

Taking on darkness as the soldiers of Yahweh's arm

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[0 : 00] Today we're going to be beginning a three-week study on the book of Joshua. So before we read, let's just take a step back and see where we are in the Bible. God's people have been freed from slavery in Egypt, and they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness.

And however unlikely it may have seemed that God would keep his promises, he has been working to make for himself a people that he's present with and to give him a place in which to dwell.

So now they've reached this place, the promised land, and in the first few chapters of Joshua, we see them entering it. They've crossed the Jordan, and now where we pick it up, they're about to begin the conquest to take the land for their own.

And the first obstacle is the fortress-like city of Jericho, and that's where we begin our reading. So please turn to Joshua chapter 5.

We're going to be reading from verse 13 through to the end of 6. When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand.

[1 : 19] And Joshua went to him and said to him, Are you for us or are you 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're 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. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once.

Thus you shall do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times.

[2 : 25] 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.

And now Joshua relays these instructions to the people, and they carry them out. And we're going to skip on to 16, which is after this has happened.

So verse 16 we pick up again. 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 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. 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.

[3 : 51] 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. 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. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of 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 the life. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

[5 : 06] 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 is with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land. Please keep your Bibles open.

In horse racing, the term a sure thing is sometimes used. Have you heard of it? This is what it means. There is a horse worth betting everything you have on, because it will certainly win.

It's a sure thing. And this certainty usually comes by a bit of cheating. A horse is given some steroids, and then raced a few times, with the rider concealing the horse's potential.

The horse becomes less fancied, meaning that any bet will be more lucrative if it wins. And when this happens, the people in the know have a sure thing, and they'll win big.

[6 : 20] The rider lets the horse go full speed, and it wins. We would love certainty like this in lots of things, wouldn't we? A sure thing. Certainty in exams, business, knowing that we won't be mocked if we talk to someone about Jesus.

Well, when I heard about this sure thing in horse racing, it all went a bit pear-shaped. The horse died. It was no longer a sure thing. Well, what is there that's certain, then?

As Joshua stands, looking over Jericho, seeing that it's shut up, nothing able to come in or out in 6-1. A sure thing in this battle seems like no possibility.

Yet, when Israel does take to battle with Jericho, victory has already been assured and given. We can try and put our confidence in all manner of things that seem to bring about the security of certainty, but nothing compares to the confidence that comes from knowing that Yahweh leads his army, that the Lord leads his precious covenant people, that he's with them.

And that's the first thing we see in this passage. We see that Yahweh gifts victory to those who follow him. Yahweh gifts victory to those who follow him from 5-13 to 6-15.

[7 : 45] We've seen that Jericho was not a sitting duck to be easily toppled. Verse 1 says, it was shut up. It was secure. They knew Israel were coming. It was basically a fortress. So attacking this city was a daunting prospect for Joshua.

He was to lead his people into battle. He knew God had promised to give them Canaan, but that wouldn't make this a robotic exercise without stress and worry.

He would still be feeling the angst of possibly losing, fighting the battle, what was going to happen. He was the leader. If things went wrong, would the blame come to his door?

So it's a wonderful encounter as Joshua stands looking over Jericho in 5-13, for he bumps into the commander of the Lord's army.

The figure effectively then says to Joshua, this is my battle. It is you who are on my side, not vice versa. I am going to lead you to victory.

[8 : 50] This is God himself coming to his covenant people to lead them as they begin their conquest, just as he did at the Exodus. And we see something similar in verse 15.

He takes off his sandals. This is holy ground. Just like with Moses a generation earlier, God is present and he is promising victory.

The Lord is as present with Joshua ahead of this battle as he was with Moses at the Exodus. So if you're in Joshua's sandals, you may be feeling slightly more confident.

God's enemies are waiting. Punishment is imminent for Canaan's wickedness. But Israel don't do it alone. They do it with Yahweh present, sword drawn, ready to lead his people and not just into battle, but to lead them all the way to victory.

Now, don't we have a sure thing here? Indeed, it's after this reassuring encounter that we read the detail about Jericho being shut up in 6.1. Shut up, perhaps, to a normal human army, but this one is

being led by the Lord himself.

[10:05] And he, with his sword drawn, continues in verse 2, I have given Jericho into your hand. It sounds pretty final. That's a sure thing.

I have given. And so, Joshua is given the exact instructions that will bring victory that has been promised.

Israel simply have to obey. And as we read on, we see more and more that this victory will come from one source and one source only, the commander of the army of the Lord. Sword drawn lays out his battle plan for Joshua to follow.

There's no sending foot soldiers over toward that gate, no catapulting this wall, no battle formation spread around, no wheeling in the tanks to flank them. No, the instructions are marching in circles, priests are to play some trumpets and to shout the wall down.

Seven days of what seems to us like nonsense. This is battle and we have seven days of silliness. It doesn't exactly sound like tactics. But Joshua and Israel are marching as the army of the Lord and it is he who gives victory.

[11:23] There's to be no over-spiritual, sickeningly pious application that we should march around Glasgow on a seven-day prayer walk. The point in these instructions, just like with the appearance of the commander, is that it is God who wins this battle.

Beyond doubt, it is God who wins this battle. Where God's people achieve any victory is because God has given it. He is with his people. In the instructions, the ark is mentioned ten times.

God is present with them in all of these instructions they carry out and he smashes the wall down. Well, this all sounds great, Josh, but we aren't in battle.

Why is this important to us? Are we not involved in battle anymore? If we trust Christ and follow him, we are soldiers in Christ's army.

We don't fight with weapons. We don't set out to kill those who reject our king. But we do fight Satan and his minions. We fight the dark stain of unbelief and we fight by proclaiming the gospel.

[12:37] We fight by taking our faith into our workplace. We fight by sharing Christ with our neighbors. We have a mission to bring the light of the gospel into the darkness of sin and unbelief.

And we fight, we preach, we share Christ knowing that it is God who gives us victory. It is he who opens blind eyes. It is he who opens hard hearts.

It is God who breaks down the walls of the most fortified city and the most fortified heart. With God leading us as we work, with God ensuring that his word achieves what it set out to do, we fight confident of victory.

And all the way to verse 15, the people do as commanded, carrying out God's instructions for this battle to the letter. And he is faithful to what he said he would do.

He leads them to victory. He guarantees the victory they obey. However, the climax of this battle scene isn't quite what's expected.

[13:46] We see the text teach us then in verses 16 to 21 that Yahweh's people fight against darkness. Yahweh's people fight against darkness.

I wonder if you notice something in verse 16. After the instructions are followed, Joshua tells the people to shout, but continues to give instruction and he isn't drowned out.

We might expect to read verse 20 straight after verse 16. The people shouted and the trumpets blew and the wall fell down. But there's an interruption and the writer uses the suspense of the story to highlight his point here.

Try and put your first-time reader hat on here. If you do, you'll be waiting with anticipation. Is the wall going to fall? What's going to happen? Are these tactics going to work?

But instead of finding out, there's a delay and we have verses 17 to 19. The readers face instructions for Rahab and her family to be saved.

[14:54] They're told that everything is devoted to God to be destroyed except the precious metals. They're for God's treasury. Surely there must be a mistake here.

We want the dramatic end of the battle. But the writer's priority isn't the battle. Its conclusion is covered in a measly verse and a half in 20 and 21.

The writer is emphasizing something else here. This is a holy war that Israel was fighting. It's not ethnic cleansing. No, God leads this battle.

He instructed it and the precious things are to be set aside for him. This was a war against darkness, wickedness. And we get a picture of this from Deuteronomy 9 which says of Israel, Not

because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God is driving them out from before you and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers.

And Genesis tells us that the land wasn't going to be Israel's yet for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. The Amorites are Canaanites and their wickedness hasn't yet reached its climax.

[16:25] Genesis tells us that the Canaanites were to do more evil, but here, now in Joshua, the Lord says, No longer. These people were abominations to God, child sacrificers.

They committed all manner of sexual perversion, probably beyond what we can imagine. They were absolutely wicked and they were spared by God for generations because their iniquity was yet to be complete.

Their wickedness was continual, unrelenting, worsening, but no more. Now, finally, it is going to be punished.

This war isn't a reward for God's people being righteous. They are not being rewarded because they are good. Rather, God's using them as instruments of judgment on wickedness.

That's why all the devoted things are to be destroyed. If God's people were to take any of these things, they too would be doomed to destruction for siding with wickedness.

[17:37] God's instructions on Jericho were clear and Israel must obey. Jericho had the opportunity to know God. Word had spread of his mighty, saving acts, but they continued to reject except for Rahab, the prostitute.

You see, she had heard of Israel's crossing the Red Sea. She had come to fear Yahweh, showing herself to have faith in Israel's and our God.

She is spared. This is a holy war against darkness and God's people are reminded that above the excitement of frontline action, of fighting, is obedience to him.

He guarantees victory, so we must obey. And we'll see next week in our study the consequences of failing to obey this ban.

If it is God's fight and him leading us in our fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, then what does this section teach us? It teaches us that we must be obedient.

[18:51] The key thing here was not winning this battle. God takes care of that. God's people are to obey him. They're to have hearts that love him and not gold.

They're to have hearts that are faithful to him, not willing to mix even slightly with the wickedness that he hates. He fights and wins.

We obey. And we see then in the last part of this passage that his judgments are final and sure.

Yahweh's judgments are enduringly decisive in 6, 22 to 27.

Yahweh's judgments are enduringly decisive. We see two contrasting fortunes here. Jericho faced judgment that led to destruction. Rahab faced judgment that led to salvation.

Word of Yahweh's army coming had caused Jericho to be shut up, closed off, hardened.

Destruction. And in contrast to the whole city that was closed, there was one open house, one house that Yahweh was not shut out from, and then there is a repeated commitment to save Rahab's family as promised.

[20:16] Salvation. With these contrasting responses comes decisive judgment. Jericho is given to destruction. Look again at verse 24.

The city was burnt and everything in it except what was for God's treasury. And there's a legacy to this. Not only is Jericho destroyed, but look at verse 26.

Cursed before the Lord be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city Jericho. God has destroyed it in its wickedness, and he will take any attempts at restoring it as further wickedness against him.

To the extent that man, the man who would attempt to rebuild it, does so at the expense of his sons. There's a legacy to this.

God's judgment that brings destruction is enduringly decisive, but so too is his judgment that brings salvation. The contrast to Jericho, the wicked people, is the faithful keeping of a promise to Rahab.

[21:31] Amongst the great iniquity of the city, a prostitute welcomed God's people and showed faith in God by sheltering them, and she and her family are saved.

And it also endures. Look at verse 25. She has lived in Israel to this day, the day that it was written, which was hundreds of years after the conquest, and her family are still part of God's people.

So how do we draw all this together as we close? What should this passage impress upon us most? It brings before us God with sword drawn, ready to lead his people in battle, ready to destroy

his enemies.

It brings to our attention the only sure thing. It asks the question, which horse are you backing? you see, this captain, this commander of God's army will return, and it'll be with sword drawn once again, only the next time he'll be riding a white horse.

That's the only horse to back. We are still led by God himself, and at the end of history when Christ returns, we will be led by God himself.

[23 : 00] In between, if we are soldiers in God's army, we say with Paul, for though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but of divine power to destroy strongholds.

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, God's thought captive for Christ. God's battles have always been holy battles.

It has always been to allow light to flood into darkness and overcome it. Those who with faith obey him make him known to those who reject him and are wicked.

In the end, we will either be soldiers following the horse whose rider's name is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, or we'll be in his sights.

We'll either be following him or we'll be in his sights. As we look at Jericho, we can either be on the side guaranteed to win, the side who have a sure thing in their hands, the side that keep fighting, who obey, who keep making Christ known, and we can be led by God, following obediently, as Israel and Rahab did, or we can be amongst those who lock themselves down, put the walls up, and are in denial of the destruction that's coming.

[24 : 43] Are you going to back the horse that's a sure thing? coming? Because he is coming and his name is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

He will win. Let's pray briefly before we sing. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your words.

We thank you that in it we are faced with you, that we can learn about your character and nature, and we can learn about the wonderful history of you acting to save your people, to be with them, to lead them, and we thank you that we too, you can stand as soldiers in your army, following your lead.

Father, be with us as we fight, as we take on Satan and his minions by proclaiming your son. And Father, if there are any of us here, who aren't backing the right horse, who aren't trusting in Jesus, then would you awaken their hearts.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.