

## Joshua at Jericho

In this series on some of the “Big Stories” of the Old Testament, we’ve seen Daniel in the Lions’ Den, three young Jewish men thrown into a blazing furnace and a reluctant prophet swallowed by a giant fish and kept alive there for three days.

Today I want to go back in time to the beginning of Israel’s conquest of the land that God had promised hundreds of years earlier to Abraham and his descendants. The story that we learned in Sunday School is the story of Joshua leading the armies of Israel in the battle of Jericho. Those of us who grew up in a church environment will remember the Israelites being told to march around the city once a day for six straight days, then to march around it seven times on the seventh day, give a giant shout, and the walls of Jericho would come crashing down and the city would be theirs. I’m sorry to spoil the plot line for you in advance, but that’s what happened.

What I’d like to focus on today are the events leading up to the conquest of Jericho, the first city in Canaan to fall to the Israelites. The first is a spy story and the second describes a dangerous encounter that resulted in Joshua receiving the instructions he needed before leading the attack on Jericho.

First the spy story:

*Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.*

*The king of Jericho was told, “Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land. So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house because they have come to spy out the whole land.”*

*But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.” (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone, the gate was shut. Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, “I know that Yahweh has given this land to you, and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how Yahweh dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted, and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for Yahweh your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by Yahweh that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. (Joshua 2:1-12)*

Whose side was Rahab on? I think there are probably three right answers to that question. She was looking out for herself, she was on the side of the invaders because it sure looked like that would be the winning side, and she was most obviously on God's side - He was the One she kept referring to in this conversation as the deliverer of Israel, the God of heaven above and earth below, and the One who would give Jericho to the Israelites.

Maybe the only wrong answer would be to say that Rahab was on the side of Jericho. She wasn't. She saw Jericho as a doomed city, its people overcome with fear and its courage melting away. And so she lied to her king and hid the Hebrew spies in the flax on her roof. She gave him the impression that the spies had just left, which would have prompted a hurried pursuit instead of a thorough search of her house. And she showed her smarts in the instructions she later gave to the spies. Before letting them down the outside of the city wall by a rope, she told them to go hide in the hills until their pursuers returned from their search - three days - and then to head back to Joshua and the Israelites. So they waited the length of time she had told them, the search team returned empty-handed and the two spies made their way back to camp.

She didn't do all this for nothing. She didn't just save some foreign spies because she thought they were good guys. She made a deal with them. When Israel came and captured Jericho, she wanted protection for herself and her relatives and the spies told her that if she would tie that rope in the window of her place - which was on the city wall - she and her family would be safe. And that's what happened, but that's not the end of the story. You know all those boring genealogies that you skip when you're doing your Bible reading because they're just a long list of names and they're so repetitive. Well, in one of those lists, in the first chapter of Matthew, we find that Rahab was the mother of Boaz, who married a Moabite woman named Ruth. Their great grandson was King David and in their line of descendants came Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Rahab was a pretty remarkable woman. She didn't work at a profession that people respect or admire, and so your first thoughts about her would probably be belittling, demeaning ... at least negative. But look at what she demonstrates in this story. She has the courage to risk punishment, maybe even death, by hiding the spies instead of turning them over to the king of her city. She has the smarts to know how to bargain a good deal for herself and her family that guaranteed their safety. She gave wise counsel to the spies on how to avoid being caught on their way back to their people. And she had spiritual insight as well, seeming to understand who Yahweh is - the God, not just of Israel, but of heaven and earth - and to know that His plans for Israel would not be defeated by the wide stone walls of Jericho.

That's a great combination: courage, smarts and spiritual wisdom and this woman became a key player in the deliverance of Jericho into the hands of Israel and in continuing the line of Salmon who became the father of Boaz who became the father of Obed who became the father of Jesse whose eighth son was David who became the second king of all Israel.

The next story leading up to the battle of Jericho is a much shorter one, but has a profound message that I don't want us to miss. In chapter 3, the Israelites cross the Jordan River. A million and a half people walk across a river which, because it is the rainy season, is at flood stage. A million and a half people see the waters of the Jordan start collecting on the upstream side of the point where the priests carrying the ark of the covenant have just put their feet in the water. And then they cross over, all of them, on a dry river bed, and they enter the land of Canaan, the land that had been home to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I want us to think about this new situation. Canaan was filled with walled cities, and walled cities are difficult to capture, especially by standing at the bottom of the wall and firing arrows upwards. The thought of going up against walled cities time and time again, suffering huge casualties and losing strength as a nation with every new conquest, must have been very intimidating. Add to that the thought of six foot thick walls at this first city, built on an embankment that may have been 30 - 60' high. You have to climb the embankment, then launch an attack against a thick wall while soldiers on that wall are firing arrows and anything else they can find, at you. It must have been an impossible city to conquer in a straight-on attack.

Now we go to Joshua. He has heard the report of the two spies and now he is not far from the city itself. As he is waiting for the LORD to give further instructions, he looks up and sees a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went up to him

... and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" It's interesting to me that he wasn't terrified of this man with a drawn sword in his hand. There was something about the man that allowed Joshua to feel confident enough to walk up to him and ask him whose side he's on:

*"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD, I have now come."*

*Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my lord have for his servant?" The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (5:14,15)*

There is one word in that answer that stands out in a powerful way. One word tells us so much about how we stand before God. "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither." That's the word. That's the statement that should grab our attention and cause us to think in a deep way about who we are in relation to the God who made us, who loved us, and who continually saves us. "Neither. I'm not on your side, nor am I on your enemy's side." That's what the Lord's messenger told Joshua, but then he added the explanation: "But as commander of the army of Yahweh, I have now come."

Joshua wanted ... needed ... to know that God was on his side, that God was going ahead of Israel and would give victory over their enemies. But when he asked the question, he didn't get the answer he wanted, needed. What he got instead was a change in perspective and this is, I believe, one of the most helpful lessons we come

across in these Old Testament stories. Joshua's perspective was looking at the situation he faced as the commander of Israel's armies. He was looking up at the walls of Jericho and wondering how he could lead the army against it. He was thinking about how Israel could be successful in battle. He probably wasn't thinking about how God could be successful in the coming battle for Jericho, about what was at stake for God in the way Israel carried out their mission, or what God might demand of him in preparing for the attack. Until he met the commander of the army of Yahweh who told him that he wasn't on his side, but on God's side.

Why wouldn't this person, this messenger angel, tell Joshua that he was on his side, on Israel's side? When you say that you're on someone's side, aren't you saying that you're on board with what they believe in, what they're doing with their life, what they value and are committed to? If you were on Hillary's side on Tuesday, weren't you saying that you want what she stands for, what she promises? And if you say you were on Donald's side, aren't you saying the same thing, that you are in agreement with his policies and plans for the future of America? Joshua was looking for someone to be for Israel or against Israel, friend or foe, but the messenger had another priority - God's agenda.

Joshua recognized immediately what he was dealing with and fell on his face in reverence for the commander of Yahweh's army. No longer is he asking, "Are you with me?", but he is asking the much more important question, "What do you want to say to me?" In other words, "I'm with you. Tell me what you want me to do." And the first thing he is told to do is to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground, he is in the presence of a representative of heaven. And Joshua does so.

The story that comes after this encounter is just details. It's the working out of the plan that God has for the walls of Jericho. The Israelites were to march around the city once a day for six days and then seven times on the seventh day, blow the rams' horns and give a great shout and the walls would come crashing down. But the real drama took place in this encounter between Joshua and the commander of Yahweh's army. That's where it became clear that this was God's battle, not simply Joshua's battle or Israel's battle. And it was at that point that Joshua's perspective was changed.

Now, let's combine these two stories and look to see what life lessons we should gain from them. Rahab knew what a lot of people in her city also knew - that the God of Israel was powerful, that He had delivered His people from a mighty empire and had given them victory over their enemies. But it's what she did with that knowledge that set her apart: she put her whole life in the hands of that mighty God of Israel. She entrusted herself to the mercy of God's people because her faith in Him was so strong.

The angel who confronted Joshua outside of Jericho was asking for a similar commitment: put your destiny in the hands of the God of Israel; trust Him fully. This challenge you are facing is too big for you, but it's not too big for God. If you will put yourself fully on His side, fully available to serve Him, you'll find the victory you hope for.

So, what do we do?

1. The first thing is to adjust our perspective. Am I looking to God to support my agenda, to be on my side, or am I looking at how I can be more fully on His side? This is such an important question, such a key area for our own growth. If we have the courage to ask and keep asking this question of ourselves, we'll also have the courage to have our perspective changed and to pursue the kingdom of God with a more clear intentionality, a real sense of purpose.
2. The second thing is to choose to act in harmony with this new perspective. Rahab acted by betraying her loyalty to Jericho in favor of a new loyalty - to the God of Israel. That wasn't an easy thing to do, I'm sure, but it was the smart thing to do, the right thing to do. And Joshua chose to obey the commander of the LORD's army, from taking off his sandals because he was on holy ground, to marching the Israelites around Jericho for seven days. Every day we make choices - about what to spend money on, about what to do with our time, about whether or not to carve out time to pray or read our Bible. Every day we can choose to orient our lives around the priorities of God's kingdom. This story encourages us, urges us, to do just that - to seek first the Kingdom of God.

That's what I see as the core lessons of this passage. We are urged to orient our thinking on being on God's side rather than asking Him to be on ours -- and then to make the choices that He asks of us, led by His Spirit, and honoring Him by the way we conduct ourselves in this world.