

The Battle for Jericho

4th September 2011
Joshua 5:13-6:7, 12-16, 20

What do you normally think of when we talk about military battles? Soldiers, fighting, guns, tanks, noise, destruction and death! These are just a few of the things that come to my mind.

The biblical story of the battle for the city of Jericho, ~3,400 years ago, was not much different: there were soldiers, fighting, weaponry, noise, destruction and death. However, there was something else in this battle that even today amazes us and captures our imagination.

To place this event in its historical human context, in Genesis 23 we have the record of Abraham purchasing the cave of Machpelah, near Hebron, in which to bury his wife Sarah and himself (Gen.25), as well as for his families inheritance (Gen.49). This was in the land which God had promised, by covenant, to Abraham and his descendants (Gen.12:7).

Through the next 600 years, which included 400+ years of enslavement in Egypt (see Ex.1), the descendants of Abraham dreamt of a time when they would be free to return to the land God had promised and reclaim their inheritance.

For over 400 years, this dream was kept alive by the stories and teachings that were passed down from generation to generation and family to family, until God called Moses to lead the people to their new life in the promised land.

For the next 40 years the people wandered as nomads in the wilderness country of the Sinai Peninsula. They learned what it was to know, trust and rely upon the Lord. It was also the time needed for the old generation, who only knew past slavery, to die out, and a new generation to rise up who would look to the future God was giving to them. This was a time of preparation and nation building.

At the end of this time of wilderness wandering, when Moses finally died at the age of 120 years, Joshua was given the responsibility to finally lead the people to take possession of their promised inheritance.

However, it was not an inheritance waiting to be discovered. It was not something simply to be handed to them on a platter, because the land was already occupied by other tribal peoples.

The Hebrew people were going to have to want their inheritance, and take it according to God's commands, and this meant both discipline and struggle.

Isn't it true, if something is given to you without cost, you tend not to value and treasure it. Likewise, if something costs you to get it, you will value it far more. The struggle for the promised land was God's way of making sure the people would value it far more when the struggle was over.

As we know from the story of the conquest of the promised land, the biggest hurdle in the way of the Hebrew migration was the city of Jericho. It was a well fortified, walled Canaanite city that guarded the eastern entrance into the land of the people's inheritance.

Was this conquest, in obedience to God, just about taking possession of the land? The answer is, 'No!'

Maybe, in the minds of many of the people, this was their major focus, however, in the mind of God there was another agenda at work here. God had called Abraham, and his descendants, to be a people set apart by God, and for God; to be a blessing to the world (Gen.12:1-3).

The Canaanite people, who lived in the land and occupied the cities, were under God's judgement, because of their many evil practices. These included the worship of their many false nature gods. Some of these were Baal (Num.25), Asherah (1 Kings 15:13) and Molech (Lev.20:2).

For centuries these people had practiced infanticide (child sacrifice) and were known for their many other immoral cultic practices. We only have to remember the attitude of God toward such things that had occurred centuries before in the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim (Gen.10:19; Deut.29:23).

God was using these Hebrew people, the children of former slaves in the land of Egypt, as his hand of judgement, and it began at Jericho. Was it an equal fight? No!

The Canaanite cities were well fortified, well provisioned and possessed the latest in modern armament technology. On the other hand, the Hebrews were seen as a wandering rabble, having no defences and only armed with older style weapons. The only note of concern for the Canaanites, were the reports that the Hebrews had some how been able to win a few battles on their way to Jericho.

As Joshua made his preparations to face the enemy he encountered a man with a drawn sword (vs.13). He asked a very natural question of this man: 'Are you for us or for our enemies?'

Naturally we would expect the answer to be in Joshua's favour, but it was not.

The man replied: 'Neither', and then identified himself: 'As commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.' It would seem that, by his own description, this man was the archangel Michael (cf. the Book of Daniel and the Letter to Jude).

Joshua's response was one of humility and submission to this messenger from God. The man then said, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.'

Isn't it wonderful how God reveals his purposes to man. Joshua knew, from the stories of Moses, that God had encountered Moses through the burning bush and he also had been commanded to remove his sandals (Ex.3:5). Now, he is being asked to do the same thing. This was a moment of divine encounter and Joshua did as he was asked.

Have you ever had a moment of divine encounter?

Have you ever experienced that presence of God miraculously breaking into your reality and so profoundly capturing your attention.

I would venture it is rare, BUT there are those who have had such testimonies, and their lives have forever been transformed.

Many years ago, I remember listening one evening to the testimony of Ian McLean, Jean's husband.

Ian's encounter with the Lord was one of those unverifiable meetings, and yet we saw the evidence of a transformed and vital life.

From the moment Joshua met with the archangel Michael, he knew that the battle for Jericho, and the subsequent conquest of the promised land, was not about winning or losing, but ALL about being obedient to the commands of God.

In the early verses of Chapter 5 we have Michael outlining God's strategy for the fall of the city of Jericho. It was a most un-conventional strategy that involved a lot of marching and the blowing of trumpets. How can anyone win a battle this way? It was a strategy that, even today, makes no sense ... or does it?

For six days the people were commanded to walk around the city. They only circled the city once a day and it was a procession focused on the Ark of the Covenant. The ark represent the physical and visible presence of God. They did not worship the ark, for that would be idolatry. They worshipped the one who sat on the mercy seat of the ark - God.

This procession had 2 main impacts:

1] It encouraged the Hebrew people to wait and not just look to their own purposes.

It taught them that all things in life should be done in good order and at God's direction. In a sense, this was a spiritual discipline for them and God was at the centre of this activity.

2] By marching around the city it sowed seeds of confusion in the enemy. What was the purpose? After the first couple of days the people of Jericho became more relaxed, and probably even 'cocky', as they watched the noisy parade from the walls and hurled insults at the people below them. They were being softened up for what was to follow.

The seventh day (vs.15) began the same as the others however, this time, the people marched **7** times around the city, with their feet stamping to the rhythm of the trumpets. After the seventh time Joshua commanded the people to shout as loud as they could (vs.16).

To everyone's amazement, as the people shouted, the walls of Jericho crumbled and the city was taken. In the end, it was a decisive victory. God brought the victory and the people were merely his instruments.

Remember what Michael had said in vs.2, even before the battle had begun; 'I have delivered Jericho into your hands, ...'

How did God do it? How did the walls of Jericho fall?

Of course, archaeologists (eg. Kathleen Kenyon) have their theories based on their excavations of the site. Despite their varying calculations, based on Sothic cycles and carbon dating, the truth remains that the destruction of Jericho occurred and heralded in a new era of occupation in the land.

Personally, I think the walls fell because of the sound harmonic that was set up by the marching, the trumpets and the shouting. I can't prove it, but I believe there is some research taking place to develop new weaponry using sound. Time will tell!

Regardless of all this speculation, the amazing lessons in this story revolve around the fact that

God brought victory to the people, because of their obedience to the commands of God. He did this in spite of the confidence of those who stood on the walls of Jericho.

What of us today? Have we become so confident and sophisticated in our own thinking that we don't need to take notice of God's commands anymore? Are we content to simply yield to the voices of the masses and settle for mediocrity, doing what everyone else does, or simply do nothing?

We can learn much from the stories of the Bible, if only we are open and willing to listen to the voice of God.