

Joshua 6-7: Shouting at Jericho and a Do-Over at Ai

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In his book on Joshua, James Boyce says that the most exciting lecture he ever heard was by a professor in military science. He held his students spellbound by describing a brilliant military campaign that employed a rapid strike into the heart of the enemy's territory in order to divide the enemy's forces. Then they attacked first south and then north. The military commander used psychological warfare to terrorize the enemy, then he attacked with speed and surprise. Boyce assumed this ancient military genius was Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar or Napoleon. Only at the end of the lecture did he divulge that it was Joshua, the commander of the Hebrew forces attacking Canaan. Then the professor also claimed that the British General Allenby in WW I had used Joshua's strategy when he conquered Palestine in 1917. Allenby crossed the Jordan River and drove westward to the north-south road in the highlands. With the enemy forces divided the British destroyed the Ottomans to the south first, then turned and attacked to the north. This was precisely the strategy of Joshua in capturing the land of Canaan in the Bible's account of Israel's conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua. The first obstacle to Joshua's strategy was Jericho, located just to the west of the Jordan River. Jericho was a military fortress designed to protect the eastern approach to the land of the Canaanites. Israel could not afford to go around Jericho because it would leave a major enemy force on their flanks. Jericho had to be taken, but how? It had high thick walls with maximum protection, and Israel had no siege towers, no battering rams, and no catapults. All they really had was flint knives and swords.

Only God Could Implement a Plan Like This

The Captain of the army of the Lord who had encountered Joshua in Joshua 5:13-15, outlined a very unique plan to take Jericho. In Joshua 6:2-5, the Lord told Joshua that the battle was as good as won already, for the Lord would fight for Israel. Joshua and his armed men were to march around the city once a day for seven days with seven priests blowing trumpets while marching in front of the Ark, but on the seventh day they were to march around it seven times and when the priests blew the trumpets, the people would issue a loud shout and the walls of Jericho would fall inward.

Maybe you noticed that the number seven is used quite a bit with seven priests, seven trumpets, seven days, and seven circles on the seventh day. All through the Bible the number seven symbolizes completeness or perfection. The blaring trumpets (ram's horns) were the "jubilee trumpets" used in Numbers 10:10 as religious instruments to announce the presence of the Lord. Therefore the priests were announcing to the people of Israel that God was present and getting ready to do something awesome. For six days the warriors of Israel circled the city following the priests and the Ark as the priests blew the horns, but the people were forbidden to make a sound until the seventh day. It is estimated that the walls of Jericho only contained about 9 acres, so it would only have taken about 30-40 minutes to do one circle around Jericho and then back to the camp. On the seventh day, they circled the city seven times, and then the priests blew the horns and the people shouted loudly. I'm guessing that for six days all the people wondered just what the Lord was going to do. Their part was to obey the strange instructions by faith believing that God would somehow give them the city. We can get the New Testament witness to this in Hebrews 11:30, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell after the people had marched around them for seven days". When the trumpets blew and the people shouted with a great shout, the wall fell down. We have all been in football stadiums when the shouts of 80,000 people were deafening, so you can imagine the magnitude of the max shout of about 600,000 men. The wall collapsed and the warriors of Israel ran into the terrified city and killed everyone but Rahab and her family. So let's review who did what in this miracle at Jericho. God's strategy of taking Jericho made it very clear that the Lord made it all happen, but the people's marching and shouting represents their participation in the victory of God. Their part was to be obedient by faith, and then watch and see what God would do. If anyone has a problem with all the inhabitants of Jericho (except Rahab's family) being wiped out, they can take it up with God. Israel was acting upon divine command, which is good because only the absolutely righteous and holy God can make these kind of judgments.

Back in Joshua 6:18-19, God gave the people of Israel some important information about the looting of Jericho. God put a "ban" on articles of gold and silver and articles of bronze and iron. All the valuables of Jericho were to go into the treasury of the Lord, and no one was to keep anything for themselves. This ban would be very important in light of the events of chapter 7.

Joshua 7—God's Wrath at Ai

Israel had a great success at Jericho, and all was right with the world---except with human nature involved there is always a "But" (7:1). Their expectations were a series of steamrolling victories, and when they came upon the next city, tiny Ai, they expected a quick walkover and the juggernaut would continue. NOT SO FAST, compadres, there was a fly in the ointment. The Hebrews got their butts whipped by little Ai, which revealed what happens when God is not with you. When God was with them at Jericho they won big time, but when God left them at Ai---disaster. In fact, this is the paradigm of the whole book of Joshua, that disobedience incurs God's wrath, but obedience guarantees success. In Joshua 7:1, we read that Achan had disobeyed the ban and taken gold and silver for himself. Achan had the weakness of the flesh we call greed, and when the opportunity presented itself he took the treasure and hid it in his tent. Amazingly, God was holding the whole nation accountable for the sin of one man---how could this be fair? The text says that "the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully", and we are told that Israel had sinned. On top of that 36 Israeli soldiers were killed. Achan would pay the max penalty of death for his crime, but apparently God wanted the whole nation to suffer for this and fear God in the future. I think Achan was just the first one to do what they were all considering doing, so God knowing their hearts struck the fear of God into them all. From this time on they would hold each other accountable. If God had not held them all accountable, then in the next town more greedy people would have done it and eventually the whole nation would have been looters.

In Joshua 7:2-5, before Joshua knew of Achan's sin he sent 3000 soldiers to take Ai, just presuming upon God's help. The Hebrews were routed, and 36 of them were killed. In v.6-9 we see Joshua's reaction of grief and sorrow as he cried out to God. Joshua's question in v.7 is a classic human response in blaming God, "why did You ever bring this people over the Jordan if we were going to lose to the Amorites, and now we are doomed". In v.11-12, God responds with the reason that this happened, "Israel has sinned". God would not be with them anymore as long as this sin was unpunished. In v.13, we see the Lord's reply to dumb question like-- Why? And What will we do? The Lord said "Get up, and clean up your mess".

Therefore Joshua gathered the people in tribes until the guilty tribe was discovered by "lot", then the family was chosen, then the household was chosen, and then the individual. The assumption was that God would guide the lot drawing. Amazingly, Achan just sat there while the tribe of Judah was chosen, then his family was chosen, then his household, until finally Achan the individual was chosen. You would think he would have confessed somewhere along the line, and what would he have done if someone else had been chosen? I believe if he had confessed and repented before the process began, he would have been forgiven and restored. Once the lot process chose him, Achan confessed and explained why he did it---I saw it, I coveted it, I took it. This reminds me of what James 1:14 wrote over a thousand years later "each is carried away by his own lust, lust gives birth to sin and sin brings forth death". Apparently human nature has always been the same.

Imagine the horrific scene that followed after they located the stolen gold and silver and brought Achan and his family together to be punished in the valley outside the camp. We must assume that his family all knew about the booty hidden in their tent because they were all held to be guilty. Achan, his family, animals, his belongings, and the stolen treasure was all stoned then burned. The final chapter to this sad story was the raising of an historical marker at the site to serve as a warning to all of Israel. The good news is that God's wrath was appeased because Israel dealt with their sin, so now they were ready to get back to their purpose of taking the land of Canaan assured that God would be with them and bless them.

If only Achan could have heeded the words of John in 1 Jn.2:15 "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of God is not in him...the world is passing away along with all its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever".

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