

PRELUDE TO VICTORY (Joshua 5:13-6:27)

As we begin today's message, I want to turn your attention to the seven-letter word *prelude*. The word *prelude* is defined as "any action, event, comment, etc. that precedes something else." This introduction is a prelude to the message that will follow.

Toward the end of Joshua 5 and through the bulk of 6, we find several events and actions that serve as a prelude to the victory the people enjoyed over the city of Jericho. The title for today's message is "Prelude to Victory." The things that Joshua and the people did serve as a template for you and I to follow as we seek victory in the battles that we wage daily. It might be a battle against a besetting sin, an addictive behavior, a nagging fear, a relentless foe, or an intractable problem. You need victory in whatever battle you face. Prior to and preparatory for that victory, there are three things you and I need to do, three steps you and I need to take.

Before we look at those three keys that serve as a prelude to victory, I want to make an observation. The text we will look at today is one of the most famous in the Book of Joshua. If you spent any time in Sunday School as a child, you likely heard this Bible story. When I was young, I learned a song in Sunday School. Maybe you did, too.

Joshua fought the battle of Jericho
Jericho, Jericho
Joshua fought the battle of Jericho
And the walls came tumbling down!

If you look carefully at this story, the interesting thing is that neither Joshua nor the people really had to fight. There was no battle they had to wage to take the city. Joshua's rag tag army didn't have siege equipment. They didn't have a catapult. They didn't employ a battering ram. They didn't blanket the city with fiery arrows or hurl boulders against the walls. It was God who gave them the city.

And God will give you victory, whatever the victory it is that you need after you do three things.

We Must Recognize Our Commander: Let's See Him for Who He Is

Let's take a moment and consider where we are in the story. Many centuries prior, roughly 500 years before, God had promised Abraham that the land where he God had taken him would one day belong to his descendants. That is why it was called the Promised Land. It wasn't promised to the Palestinians. It wasn't promised to the Arabs. It was promised to the Hebrew people. It had been promised by God to Abraham's family. For a long time, they were captives in the land of Egypt.

Due to a famine in the land, Jacob's family moved down to Egypt. His family grew and grew. They became so numerous that the Egyptians became fearful of them. Viewing them as a threat, the Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews. They were forced to serve the people of Egypt.

Eventually, God sent Moses to Egypt to free His people. Through a series of plagues and disasters that befell the land of Egypt, Pharaoh relented and let the people go.

This story is told in the second book of the Bible—Exodus. That word comes from the Greek. *Ex* means “out.” *Hodus* means “the way.” *Exodus* means “the way out.” When you see an exit sign, it shows you the way out of the building. Moses led the people out of the land of Egypt.

After God gave Moses the Law by which the people were to live, they were expected to enter the promised land, but the people were fearful. They didn’t trust God to give them victory. They refused to go in and take possession of the land.

God judged them by making them wander in the wilderness until every adult 20 and over had died. Now, a new generation has arisen. After Moses died, it was time for the people to enter the land God had promised.

Last week we saw that Joshua led the people across the Jordan River from the east side to the west side. They are now in the land that had been promised to them. Chapter 5 of Joshua begins with the males being circumcised. Their fathers had been circumcised, but they had not been.

Then, the people observe the Passover meal. They celebrate what God had done for them and how He had delivered them. While they had been living in the dessert, God fed them with manna that fell from heaven. Now that they are in the land, the manna ceased, and the people were able to eat of the produce and fruit of the land.

The first city that lay before them was the city of Jericho. It was an ancient, walled city. When they crossed the Jordan, they camped midway between the Jordan and Jericho. The place where they camped became known as Gilgal. It was about three miles from Jericho.

On the eve of what he thought would be a battle, Joshua walked out to where he could get a get view of Jericho. Let’s see what happens next. Look with me at Joshua 5:13-14a. Joshua is startled to see a stranger. He doesn’t know who the man is, but he can’t help but see that the man is armed. His sword isn’t tucked safely in its scabbard. The unknown man is holding a drawn sword. That fact is concerning to say the least. Joshua wants to know the man’s intention. He asks basically, “Are you a friend or a foe? Are you an ally or an enemy? Are you for us or agin’ us?”

The stranger has an interesting answer. Some versions of the Bible translate his answer as “neither.” I prefer my version which translates his answer as “no.” In other words, “You don’t know who I am. That’s the wrong question.”

The man standing before Joshua was no mere man nor was he an angel. He identifies Himself as “the Commander of the army of YHWH.” I believe the man standing before Joshua was no less than the Son of God, the pre-incarnate second person of the trinity.

The take away for us is that God doesn’t take sides. Whether we are talking about an athletic contest, or a political campaign, or a shooting war, God doesn’t take sides. If you were to ask me, “Whose side is God on—Israel or Hamas?” I would say, “That is the wrong question.”

The right question is, “Who is on God’s side?” Ironically, both would claim to be. Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihadists, all of them claim to fight for God, whom they call

Allah. At the same time, many Israelis would claim to be the people of God. Both can't be right. If both were on God's side, they would not be fighting and killing one another.

To properly decide who is on God's side, you would have to decide whose actions better conform to the character of God. Is killing babies, raping women, and terrorizing innocent people in line with God's values? Obviously not. Is hiding behind women and children and using them as human shields in line with the character of God. No, it is not.

Despite what you may hear, the Israeli army is not targeting and indiscriminately killing Palestinians. They go out of their way to not do so. Before bombing northern Gaza, they sent emergency text messages and dropped leaflets urging the people to move south. Hamas did everything they could to keep people from leaving.

I want you to know, God is not a registered Republican. When bedlam rolls around, He will wear neither orange nor red. On Friday I read Psalm 108. In v. 11 David wrote, "You do not go out, O God, with our armies." I believe He was saying, "God is not on our side." Yet, two verses later David rejoiced, "With God we shall do valiantly; it is He who will tread down our foes." The idea is, "God is not on our side, but if we are on His side, He will take care of us."

God is under no obligation to bless your plans; so, don't try to recruit God for your side. Make sure you are on His. Do you recognize Him as your Commander?

Paul used a military metaphor in his second letter to Timothy. He urged Timothy, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Serving as a soldier is not a cushy life. It is not necessarily a comfortable life. Paul went on to tell Timothy, "No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him" (2:3-4). I am afraid that many believers are pursuing things they have no business pursuing. You and I are to serve under the command of Jesus. If you are doing anything that keeps you from being available to Him or that prevents you from following Him fully, you need to give it up.

Notice that the sword in the hand of the Commander was unsheathed. The idea is that the Commander was ready to fight. Are we ready to go with God?

Make sure you know who your Commander truly is. Study the gospel accounts to see what He is like. There are many imposters in our world who are trying to lure you to follow them. Make sure you know your Commander's voice so you can heed His call.

There is a second prelude to victory.

We Must Surrender to Our Commander: Let's Worship Him Alone

Upon hearing the announcement of who the stranger was, look at what Joshua did (5:14b). One reason I believe this stranger was God, not an angel, is that whoever it was didn't stop Joshua from worshiping Him. In the very last page of the Bible, Revelation 22:8-9, we find that John bows down to worship the angel who had given him his great vision. What did the angel do in response? We read in v. 9 that the angel said, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." So said the angel.

A second reason that this must God Himself who is standing before Joshua is that He

instructed him, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy” (5:15).

This is similar to what God said to Moses in Exodus 3:5. Moses approached that bush which burned but was not consumed. From that bush God called out to Moses and said to him, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Wherever God is, be it a church or a park bench or the grocery store, wherever God is, it is holy ground.

The late pastor and writer Eugene Peterson once told a story about walking in Yellowstone Park with his wife and three children. He was on holy ground, but he didn't realize it, and since he didn't know it, he blew it. He wrote:

As my family and I were walking in a mountain meadow in Yellowstone Park, there was a little boy of four or five about 30 yards out in the meadow picking exquisite alpine flowers. It is against the rules to pick flowers in national parks. I was outraged. I yelled at him, “Don't pick the flowers.” He just stood wide-eyed, innocent, and terrified. He dropped the flowers and started crying.

You can imagine what happened next. My wife and children, my children especially, were all over me. “Daddy, what you did was far worse than what he did! He was just picking a few flowers and you yelled, you scared him. You ruined him. He is probably going to have to go for counseling when he's 40 years old.” My children were right. You cannot yell people into holiness. You cannot terrify people into the sacred. My yelling was a far worse violation of the holy place than his picking a few flowers. Later I had plenty of opportunity to reflect on this, reminded, as I frequently was, by my children.

I do that a lot, bluster and yell on behalf of God's holy presence, instead of taking off my shoes myself, kneeling on holy ground, and inviting whoever happens to be around to join with me.

Peterson added, “If we begin by formulating a problem, by identifying a need, by tackling a necessary job, by launching a program, we reduce the reality that is before us to what we can do or get others to do.” He concluded that everything we do in the Christian life must begin with adoration, with a sense of wonder, and with worship.

Before going off to win a battle against the city of Jericho, Joshua kneeled to worship. That is where the battles of life are always won. Worship is the prelude to victory, not the postlude. Victory starts with worship. What happened after Joshua worshiped? Look at 6:2.

With what are you struggling right now? What battle are you presently fighting? Your greatest need is not a better battle plan or better weapons or more soldiers to fight beside you. No. Your greatest need is to kneel and worship your Commander. He will give you victory, but it starts with worshipping Him.

Let's worship Him because right now we are on holy ground. Wherever two are three are gathered in His name, that is where He is.

The prelude to victory starts with recognizing our Commander. It moves on to

surrendering or worshipping our Commander. Finally . . .

We Must Follow Our Commander: Let's Do Just What He Says

At the end of v. 14, Joshua had a question. As he was worshipping His commander he asked Him, "What does my lord say to His servant." Our worship is incomplete if we haven't asked, allowed, and waited for God to say what He wants to say to us. Worship is so much more than singing and lifting our hands toward God. It culminates in hearing Him and then doing exactly what He has called us to do.

While disobedience negates our worship, our obedience completes it.

In chapter 6, Joshua literally receives his marching orders from God. Look at vv. 3-5. This was God's battle plan for His people. Think about it for a moment. I mentioned earlier that Gilgal, where the people camped was about 3 miles from Jericho. How long does it take to march 3 miles? It takes upwards of an hour. Each day for six days, after walking to Jericho, the army marched once around the city of Jericho. How long would that take. One commentator said one hour. Another said two. It sounds like a guess to me. Let's cut the difference and say an hour and a half. So, each day for six days they march an hour there, an hour and a half around, and an hour back to camp. That's 3.5 hours of marching each day for six days. On the last day, they march an hour there, around the city 7 times. That would be approximately 10.5 hours of marching, not including water breaks, bathroom breaks, and maybe a picnic meal. The 7th time around concluded with a loud trumpet blast and the people shouting real loudly. That's the battle plan. There is nothing about placing archers at strategic points along the wall. Nothing about scaling the walls or digging under them or knocking down the city gate.

Goodness! The Trojans had a far better plan with placing that gift horse outside the city gate of Troy. That was genius. Honestly, I think you and I could put our heads together and come up with something more impressive than this.

The point God was making was, "Trust Me. Just trust Me. If you will trust Me and do what I say, I will give you the city." They did, and God did.

On the 7th day, after making their 7th circuit around the city, the priests blew their trumpets, and the people shouted, and God did the miraculous. Look at v. 20.

Excavations of the site of ancient Jericho reveal that it was built on a mound, and it had a double enclosure. There was a retaining wall at the bottom. Higher up there was another earthen wall. Between the two, there were homes. That was the low-rent district. It was less fortified. That is where Rahab lived. Jericho is widely believed to be the oldest city in the world and the first walled city. Excavations reveal that the top wall slid down to the bottom forming a ramp up into the city. That corresponds with what the text claims—"the people went up into the city, every man straight before him."

Many researchers have concluded that an earthquake must have been the caused the walls to buckle and slide down. I would like to think that after the Israelite army had finished their seventh time around the city on that seventh day, and just after the trumpets blew, at the moment the army shouted, God caused the tectonic plates miles underneath their feet to shift, and the resulting earthquake leveled the city, minus the portion of the

wall where Rahab and her family were hiding. Look at v. 25.

What insurance companies call an act of God was in this case, undoubtedly, an act of God. The army didn't cause the walls to fall; God did.

By the way, archaeologists further determined that the ancient city had been burned, which is also in agreement with the text. We read in v. 24, "And they burned the city with fire, and everything in it."

The only way to follow our Commander is to listen to Him. Recently, I became aware of a study conducted by the Center for Bible Engagement. They surveyed 400,000 people between ages of 8 to 80, from 24 different countries, and from every walk of life. They discovered something for which they weren't even looking. They learned that the life of someone who engages with the Scripture four times a week looks radically different from the life of someone who does not. To engage with Scripture means to read it, listen to it, hear it taught. The person who does that 4 times a week is 68% less likely to have sex outside of marriage. He or she is 57% less likely to struggle with alcohol addiction. That same person is 228% more likely to share their faith with someone else, 407% more likely to memorize Scripture, and 416% more likely to support his or her church financially.

If you want to see your life change for the better, listen to your Commander by engaging with His word and then by doing His word.

All of us are led by something or someone. If I asked you to take me to your leader, where or to whom would you take me? Receiving Jesus as your Commander is the prelude to a life well-lived, the prelude to battles well-fought, and the prelude to victories well-won.