

Joshua 5:13-6:27

The Fall of Jericho

Review and Introduction

I am not a military historian. There are those who specialize in, indeed, immerse themselves in, the details of military history. They can describe the armor of a twelfth century knight in detail. They can regale you with the strategies of encirclement at the battle of Stalingrad in World War two. They can tell you where every Union and Confederate regiment was at the battle of Gettysburg.

I am not that kind of historian, but that is of no consequence this morning. For the battle we will recount this morning, the battle of Jericho, is hardly worthy of the name. No appreciation of military nuances are necessary. We need not attend to the details of siege strategies, weaponry, and generalship, for as we will see from Scripture, this battle was not won by the Israelites, but by God. In keeping with the theme of the book of Joshua, the battle is the Lord's. The Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, are to be strong and courageous in obedience to His divine plan.

As we begin, recall that the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River in miraculous fashion. Then they had spent some time renewing the ritual of circumcision and the ceremony of Passover that had always marked them as God's chosen people. Now, it was time to begin the conquest of the Promised Land in earnest. But there are two points to consider as we begin the conquest of the Promised Land.

First, this is not a matter of land-hungry marauders pillaging and plundering their way through the Middle East. It might seem, as we consider the entire destruction of all living things that we will see this morning, and at other places as we continue with our study in the future, that such wanton destruction is unrighteous. In other words, is it truly in keeping with the will of God to slaughter every man, woman, and child in a defenseless city – for so Jericho was after the walls fell? The simple answer is yes. Scripture teaches us that God often uses the unrighteous to punish the even more unrighteous. And such punishments would fall on the Israelites as well, when they disobeyed the Lord.

Second, as we will see, this account is given in great detail. That is because this was the first city taken in Canaan, and it served as a representation for the entire conquest of the Promised Land. In fact, Jericho became the standard by which the taking of other cities would be measured. Indeed, at the very end of his life, as he gave his final challenge and exhortation to the Israelites whom he had

led for so many years, it was the only city specifically mentioned by Joshua as he recounted the conquest.

Pre-Conquest Instructions

But our narrative begins, not with the battle, but with a visitor. ¹³Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, he raised his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' ¹⁴He said, 'No; rather I have come now as captain of the army of the LORD.' And Joshua fell on his face to the ground, and bowed down, and said to him, 'What has my lord to say to his servant?' ¹⁵And the captain of the LORD's army said to Joshua, 'Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.' And Joshua did so" (5:13-15).

The stage was set. Joshua was near Jericho, perhaps surveying the city and planning his strategy, when he was surprised by a man "standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand" (v. 13). Joshua did not recognize the person. Could he be an assassin from Jericho? Quite naturally, Joshua demanded to know his loyalties. The question was entirely appropriate, because the figure clearly was in the form of a man, was equipped as a warrior, and had drawn his sword.

Notice that the stranger did not give Joshua a direct answer. Instead, His 'no' indicated that He had a different purpose altogether. He identified Himself as the "captain of the army of the LORD" (v. 14). This could mean that He was taking command of the armies of Israel, but a more likely understanding of the claim is that He was commanding the angelic armies that would fight on the behalf of Israel. Since we have learned that the conquest of the Promised Land was the Lord's work, and not that of Joshua or the Israelites, this makes more sense.

Understanding this, Joshua's response was immediate. Whatever disputes modern theologians may have about the nature of this visitor, Joshua was not confused. He "fell on his face to the ground" (v. 14). He addressed the visitor as lord, a term that could be used either in reference to man or to God. However, from the context it is clear that this was the Pre-Incarnate Christ. Perhaps the most obvious argument for that conclusion is the fact that Joshua worshiped this figure, something prohibited to any other than the Lord. Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:8 both expressly, and unmistakably, forbade the worship of any other being than God.

Also, Joshua's response reminds us of other such encounters recorded for us in Scripture. Think of Isaiah. "And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' " (Isaiah 6:5).

And the prophet Ezekiel had a similar experience. "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking" (Ezekiel 1:28).

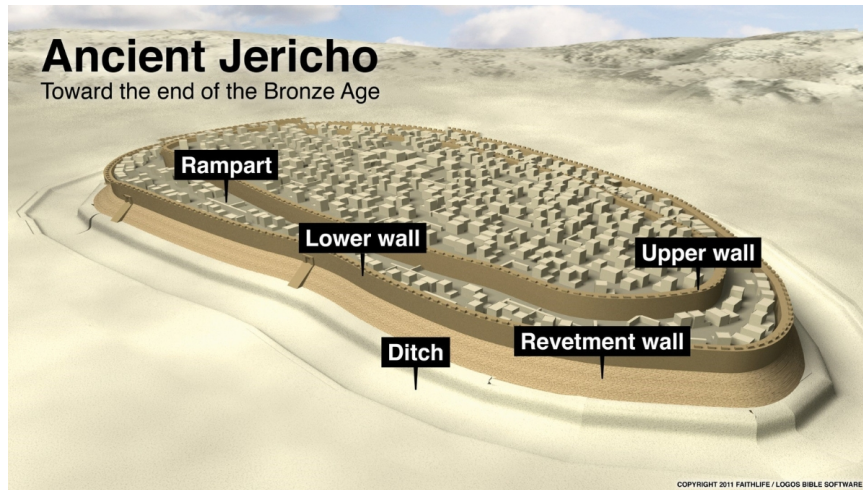
While those encounters involved visions rather than tangible beings, there are other accounts in the Old Testament of a human encountering the Lord in a more earthly fashion. For example, in Genesis 32, Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord. Eventually Jacob had his name changed to Israel and received a blessing. In Exodus 3 Moses, in his encounter with the Lord, questioned the Lord, doubted his own abilities, and tried to find excuses not to obey. Eventually, he needed to be convinced by miracles that God would be with him as he performed the assigned task.

So we can see that there are significant differences in this encounter of Joshua. To begin, it is only Joshua who was actually looking forward to the encounter to come. Jacob was in terrible fear of his brother Esau, and Moses had no desire to return to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Joshua, on the other hand, was eagerly anticipating the upcoming battle.

Also, Joshua neither wrestled with, nor questioned the angel of the Lord. He was cautious, but understandably so, yet he responded immediately and properly when he understood Who this visitor was. See also that the angel of the Lord told Joshua to remove his sandals (v. 15). This is further evidence that the visitor is no mere mercenary general looking for a fight, or even an angelic being, but the Pre-Incarnate Christ. The place was holy, because it is where the Lord has chosen to meet His leader.

The Strategy Given

To digress a bit into history and archaeology, excavations at the ancient site of Jericho began in the 1860s. By the early 1900s, the city walls had been discerned, as well as evidence of destruction. By the 1930s, John Garstang had determined that the biblical account of the destruction fit the archaeological pattern. While those findings have been challenged, beginning in the 1950s by Kathleen Kenyon, more recent research has determined that Garstang was correct after all in his dating the destruction of Jericho to the early fourteenth century.



Jericho was a typical city of the period. It had both inner and outer walls, was surrounded by a ditch, and had towers built from which the defenders could both see, and repel, attackers. In the fourteenth century BC, to take such a city was not possible by direct assault. Rather, the attacking army would lay siege to the city, and the attackers could make use of several conventional strategies to take a desired city. The most common tactic was to "invest" a city by surrounding it. This would sever supply lines and communication. The goal was to force surrender through starvation and disease. As a part of this strategy, the attackers would also engage in the destruction of the local countryside, destroying crops and homes. This was also part of the psychological warfare, making the besieged feel hopeless.

If this process was taking too long, after all the attackers also needed supplies, ladders could be used to scale walls under covering fire from archers. This was extremely hazardous as defenders threw down stones, boiling water, and whatever else they could find onto the attackers. Another strategy was to dig tunnels beneath city walls to weaken the foundations. The tunnel would be supported by wooden beams and, when the time was right, it would be ignited. As the wood burned, the wall above would collapse, creating an opening for the attackers.

Another strategy was to build earthen ramps. In the case of Jericho, as with other cities that used a ditch around the walls for added defense, the ditch first had to be filled with rocks, dirt, etc. to provide a foundation. Then, earthen ramps would be built directly to the top of the walls, allowing troops to simply march over the defenses. Finally battering rams, at this time really large logs, could be used. More elaborate models were protected by wheeled, roofed structures, called "tortoises" to shield the attackers from projectiles being hurled down at them from above.

But that was not how God chose to do it. ¹"Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in. ²But the LORD said to Joshua, 'See, I have handed Jericho over to you, with its king and the valiant warriors. ³And you shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. ⁴Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. ⁵It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, 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 ahead'" (6:1-6:5).

In terms of the biblical narrative, there is some disagreement among scholars as to whether there is an interval of time between chapters five and six, or whether the entire section from Joshua 5:13-6:5 is one event. If it is one event, then verse 1 is parenthetical to the conversation, but it is appropriate because it details the hopelessness of Israel's cause without God's intervention, "Jericho was tightly shut" (v. 1). This is similar to Joshua 3:15, when the author interrupted his narrative of the crossing of the Jordan River to inform us that the river was in its season of flooding when it overflowed its banks. The point is to demonstrate that, humanly speaking, the task was impossible.

We need not hide from the fact that there is a strangeness in the plan. Rams' horns, the ark, the people shouting are hardly military terms. But that is precisely the point. The victory was a gift from God. There was no reference to a military strategy, because this was not a battle. This was a ritual ceremony. In fact, it was a continuation of the rituals (circumcision) and ceremonies (Passover) that had preceded it. God would have the Israelites use a ceremony, not a siege or an assault, to bring down the walls of this city. There is no comparative example in ancient Near-Eastern history that we can find to replicate this. No other pre-battle rituals are similar. This is a divine act to glorify the God Who gave the victory.

Let's examine some details. The mention of the "king and the valiant warriors" (v. 2) are almost an afterthought. Scripture makes it clear that they have no power to stop Joshua as he acted according to the Lord's commands. They were not the obstacle. It was the walls that were the obstacle, and God would bring them down. God, speaking of the future as if it had already occurred, told Joshua "I have handed Jericho over to you" (v. 2).

As we have said, the "march around the city" (v. 3) was a sacred procession. Again, elements such as the rams' horns and trumpets demonstrate this. There was similarity with the role of the ark in the crossing of the Jordan River and with 2 Samuel 6 and the bringing of the ark into Jerusalem. The

ark had moved from Sinai, across the Jordan River, and would eventually take its rightful place in Jerusalem. The Lord had always been in the midst of His people.

The instructions are as simple as they are unconventional. The men of war were to march around the city once each day for six days. They would be accompanied by seven priests carrying the rams' horns, followed by the ark of the covenant. On the seventh day, the procession was to make seven circuits about the city walls, at the end of which there would be one long blast of the rams' horns. At that moment the people would shout, and the walls of Jericho would fall.

The Strategy Obeyed

Having been given his marching orders by the Lord, Joshua passed them along to the people. ⁶"So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, 'Take up the ark of the covenant, and have seven priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark of the LORD.' ⁷Then he said to the people, 'Go forward and march around the city, and the armed men shall go on ahead of the ark of the LORD.' ⁸And it was so, that when Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the LORD went forward and blew the trumpets; and the ark of the covenant of the LORD followed them. ⁹And the armed men went ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard came after the ark, while they continued to blow the trumpets. ¹⁰But Joshua commanded the people, saying, 'You shall not shout nor let your voice be heard, nor let a word proceed from your mouth, until the day I tell you, "Shout!" Then you shall shout!' ¹¹So he had the ark of the LORD taken around the city, circling it once; then they came into the camp and spent the night in the camp.

¹²Now Joshua got up early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. ¹³Then the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark of the LORD went on continually, and blew the trumpets; and the armed men went ahead of them, and the rear guard came after the ark of the LORD, while they continued to blow the trumpets. ¹⁴So the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp; they did the same for six days.

¹⁵Then on the seventh day they got up early at the dawning of the day and marched around the city in the same way seven times; only on that day did they march around the city seven times. ¹⁶And at the seventh time, when the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, 'Shout! For the LORD has given you the city'" (6:6-16).

This seven day march reminds us of the seven days of Creation. Again we see the point being to illustrate the glory of God on display. We can also see that Joshua followed the plan to the detail.

In fact, more details are given in the execution of the plan than in God's instruction, but we need not think that Joshua went off script and added his own ideas. Rather, there is an intentional narrative build-up to the climactic destruction of Jericho.

To give a brief overview, the first day is described in great detail. The second day with somewhat less detail. The third through the sixth days are merely recorded. Also, as we have seen before, there is much repetition in the narrative. Looking more closely, we can see that verses 8-9 are the first day executing God's commands to the letter. Notice that the only noise to be made came from the rams' horns, since Joshua had instructed the people not to make any sounds.

The command to the people is threefold, "You shall not shout nor let your voice be heard, nor let a word proceed from your mouth" (v. 10). This seems all-inclusive, and the emphasis on silence is clear. What an eerie sight this must have been to those within the city, watching from the walls. For six days, hundreds of thousands of people marched in silence around their city as the rhythmic sound of trumpets echoed all around.

Verse 11 informs us that the first day went off successfully. Verses 12-14 tell us that the second day repeated the successes of the first. And then we are told the remaining days passed in the same fashion.

We can only wonder what those within the city of Jericho were thinking. Remember that they were terrified, their hearts had melted is the phrase Scripture uses. Therefore, they offered no resistance. Scripture has no mention of showers of arrows being shot from the ramparts. There are no reports of stones being hurled from the walls by the defenders as the Israelites marched passed. The people inside Jericho watched, and they waited.

Finally, the seventh day came. The Israelites began early, since they were to complete their circuit around the city seven times on this last day. Scripture records the climax, "And at the seventh time, when the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, 'Shout! For the LORD has given you the city' (v. 16). But then, there is a narrative pause.

The Requirement

Joshua reminded the people that ¹⁷"the city shall be designated for destruction, it and everything that is in it belongs to the LORD; only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in the house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. ¹⁸But as for you, only keep yourselves from the things designated for destruction, so that you do not covet them and take some of the

designated things, and turn the camp of Israel into something designated for destruction and bring disaster on it. ¹⁹But all the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD" (6:17-19).

This is a wonderful dramatic pause, clearly designed to heighten the tension of the narrative. These verses could not have happened sequentially. It is not possible to think of Joshua telling the people to shout and then going into this digression while they held their voices. The point here is not to write a sequential history, but rather to highlight the obedience of the Israelites in this occasion. That is more important than the victory, as we will see in future weeks.

Joshua reminded the people that the city of Jericho "shall be designated for destruction" (v. 17). To be clear, "everything that is in it belongs to the LORD" (v. 17). This was a reference to the Levitical laws for a wholly burnt offering. It was called the ban (*ḥērem*) and was commanded in the Law,

¹⁶"Only in the cities of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. ¹⁷But you shall devote them to destruction, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as Yahweh your God has commanded you, ¹⁸so that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against Yahweh your God" (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

This prescribed the devotion of something to God for His exclusive use. Rahab is excepted since she had made a profession of faith. With all of Jericho under the ban (excepting those with Rahab) this meant that all living creatures were to be killed. All the valuable possessions were to be given to the house of God. All the rest (buildings, crops, etc.) were to be burned.

This was no arbitrary injunction. We see that Joshua reminded the people of the reason for the ban. It was given so that "you do not covet them and take some of the designated things, and turn the camp of Israel into something designated for destruction and bring disaster on it" (v. 18). Disobedience would bring this judgment upon themselves, again remember that the responsibility of the people of Israel is not to fight the battles, but to be strong and courageous in obedience.

While the city itself is devoted to destruction, "all the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron are holy to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD" (v. 19). The treasury of the Lord is not detailed, but likely the tabernacle, since Psalm 27:4, 6 uses the same word.

The "Conquest" of Jericho

The battle itself, if it can even be called that, is barely mentioned. ²⁰"So the people shouted, and the priests blew the trumpets; and when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, everyone straight ahead, and they took the city. ²¹They utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, sheep, and donkey, with the edge of the sword" (6:20-21).

The people shouted, the priests blew the trumpets (how those in Jericho must have hated that sound after a week of rams' horns blaring), and the walls fell flat. Conveniently, the fallen wall created a ramp for the soldiers to gain access to the city. Unlike the crossing at the Jordan River, no details are given about the falling of the wall. But this makes sense since the emphasis throughout the narrative has been on the actions of God, not the Israelites. As the writer to the Hebrews stated it, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after the Israelites had marched around them for seven days" (Hebrews 11:30).

The totality of destruction is emphasized by the phrases young and old, men and women, and the list of animals. The Israelites obeyed to the letter. They did not let their greed, or their excitement, get the best of them. As we will see in the future, that was not always to be the case.

Salvation in the Midst of Judgment

Then, we are reminded of the episode with the spies and Rahab's role in helping them and, thus, bringing about God's plan. ²²"And Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, 'Go into the prostitute's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there, just as you have sworn to her.' ²³So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab, her father, her mother, her brothers, and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives, and placed them outside the camp of Israel. ²⁴Then they burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. ²⁵However, Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (6:22-25).

Here again, the sequence of events is blurred. Surely the rescue of Rahab and her family was planned before the sack of the city, not during the confusion of the attack. Notice that Joshua wisely chose the two men who had spied out the land. Those two men were given the responsibility to go into the city and find Rahab, since they had met her they would recognize her

in the midst of the commotion. Rahab had kept her part of the bargain, she had saved the spies and she had gathered several members of her extended family it seems. Now the Israelites honored their covenant with her.

Also, we can see that there is no inconsistency here, with regards to the ban. Rahab and those with her were already devoted to the Lord, and thus were exempt from the ban. Rahab was now a part of the Israelite community. The text indicated that she was still living among them at the time of writing, though the word can also mean descendants. In either case, The people of Israel had kept their promise.

This list given, " the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron" (v. 24) is formulaic, and is thus intended to be an inventory of what was taken. The rest of the city was burned. There was no mercy shown to either humans nor animals. All were slaughtered. Every dwelling was set ablaze. It was a scene of utter destruction.

The Oath

Standing back, watching the city burn, satisfied with all that had occurred. Joshua declared an oath. ²⁶"Then Joshua made them take an oath at that time, saying, 'Cursed before the LORD is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his firstborn he will lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he will set up its gates.' ²⁷So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land" (6:26-27).

In the ancient world, leaving such a curse on the sarcophagi was common. It was intended to frighten those who might want to rob the grave for valuables that had been buried with the deceased. In this case, the pronouncement of the oath was the theological rationale for the *ḥērem*. Population centers which were particularly associated with pagan cults were to be destroyed and never inhabited again. The Law had commanded it.

¹²"If you hear in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to live in, anyone saying that ¹³some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, 'Let's go and serve other gods' (whom you have not known), ¹⁴then you shall investigate, search out, and inquire thoroughly. And if it is true and the matter is certain that this abomination has been committed among you, ¹⁵you shall most certainly strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword. Utterly destroy it and all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword. ¹⁶Then you shall gather all its plunder into the middle of its public square, and burn the city and all its plunder with fire as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall

never be rebuilt" (Deuteronomy 13:12-16).

We should also point out that this was not simply Joshua taking it upon himself, but was rather Joshua speaking what God intended, as it is clear from future events. During the time of Ahab, king of Israel, a man named Hiel tried to rebuild the city. The account in 1 Kings tells us what happened.

"In his days Hiel the Bethelite rebuilt Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun" (1 Kings 16:34).



To this day, Jericho has never been rebuilt.

As an echo of Joshua 3:7 and 4:14, the passage concludes with the assurance that Joshua's fame "was in all the land" (v. 27). It is clear that his fame was not his own achievement, but because the Lord was with him, fighting his battles.

Takeaways

And truly God was, and would be as long as the Israelites remained strong and courageous in obedience. Today, God's gift of faith and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit precedes our command to a life of discipleship. But we must always remember that it is our submission to the Lord's will, and not in our own strength, that will be the difference between obedience and disobedience. After all, "We have this treasure in earthen containers, so that the extraordinary greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:7).