

West Valley Church
11/6/11

Engage The Word
Part Three: Joshua 5:13-6:27

You just listened to the story from Joshua; a story that you might be familiar with. If you've been doing your daily readings together with us, you'll recognize that is the passage for today.

Today we are beginning the third week of our six weeks together through the Bible. We are learning to *Engage the Word* over 40 days together, all reading the same passages of Scripture using these books as a guide. Every day we are spending time praying, reading, reflecting and responding to God's Word. Amazing things are happening in our church and in our homes as we all read the Bible together; God can speak to us and lead us in great ways as we are all engaging the same passages of Scripture. I also want to encourage you to join us for community groups at 8:45a.m. on Sunday mornings where we get a head start on this conversation by talking about the sermon ahead of time. It will help you *Engage the Word* even that much more in your life if you join us each Sunday morning.

So we are on day fourteen of our forty days. We have copies of this book that are available to you if you didn't get one; our guest services would be happy to give you one—just let us know. And don't worry about catching up if you haven't been reading or have fallen behind—just begin today and join in. Our prayer is that this will encourage us to take time every day to engage the Bible, even beyond these forty days together.

What we just heard so dramatically is a powerful story of obeying God, of God fighting for his people, and the miraculous ways that God will do what we cannot. But before we get into that part of the story, we need to back up and look at a conversation that took place first. It begins with

1. Joshua's Improbable Marching Orders.

Open to "Day Fourteen" in your *Engage the Word* books that says *Sermon Outline* on it, or use the insert in your worship folder. If you have an iPad or smart phone you can go to our website, westvalleychurch.com, go to the "sermons" page and download the outline from there. You can also get the sermon manuscript or listen to the sermon or even subscribe to the free podcast of the sermon if you miss a Sunday or just want to review it.

Before the Israelites started marching around the city of Jericho, Joshua received some very improbable marching orders. Let me share that part of *the* story with you: “When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a Man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to Him and demanded, ‘Are You friend or foe?’ ‘Neither one,’ He replied. ‘I am the Commander of the LORD's army.’ At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. ‘I am at Your command,’ Joshua said. ‘What do You want Your servant to do?’ The Commander of the LORD's army replied, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.’ And Joshua did as he was told.” (Joshua 5:13-15, nlt)

This happened while Joshua was doing reconnaissance of Canaan. Joshua quickly recognized by the man's sword that there was another Warrior on the scene, so he addressed him as such, asking if he is friend or foe, “for us or against us.” The answer Joshua got left no doubt about who this Man was. This wasn't some soldier, or even some ranking officer; this was a commander with far more authority than Joshua had as the “general” of God's people.

Let me interject here that there are instances in the Old Testament of angels being sent on missions like this (Judges 6:11, 13:3), and even being identified as captains of the heavenly armies (Daniel 10:5, 20; 12:1). But I agree with those scholars who say this is an example of something called theophany—God appearing as a man, or better yet, Christophany—Christ himself appearing to Joshua. I say that because Joshua is given the same command that was given to Moses at the burning bush: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.”

Angels would deflect any attempts made to worship them; here Joshua is *commanded* to give worship and reverence. Joshua submitted to God as the first-in-command; it was only then that Joshua could be positioned to do improbable things. (*repeat*) He took off his shoes. He's vulnerable. He can't run away. He is willing to listen.

When you are willing to give reverence to God—to let him be first-in-command of your life, God will be able to do some amazing, improbable, miraculous things in and through *your* life.

That's when Joshua gets his improbable marching orders: “Go take Jericho.” And that improbable command became

2. The Impossible Task.

The task was impossible for many reasons; Joshua's armies were ragtag, desert-living foot soldiers with only the few weapons they could muster. Jericho was a strongly fortified city, tightly “shut” because of its strong walls and reinforced

gates. I imagine that the residents of Jericho were quite confident in their secure setting. They probably mocked and “trash-talked” the Israelites as they marched around the wall each day. No doubt it felt entirely impossible to Joshua and the people.

Let me give you an idea of why it felt that way, by looking at how strongly this city was protected: Archaeology has shown that people have settled in Jericho dating back to Neolithic times, to 8000 BC. The site had the main ingredients needed for an important city: an abundant water supply, good climate and a central location.

By Joshua’s time, the city had been built and destroyed and rebuilt some dozen times—each on top of the other. By Joshua’s time, Jericho was surrounded by thick double walls; one tall, 15-20 foot wall, with another 20-25 foot revetment wall outside of and around that. Here’s a photo of the excavation of the city of Jericho: the stone revetment wall is in the lower right of the photograph. You can judge the height of the wall by comparing it with the man standing beside it. The revetment wall surrounded the city at the base of the sloping earthen rampart and provided a first line of defense for the city. A mud brick parapet wall is clearly visible above it. Behind the parapet, across the center of the photo, are the remains of houses - these were poorly built, only one brick thick. It is suggested that Rahab, the prostitute who helped Joshua’s spies, might have lived in one of these houses on the sloping rampart between the revetment wall encircling the bottom of the hill and the city wall above it.

This photo shows some of the actual devastation; I don’t know if you can see it, but the yard stick in the back is propped up showing all that’s left. Excavations showed evidence of some event involving terrible destruction at the same time as Joshua lived. In other words, evidence also shows the devastation; here’s a photo of an archaeological dig at the site and is the very walls. The evidence shows that the city of Jericho remained in ruins from Joshua’s time until the ninth century.

<http://www.bible-architecture.info/Jericho.htm>

Jericho may be the site of the oldest city on earth, dating back to as much as 10,000 years ago. It is also believed to have been the center for worship of the moon-god (Jericho probably means “moon city.”). If that were the case, then God was not only destroying the stronghold of the Canaanite cities, but also the center of Canaanite religion. The point is, as I shared with you in the first sermon, this is a case where archeology is validating the historical facts of Scripture. But I also show you this so you can see how extremely fortified this city really was; making the task that God had given them impossible for them. But God did it!

Maybe you heard the story of a new pastor who decided to visit the children's Sunday school. The teacher introduced him and said, "Pastor, this morning we're

studying Joshua." "That's wonderful," said the new pastor, "Let's see what you're learning. Who tore down the walls of Jericho?" Little Johnny shyly raised hand and offered, "Pastor, I didn't do it." Taken aback the pastor asked, "Come on, now, who tore down the walls of Jericho?"

The teacher, interrupting, said, "Pastor, little Johnny's a good boy. If he says he didn't do it, I believe he didn't do it." Flustered, the pastor went to the Sunday school director and related the story to him. The director, looking worried, explained, "Well, sir, we've had some problems with Johnny before. Let me talk to him and see what we can do."

Really bothered now by the answers of the teacher and the director, the new pastor approached the church board and related the whole story, including the responses of the teacher and the director. One white-haired gentleman on the board thoughtfully stroked his chin and said, "Well, Pastor, I move we just take the money from the general fund to pay for the walls and leave it at that."

Well, we are talking about a factual event involving Joshua and not Johnny, and the evidence backs up

3. Joshua's Impossible Victory.

The victory came about with some key things that are worth noting. First, it is clear that this victory would happen as a result of God's power. When God confronted Joshua to give him his orders, he said, "I have given you Jericho." He didn't say "I will give you," he said "I have." Before a step was even taken, God had already accomplished it for them. The requirement for them was that they had to do it God's way. The people weren't asked to show any human strength, power, or wisdom, but to do things God's way. God would do his unmistakably powerful work, but Joshua and the people had to obey. Now here's what's interesting about what God asked them to do: there was a clear message God was delivering to the people of Jericho by the way the Israelites were supposed to march. I don't know if you've ever wondered, but there was good reason that God told them to march in the order that he did.

First in the order was the armed men; the soldiers. This was to make a statement of warning to the people of Jericho; that they would be defeated if they didn't surrender to God's plan.

The next group in the order of the marching Israelites was the trumpet-blowing priests. This is interesting. They weren't blowing musical trumpets like we would think about. They were blowing the ram's horn that produced a loud, shrill, sound. It would be unnerving to the people living in Jericho. But it was a battle-horn, not a worship horn. What's interesting is that it wasn't soldiers blowing the battle

horns; it was priests, dressed in all their priestly robes. So you've got spiritual leaders blowing military horns. That's significant because God is making the statement that this victory is going to be God's doing, not man's military might. That makes the statement loud and clear to the people of Jericho that it is God himself who they are dealing with.

The priests were also calling attention to what was next in the order of procession: the Ark of the Covenant. This was a box that God instructed Moses to have built that represented the very presence of God himself. Inside it, among other things, was the tablets that the Ten Commandments were inscribed on—God's covenant with people. Normally the ark rested in a place called the Holy of Holies—the very center of the Temple. But more than the presence of God, it represented that God is willing to make covenant with people; to be in relationship with them. So the message for the people of Jericho was that the God who was confronting them and had the power to destroy them was willing to be in relationship with them, if they would open up to him. Their mistake was that they kept their gates closed to him.

Following the ark was the “rear-guard.” This was a gathering of “witnesses.” These were the people who had been through all the testing that had happened in the wilderness. These were the people who had received God's grace. These were people who received God's mercy but didn't deserve it. These people represented what could happen for the people of Jericho if they would allow it. Of course, unfortunately they didn't, and that sealed their fate.

But every day, for seven days, they received this procession of proclamation: God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people. God's warning, God's power, God's covenant-making presence, God's people.

Then on the seventh day, they got that sermon seven more times. That's how hard-hearted the people of Jericho were, and how patient God is. The New Testament re-emphasizes this point when it says, “The Lord isn't really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” (2 Peter 3:9, nlt)

The evidence that God was willing to forgive the people of Jericho is shown with Rahab, the prostitute who helped Joshua's spies. I don't have time to retell that part of the story, but hopefully you read it this morning, or will today in your

reading. She was a resident of Jericho, and she believed God and helped Joshua. The result was that after Jericho was destroyed she was allowed to become part of God's people. Not only that, but this hooker who put her hope in God has an important place in biblical history. The great King David was one of her descendants; in fact Jesus himself was one of her descendants. If that doesn't speak of God's willingness to forgive and be in relationship with us, I don't know what does.

Joshua's victory happened because he was willing to trust God to do the improbable, impossible thing, so he obeyed God. The defeat for Jericho came because they refused to. Was it right for God to destroy the people of Jericho? Absolutely. God gave them every opportunity to become one of his. They refused to until their last chance. In reality, they were already due for destruction; but they could've changed that if they had opened their gates to him. It's the same thing that is true for us today. That begs the question: have you opened the gates of your life to God? Jesus himself is the sermon, for you, like what the citizens of Jericho saw. If you don't respond to God's love, forgiveness and grace, you are already condemned. Jesus himself said, "For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has *already been judged* for not believing in God's one and only Son." (John 3:16-18, nlt, italics added)

But here's what's cool: if you will open your gates to him and become one of his through Jesus, God will do miraculous things through you! If you repent of sin and accept God's forgiveness through what Jesus did for you on the cross, or if you already have done that, then God wants to do amazing things through *you!* He wants to use you to declare to others the kind of God he is, so that they, too, can become one of His. And He will do miraculous things through you to reach them. That's

4. Your *improbable, impossible*, task.

Your life can tell this story of this powerful, covenant-making God of mercy. You can go out and conquer for Him! And He has the power to back it up! That might seem an improbable task to you, but He will do the impossible when you trust and obey Him! If you do, you are ready to see God work!

Pray: that some here would hear the warning and open the gates of their life to God. That those who have would truly trust him, obey him, and be willing to show, and tell, his life and promises to others so they won't be condemned.