

“The Fall of Jericho and the Terrifying Faithfulness of God”

Joshua 5:13—6:27

March 29, 2020

As we continue our series, “*Extraordinary Times, Extraordinary God*,” please join me in Joshua 6 where we will see “*The Fall of Jericho and the Terrifying Faithfulness of God*.” I realize that we don’t typically think of God’s faithfulness as terrifying, so let’s take a moment to make some sense out of this title.

The Fall of Jericho in Joshua 6 is about both fully deserved judgment and undeserving salvation. As we saw last week, the most important factor in all of life is where you stand in relationship to God. You will either stand on the side of God’s judgment toward sin or you will stand on the side of His faith-honoring faithfulness. God is faithful to honor the faith of those who fear Him (the saving faithfulness of God) but He is also faithful to judge the sinner who refuses to fear Him (the terrifying faithfulness of God). I hope you are beginning to see how important the fear of God is. Those who sin because they don’t fear the Lord will fall under His dread, while those who walk by faith because they fear the Lord will receive mercy.

Here’s the big idea: ***We must walk in the fear of God because He who is to be feared by all will honor the faith of all who trust in Him, to the terrifying dread of God’s enemies.***

[Joshua 5:13-15; 6:1-27]

We are going to look at our passage through the lens of 7 attributes of God and then in response to God’s character we are going to see the faith, obedience, and vulnerability of God’s people.

1. **The Holiness of God** (Josh 5:13-15)

[5:13-15] Joshua was probably scouting out the area, when suddenly out of now where someone appeared before him with a drawn sword. Joshua’s question, is basically this: “are you from our army or are you from our adversary’s army?” But this individual is from neither. He is from the Lord’s

army, and in fact, identifies Himself as the *captain* of the Lord’s army! So who is this? Let me give you several clues that help us identify this heavenly being as the pre-incarnate Christ Himself appearing to Joshua. First, when Joshua fell prostrate before him in the posture of worship, He was not corrected. Angels never allow people to remain prostrate in worship (cf. Rev 19:10). Second, Joshua was told in vs. 15, “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” Why? Because He is in the presence of the holy one just as Moses was at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5). Third, Joshua 6:2 clearly expresses that the Lord Himself is giving Joshua assurance that He Himself will give this city of valiant warriors into Joshua’s hand.

What’s important for us to see here is that there is no business as usual in the presence of a holy God. The enemies that lie before Joshua are of far less concern than Joshua’s need to regard the Lord as holy, because the most important factor in your life is where you stand in relationship to God. It’s more important than avoiding COVID-19, or financial problems, or relational stress, because where you stand in relationship God determines where you stand in relationship to all things, including eternity.

While its true that our relationship with God should be personally intimate (like a child to a Father), it should never be casual, never lacking reverence for His holy passion for purity and His holy distain for sin.

2. **The Dread of God** (Josh 6:1; cf. 2:9-11, 24; 4:23-24; 5:1)

Verse 6:1 tells us that “*Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel. No one went out and no one came in.*” This was an ancient “shelter-in-place” order! But why should a heavily fortified city of valiant warriors exercise such caution toward a traveling band of civilians, inexperienced in war?

The dread of God had fallen on the people of Canaan. They are afraid of Israel because of Israel’s God who has done great wonders for them.

- [Josh 2:9-11]
- [Josh 2:24]
- [Josh 4:23-24; 5:1]

These pagan people get it! Only the true living God could do such things on behalf of Israel and thus they seek to hide and shelter-in-place. They are experiencing the dread of God which is the terrifying fear that falls on those who grasp the greatness of God but don't walk by faith in the fear of God.

3. **The Power of God** to intervene for His people (Josh 6:2-16, 20)

Jericho was not a huge city, but it was a strongly fortified city and strategically stood between Israel and the rest of the promised land yet to be conquered. The high walls had discouraged the first group of spies sent out in Numbers 13:28. In fact, Jericho had an inner wall as well as an out wall which scholars says were anywhere between 4.5 to 6 feet thick. Furthermore, the Hebrew rendering of vs. 2, could indicate that all the men of Jericho were great warriors.¹

Yet Jericho had no defense whatsoever against Almighty God. In fact, God's instructions to Israel are so unconventional in vs. 3-5, that they highlight the fact that only God could be credited with the collapse of the walls.

They were to march around the city once a day for six days with the priests blowing trumpets but the people were not to speak a word. Then on the seventh day, they marched around the city 7 times, and on the last lap, Joshua commanded the people to shout, and when they did the walls collapsed. In fact, vs. 20 says, they "fell down flat!"

No human explanation could be given. When the people gave the victory shout, God caused the massive walls of Jericho to collapse in utter ruin. Take note that this victory shout was not only in obedience to God's command, it was also a shout of faith. Hebrews 11:30 tells us that "*By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been encircled for seven days.*"

Furthermore, the most notable aspect of Israel's parade around Jericho was that in the center of the procession was the ark of the covenant which represented God's presence among His people. God was with them, God was among them, and God's presence was surrounding their enemy.

And so there is only one reasonable conclusion. The walls of Jericho fell by the power of God in response to the faith and obedience of His people.

4. **The Judgment of God** on His enemies (Josh 6:17-19, 21; cf. 7:1-26)

Certainly, the most disturbing part of this story is God's command to utterly destroy all who lived in Jericho with only one exception—the harlot Rahab who hid the Israelite spies, protecting them from the men of Jericho. Vss. 17-19 detail the extent of the ban (or the *herem*) that God placed on Jericho. **[17-19, 21, 24]**

The sobering question we are faced with is, why did God order the death of all the people of Jericho, including women and children? This is a unique kind of war called the *herem* or the *ban*. *Herem* is the Hebrew word that means "to devote to complete destruction." The *Herem* was only to be practiced in the Canaanite cities that God was giving to Israel as an inheritance and it was an act of God's judgment on the wickedness of those cities.

Deut 20 describes the difference between the normal rules of war and the *herem*. Under the normal rules of war, if a city was willing to accept the terms of surrender, then they were to take the people as their servants. If they refused to surrender, but warred against them, they were to kill the men but spare the women, children, and animals (Dt 20:10-15).

But God had different rules for the cities which they are going to inhabit in the promised land. They were to be under the *herem* of Deut 20 as a means of final, divine judgment (Dt. 20:16-18).

Scriptures gives at least 3 reasons for this *herem*:

- a. **God invoked the *herem* as judgment against the wickedness of the Canaanites** (Dt 9:5; 7:10; 12:31). Deut 9:5 says, "*It is because of the wickedness of these nations, that the Lord your God is driving them out before you.*" They were haters of God (7:10) who performed every abominable act which the Lord

¹ Donald Madvig, *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 3: Joshua*. Pg. 277.

hates, including sacrificing their children in the fire to false gods (12:31).

- b. **God invoked the *herem* to protect the vulnerable hearts of His children from the same destructive sin.** (Dt 7:4; 20:18)
- c. **God invoked the *herem* because Israel was to be set apart as holy unto the Lord** (Dt 7:6). Because they belong to the Lord, they are to be a reflection of His holiness. God had chosen Israel to be the instrument through which He would reveal Himself so that all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

So God is bringing a total devotion to destruction upon these nations as judgment for their own wicked sin, to protect Israel from succumbing to the same sin, and to uphold His glory through His people.

As a point of clarification, what took place under the *herem* was not genocide. Rather it was a moral response by a holy God to judge the wicked. We know this to be the case because Rahab was spared because of her faith and later in chapter 7, Achan (an Israelite) was put to death for his sinful disregard of the *herem*. It is not a racial matter. It is a matter of rebellion against a holy God.

Ironically, the most disturbing and sobering aspect of the Jericho story is what brings us closest to the gospel of grace. ***What is it in our hearts that causes us to focus on the harshness of the herem rather than being overwhelmed by the generous, undeserved grace of God to anyone who doesn't come under the death-ban?***

If we read the hard judgment passages, like the *herem*, and don't say, "that should have been me," we don't understand ourselves biblically, we don't understand the holiness of God, and we will struggle to understand the glory of His grace.

The reality is that all sin is heinous before God. The sins of Jericho may seem worse in comparison to ours but our sin is not less in light of the holiness of God. All sin must come under judgment. Either we will bear that judgment in hell or we will come under the perfect refuge of Christ who bore God's judgment for us.

Beloved, God's wrath, portrayed in the *herem*, is what our sin deserves. But God in His grace has laid the severity of his wrath for our sin on Christ so that God's love (though undeserved) may be lavished on us.

- 5. **The Mercy of God** (Josh 6:22-25; cf. 2:9-14; Heb 11:31; Mt 1:5-6; Ruth 4:17-22)

What's so remarkable about God's mercy toward Rahab is that under the *herem* no one was to be left alive. So why did God make this one exception for Rahab and her family? Certainly, it was not because she was morally upright—she was a prostitute. Rahab was spared because of her faith. More specifically, she was spared because of the faith-honoring faithfulness of God. He *always* honors true faith. And ***divine mercy is only accessed through faith.***

But where do we see Rahab's faith? Turn back to [Joshua 2:9-14]. When Rahab says, "for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (11), she is confessing that He is the living God of heaven and earth and acknowledging His supremacy. Then she goes on to plead for mercy to spare her life, having apparently abandoned all hope in the gods or armies of Jericho. Don't miss what's happening here. The fear of God has taken hold of Rahab's heart causing her to respond with faith! **Hebrews 11:31** confirms this: "***By faith, Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.***" (Notice here again the inseparable link between faith and obedience.)

Let me remind you of what I said at the beginning. *The most important factor in all of life is where you stand in relationship to God. You will either stand on the side of God's judgment toward sin or you will stand on the side of His faith-honoring faithfulness. God is faithful to honor the faith of those who fear Him (the saving faithfulness of God) but He is also faithful to judge the sinner who refuses to fear Him (the terrifying faithfulness of God). Oh, may God write the fear of God on our hearts! The fear of God that leads to faith and receives divine mercy!*

Initially we are told that Rahab and her family were placed outside the camp of Israel (vs. 23), probably due to their ceremonial uncleanness and Joshua's meticulous obedience to God's law. But this was only temporary, because vs. 25 says, "she lived in the midst of Israel to this day." In fact, as we continue to read the Bible story, we discover in Matthew's genealogy that

Rahab married an Israelite man by the name of Salmon, and became the mother of Boaz who married Ruth, making Rahab the great, great grandmother of David; the royal lineage through which Christ would come.

Do you see the incredible beauty of God's mercy?! Regardless of your background and your former life of sin, when you receive God's mercy, you receive it all! There are no marginalized citizens in the kingdom of God. There are no step-children in the family of God. When you are adopted into God's family, you receive 100% of His mercy, granting you the full inheritance of your heavenly Father. Probably most everyone hearing my voice today is of non-Jewish heritage. Beloved, we are the Rahabs that have been spared by the mercy of God, and we have been granted the full inheritance of our Father as the bride of Christ!!

6. **The Curse of God** (Josh 6:26; 1 Kings 16:34)

Because of the utter wickedness of Jericho, it was never to be rebuilt.² This was so serious, that in vs. 26 Joshua says, "Cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his firstborn he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates." When we fast forward to 1 Kings 16:34, we discover a man by the name of Hiel who rebuilt Jericho but "he laid its foundation with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua."

Here again, we see not only the holiness of God, but also the faithfulness of God to fulfill His word.

7. **The Faithfulness of God** (Josh 6:2, 20, 26; 1 Kings 16:34)

We see the saving faithfulness of God to the faith of Joshua and the Israelites. We see the saving faithfulness of God to the faith of Rahab. But we also see the faithfulness of God to judge the wickedness of sin. It is by God's faithfulness to His own holiness and His own word of promise that He brings judgment to bear on the people of Jericho, on Hiel, and even on Achan in Josh 7 for failing to obey God's instructions about the *herem*.

² According to Dt 13:16, cities devoted to idolatry were to be permanently ruined.

Beloved, the faithfulness of God should produce the fear of God in our hearts, knowing that He will honor the faith of those who fear Him as the sovereign and holy Lord of mercy, and He will be faithful to bring the dread and terror of His judgment on those who persistently sin against Him because they refuse to walk by faith in the fear of God. *Oh, for the mercy of God, may He write the fear of the Lord on our hearts!*

8. **The Faith, Obedience, and Vulnerability of God's People.**

When the Israelites marched around Jericho, it not only required obedience to God's instructions, it also required faith. God's method for the overthrow of Jericho was so unconventional that it left no room for human boasting, but only room for exercising the faith of obedience.³ At a human level the plan was risky. Jericho was a fortified city of trained warriors while Israel was extremely vulnerable. They are inexperienced with war. They are camping in mere tents and they are now backed up against the wall of the Jordan River that God closed behind them, so there is nowhere to retreat. Yet from this vulnerable position, they advanced forward by faith on the pathway of obedience.

I emphasize this because when we find ourselves in a vulnerable position, we are tempted to compromise our obedience to God and retreat to self-preservation rather than *walking by faith, which means obeying God regardless of the risk from a human perspective.*

Here's the principle I'm driving at: When we find ourselves in a vulnerable position, it is not the time for us to compromise our obedience to God, nor is it the time for us to retreat to self-preservation. ***When we are faced with the human risk of obeying God, it is essential that we rise up and walk by faith on the path of obedience because the most important thing in life is where we stand in relationship with God—to stand in fear of the Lord.***

Prayer challenge: ***"Lord, in as much as you brought down the walls of Jericho and spared Rahab by Your mercy, so plant the fear of God in my heart and in hearts of my children so that faith will take hold of infinite mercy!"***

³ Theodore Epp. *Joshua—Victorious by Faith*. Pg. 187.