

THE INITIAL CONQUEST: JERICHO (JOSHUA 6:12-21)

Central Thought: *God gives Israel victory and removes the wicked Canaanite population of Jericho from the land.*

THE SETTING. The initial conquest was an exciting time for Israel. The nation had survived a dark period of its history—forty years of wandering in the Sinai wilderness. Now God would give Israel the promised land. With Joshua as their leader, the people dedicated themselves to the task. They crossed the Jordan river and camped at Gilgal. The time to conquer had come! But the initial conquest was also a perilous time for Israel. Yes, God wanted his people *in the land*, but God wanted his people *holy*. The Israelites had spent the past forty years as nomads in the desert. As a result, they had a low or undeveloped culture. The Canaanites, however, had lived in the land for centuries, and they had developed a highly sophisticated culture. Their cities were well-fortified, and they were very capable in military combat. Canaanite religion also was well organized and repulsive. It was a debasing form of paganism with practices like sacred prostitution, homosexuality, and various orgiastic rites to Baal, Asherah, Astarte, and other deities.¹ The danger of the Canaanites influencing the Israelites for evil through both culture and religion was very real. As Leon Wood suggests, “It was this danger which God sought to avoid by commanding that all Canaanites be destroyed or driven from the land” (see Numbers 33:51-56; Deuteronomy 7:1-5).²

¹See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1981), 118.

²Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 169.

The first Canaanite city to be destroyed was Jericho. Situated some eight miles northwest of the Dead Sea, this “city of palms” guarded important travel routes that connected the transjordan with the hill country of Canaan. The position of Jericho was crucial. Ian Wilson notes, “Not only did it command the fordable stretch of the Jordan that the Israelites needed to cross in order to press westward, it also controlled the most practical route they could take to reach the highlands. Furthermore, for a people parched after too long in the desert, the oasis of Jericho offered a first taste of fertile land and an abundant water supply.”³ It is easy to see why God brought Israel here to begin the conquest of Canaan.

THE TEXT. Verses 12-14. “For six days” the Israelites circle the city once each day. On the second day, Joshua begins the march “early in the morning.” The contingent marching around the city includes military and religious personnel. Not only is this a military operation, it is foremost a religious endeavor. The armed guard goes first, followed by the priests (who blow their horns constantly), the ark of the covenant next (carried by priests), and finally a rear guard (see vv. 6-9). The emphasis in the whole procession is on the ark. The ark dominates the action. Everything else takes a subordinate role. This is because the ark is the Lord’s ark, and the Lord himself is identified with his ark (cf. Numbers 10:35-36).

The seven priests carry the seven horns *before the Lord* (v. 8), and the ark is called “the ark of the Lord” and “the ark of the Lord’s covenant.” And, as Hugh Blair observes, “the position of the ark in the midst of the armed men of Israel is significant. God is in the midst of

³Ian Wilson, *Exodus: The True Story Behind the Biblical Account* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985), 165.

his people, and together they encompass the city.”⁴ As at Sinai, the blasts of the priests’ horns signal the presence of the Lord (see Exodus 19:13, 16, 19). The constant blowing of the horns also suggests war and victory. To the Canaanites, it was a piercing noise of terror. By making the daily circuit around Jericho, the Israelites follow the detailed instructions of the Lord (vv. 2-5). As Samuel Schultz affirms, “Israel does not attack the city according to regular military strategy but simply follows the instructions of the Lord.”⁵ The battle is the Lord’s, and he will give the victory.

Verses 15-19. On the seventh day the Israelite contingent circles the city *seven times*. By doing this, the people once again follow the Lord’s instructions (see v. 4). Note the repeated appearance of the number seven—seven priests, seven horns, seven days, seven circuits of the walls on the seventh day. God’s work in the initial conquest of Canaan is consummated or completed on the seventh day (cf. Genesis 2:1-3). The Lord who leads Israel into Canaan to conquer is the same Lord who created all things.

After the seventh time around the city, Joshua commands the people to give the war-shout (cf. vv. 5, 10, 20). The Israelites conquer with the familiar noises of battle—the war-shouts and trumpet-blasts (cf. Amos 2:2)—but not with normal siege operations. The felling of the walls is of the Lord’s doing. So Joshua reminds them, “The Lord has given you the city!” (cf. v. 2; 8:1, 18).

⁴Hugh Blair, “Joshua,” *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, eds., Donald Guthrie, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 239.

⁵Samuel Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1960), 95.

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And to help Israel know the source of her victory, Jericho and everything in it are placed under a “ban” or “curse” (the Hebrew word *herem*). Something or someone so banned or cursed was to be destroyed completely and could not be redeemed (see Deuteronomy 13:12-16; Leviticus 27:28-29). That this *herem* is applied to Jericho (and likewise to Ai, Makkedah, and Hazor, see Joshua 8:26; 10:28; 11:11) is no indication of any injustice by God but rather just the opposite. God had waited patiently since Abraham’s days “for the sin of the Amorites . . . (to reach) its full measure” (Genesis 15:16), and the time for judgment had come (see Deuteronomy 9:4-6; 20:10-18).

The Canaanites were singled out for such severe treatment to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted. According to Walter Kaiser, “When a people burn their children in honor of their gods, practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices, the land itself begins to ‘vomit’ them out just like the body heaves under the load of internal poisons” (Leviticus 18:19-30).⁶ No, the extermination of the Canaanites is not a lack of God’s grace; it is God’s grace in action. Jericho is a wicked city, so it is placed under the *herem*. Israel must take no spoils of war. Israel must not perceive the victory as her own. The victory is not of Israel’s own doing. Rather, God’s mercy is at work, his mercy (the Hebrew word *hesed*) that rids the world of wickedness and evil and establishes truth and justice in its place. Joshua’s warning against taking anything from the city is strong. To violate the *herem* would subject Israel to the curse and would bring destruction on the camp. Everything is to be destroyed. The only *things*

⁶Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 268.

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exempted are the precious metals, and these are to be placed in the treasury of the Lord. They become “sacred” or “consecrated” to the Lord. The only *persons* exempted from the *herem* are Rahab the harlot and her family. By hiding the Israelite spies she had aligned herself with Israel and with Israel’s God. Because of her faith, she and “all . . . with her in her house” were to be spared (cf. vv. 22-25; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25).

Verses 20-21. The text now comes to the dramatic climax. The horns blast, the people shout, the walls collapse, then the people storm the city and destroy everything in it (cf. vv. 5, 24). Israel again follows the Lord’s instructions. The Lord responds with a dramatic display of his power. God strips Jericho of its defense by causing the wall to *fall down flat* (literally, “in its place”). The Lord makes Jericho easy pickings for the Israelites. He gives the city to his people as a gift (see 24:11). In return, the execution of the *herem* is Israel’s gift to God.

Note on the walls of Jericho: While secondary causes (such as an earthquake) might explain the collapse of the walls, only the Lord’s intervention can explain its occurrence at the precise moment of Israel’s advance (see Hebrews 11:30). Often it is asserted that archaeological evidence from Jericho does not support the extent of destruction demanded by the biblical text. But the standard dating of Jericho’s occupational levels is open to reinterpretation, and if John Bimson’s thesis holds true, Jericho in the Middle Bronze Age (or ca. 1400 BC) was a major fortified city that suffered extensive destruction by earthquake and fire.⁷

⁷ See John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and the Conquest* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1978); compare Ian Wilson, *Exodus: The True Story Behind the Biblical Account*, 159-178.

THE LESSON. God demonstrated his power mightily in the conquest of Jericho. God's intervention caused the walls to collapse and rendered the city defenseless. The city did not fall because of Israel's military superiority, nor did Jericho fall because of Israel's righteousness. God gave the city to Israel. It was his gift to his people. Israel received this gift by faith. Remember that God's people were entering a strange land, fighting strange people, and facing the Canaanites who were very strong and very wicked. The Israelites could not have conquered Jericho without the help of God. But with God with them, the victory was theirs. They conquered by faith and by following the instructions of the Lord.

God also calls us to faith in Jesus. Every day we face many trials to our faith in a wicked world. God says to us, "Be strong and of good courage; do not fear." He assures us, "I will not fail you or forsake you." He asks us to trust him and his power not ourselves nor our own ability. If we do this, he surely will give us the victory.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT & DISCUSSION

1. Why was the initial conquest a critical time for Israel?
2. Discuss the importance of the location of Jericho. Why did God bring the Israelites here to begin the conquest of Canaan?
3. What role does the ark play in the marching around the city?
4. How would you compare what the Israelites did in taking Jericho with the usual siege operations of ancient times (cf. Ezekiel 4:1-3)?
5. Explain the significance of the number "seven" in the text.
6. What was the *herem*? Was it unfair of God to place the Canaanites under this ban or curse? Justify your answer.
7. Describe the wickedness of the Canaanites. Use scriptures for your answer.
8. Why was Rahab spared? Of what significance is the fact that she was a prostitute?
9. Read Deuteronomy 9:4-6; Joshua 1:11; 6:16; 24:11. Discuss the importance of seeing the initial conquest as God's gift to Israel.
10. How can the Lord being victory over sin and wickedness in your life today?