

“God Gives Us the Victory”

Try it sometime. Pick out a building perhaps, or a walled in or fenced in yard, and start marching. March around it one time a day for seven days. And I mean go all out. Get your friends and family members to join you, gather up the neighborhood kids. The seventh day is going to be a special day. Don't just march one time around, repeat it six more times. On the seventh lap, let loose. Blow some trumpets or other instruments if you have them. Shout and yell and scream. Remember those neighborhood kids? Tell them to shout as loudly as they can. If you need some help with that, I can probably find someone to help you out.

So, after your seven days and your hard work, what do you think is going to happen?

You're probably right. Nothing will happen. Perhaps not nothing. Maybe your neighbors will look at you funny, and the kids will probably ask why you had them do that. But no matter what house you march around, even one in very bad shape, it probably won't fall down on its own. No block wall or wooden fence is going to crumble because you hike around it.

Does that help you get into the mindset a little bit of God's people, the Israelites, right after they had crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land? God had warned them that there was going to be work to do. They were going to have to battle the nations that were already there. They would have to take over the cities and towns for their own use. The Israelites were ready to get started. They were making sure their military gear was all ready to go. They were set to start drawing up plans to besiege and attack cities like Jericho, the walled city that greeted them near the Jordan. And then they got their marching orders.

And their orders were to march. Not to lay siege to the city, not to prepare the battering ram to knock down the door. They were to march again and again, for six days, one time around the city each day. And on the seventh day, they were to march around seven times and blow trumpets and make noise. And that was it.

Some have pointed out that the results could be some sort of psychological warfare on the people in Jericho. They would be confused and wonder what was going on. Whether that was the case or not, this sort of attack was an unusual approach to say the least.

Our sermon text this morning shares with us some of the details that led up to this unusual attack. The account centers on Joshua, the leader of God's people. He had been second in command under Moses, and assumed the leadership position when Moses was laid to rest before entering the Promised Land. Under Joshua, the people crossed the Jordan River when it stopped flowing for them to give them dry ground for crossing. The people in the land of Canaan took notice. They were concerned about the Israelites entering the land. The Israelites stopped, however. After forty years of wandering, they paused to carry out God's command that all the men who had not been during the wanderings were to be circumcised. They celebrated the Passover. And they began eating the food that was so abundant in Canaan instead of relying on God to miraculously provide it for them.

It was at that point in the history of the Israelites that Joshua had the experience detailed for us in our sermon text. He met an interesting and somewhat mysterious figure. A man stood in front of him with a drawn sword. When Joshua inquired about his allegiance, the man indicated that he was neither for Israel nor for its enemies. Instead, he was the commander of the Lord's army. In other words, it wasn't that the Lord needed to take sides in a battle. What mattered was whether the people were on the Lord's side.

I said that this man was mysterious. The Bible doesn't tell us explicitly, but many believe that this was the preincarnate Christ, the Son of God before he came to earth as a human being. That would certainly explain his command that Joshua remove his shoes since he stood on holy ground. The traditional numbering of chapters and verses divides the account right there, leaving some to believe that it was another occasion

when the Lord gave Joshua his orders. Whatever the timing of those orders, God was clear about what the Israelites were to do, as we have already mentioned.

What happened next is not part of our text, but the Israelites obeyed. They walked around that fortified city once, and went back to their camp. The next day they did it again, and so on. I do wonder how this tested the faith of the people. Did they want to start fighting right away? Did they wonder why they were wasting their time? Did they look at the strong walls that protected the city and think that they should have turned back when they had a chance? If doubts crept into their minds, they didn't dissuade the people. By faith they listened to what God said and obeyed.

It's not terribly hard to find the lesson to apply to our own lives, is it? When we have doubts and fears, it is so easy to ignore what God says. It is so natural to look to ourselves, our strength, our wisdom, for the answers we need. It goes against our sinful natures and against our natural inclination to simply listen to what God says and to obey. Let me give an example. When finances are tight, God still encourages us with his promises to bless us. He tells us that we can trust him, and he invites us to display our faith by giving him generous first-fruits offerings in proportion to our income. We can't help but think, "If I give to God first, what am I going to have left? How will I make it?" God asks us to trust him, like marching around the city once and to return to our camp.

No, there was no special power in marching around the city. There was no conveniently timed earthquake on the seventh day. The people inside Jericho didn't go crazy because of this psychological warfare and simply let the Israelites in the gate. There was the Lord fighting the battle on behalf of his people. When the trumpets sounded and the people shouted, the walls crumbled and collapsed. The fortifications were no match for God working on behalf of those who trusted in him. The Israelite army rushed straight into the city. They conquered their enemies and took the city.

In one act God had pronounced his judgment on Israel's enemies, those who were dwelling in Jericho. And in the same act he was revealing his saving grace to his people. God was keeping his promise to give the land to his chosen ones, the nation from which the Savior of the world would be born. The lesson of this battle for us is a lesson of God's faithfulness. He kept his promise to his people. He directed their steps and granted them success. God gave them the victory.

And he does the same for us. When we rely on our own power, wisdom, or strength, we will fail. When we fight our own battles, we flounder. A lesson in God's faithfulness for us is a call to faith. In his Word, God has revealed to us that he has won the victory in our most serious battle, against our most dangerous enemies. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he has defeated death and the devil. God has won our battle against sin for us.

And faith means that we trust that God has done all of this for us, just as the Israelites trusted God, just as the Roman centurion trusted God. Just as God has won the big victory for us, so he will also win the victory in the battles that we face from day to day. In sickness and suffering, in hardship and in need, we turn to God in prayer and trust his loving care. When he grants us success and safety, we look to him to help us in our battle against pride and conceit. When his instructions for our life don't seem to make sense to us, we trust him anyway, knowing that his ways and his thoughts are higher than ours.

Don't go parading around your neighborhood to test the seven-day march approach to dealing with walls and buildings. God hasn't given you the promise that anything special will happen. But do trust the promises that he has given you. In your baptism God promised to make and to keep you as his very own child. He promises to give you the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper. He promises to strengthen your faith through his holy Word. Faith trusts these promises. Faith trusts God to give us the ultimate victory. We pray along with the hymn stanza: "Lord, give us such a faith as this, and then, whatever may come, we'll taste even now the hallowed bliss of [our] eternal home."

The Text: Joshua 5:13–6:5 (NIV84)

¹³ Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

¹⁴ “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?”

¹⁵ 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.

6 Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

² Then the LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in.”

Joshua 6:20 (NIV84)

²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city.