimony against her people. She is proof that any Canaanite could have been spared and redeemed.
 - Knowledge of Yahweh was not withheld from them. Rahab heard about Yahweh and what he did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. That information was available to them. They can’t plead ignorance. **And even marching around the city for six days meant six opportunities for them to open the gates to welcome the LORD and his people.** Like Rahab did for the spies.

- ❖ There is so much mercy in this story, but we tend to fixate on the justice, on the judicial sentence. **And we tend to do the same in our own lives. We've grown accustomed to God's merciful compassion. To the point that we come to expect it. Perhaps even demand it.** So in those sporadic moments when mercy is withheld. When hardships, troubles, or tragedies occur. When the harsher side of life – and the harsher side of God – seems more apparent. We suddenly notice. Something seems off. Something seems wrong.
 - But in those moments, we're getting what we deserve. **Those moments in life are sporadic displays of God's justice and sporadic reminders of how merciful and compassionate he is the vast majority of the time.**

A Theological Statement

- ❖ And that leads to our third and final observation. **How the battle of Jericho was really a theological statement.** In other words, it was intended to teach God's people something about God and something about ourselves in light of God. **This is not to suggest that the historical nature of these events are insignificant or should be called into question.** No, that's still important to affirm. These things really did happen. But what's more important is that God's people come away understanding and applying the theological message behind the battle of Jericho.

- ❖ That brings us back to this concept of *herem*. **At the heart is the claim of the LORD's exclusive ownership.** Anything designated as *herem* belongs solely to the LORD. So to violate that ownership – by trying to keep devoted things for yourself – **that would be tantamount to robbing God.** That's why Joshua warns in v18 to “*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.*”

- That foreshadows what will occur in the next chapter when Israel goes up against the city of Ai. They experience a humiliating defeat, and it's revealed that a man named Achan had kept some of the devoted things from the battle of Jericho in his tent. That was a grave offense. It was taking what belonged to God. And notice how that singular offense affected the entire nation of Israel.

- ❖ **So this concept of *herem* is a recognition of the LORD's claim to be the sovereign Creator and Ruler of all.** All things belong to him, including us. We must recognize that our lives belong exclusively to the LORD. We are devoted things. **In a sense, we have been designated as *herem*.** Which makes our sinful rebellion all the worse. Our efforts to rule our own lives – our refusal to submit to God's lordship – is like keeping devoted things in our tent. It's a grave offense. It's an act of cosmic robbery. And God's response to our thievery is far more terrifying than what we encounter in the battle of Jericho.
 - **If you find God in the OT distasteful because he called for the destruction of a city and all its inhabitants – then what are you going to do with God in the NT?** There's this mistaken impression that God somehow softens up in the NT. When in actuality, his judicial sentences are elevated to a greater degree (from a focus on physical death to spiritual death) and to a greater scope (from a focus on temporal punishment to eternal punishment).

- ❖ We can't escape the theological message underlying this story. At the heart of this concept of *herem* is the grave warning that our lives have been devoted to utter destruction. **But at the heart of the gospel is the good news that God set apart another leader and sent him.** Not to carry out a judicial sentence against us like Joshua. Not to put us to the sword.
 - But to fall on the sword for us. To devote himself to destruction. To be consumed by the fires of God's holy justice. So that we can be redeemed. Spared like Rahab and her household. That is what Jesus accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

- ❖ So whenever you read about or talk about the battle of Jericho, don't gloss over the troubling parts. Don't ignore the violent parts. **Instead, let those parts of the story remind you of the certain fate from which you have been spared.** From which you have been redeemed. **All because Jesus has triumphed over death by his own death and won the decisive battle.** And now he leads you into a new land, a new home, an eternal inheritance.
 - And for those of you who are not yet Christians, who are not yet redeemed, let those troubling parts of the story lead you to repentance. To recognizing that you are devoted to utter destruction and that your only hope is to trust in Jesus and look to him for salvation.