

In the early morning of December 28, 1908 a devastating earthquake destroyed the flourishing and extraordinarily beautiful city of Messina, Italy. Over 80,000 of people who lived there, died. Though one of the most beautiful in all of Italy, the city's outward appearance was not reflective of the inward condition of its heart. The night before the earthquake, a series of resolutions were passed into law by the town's governing authorities, allowing for public conduct and behavior which was explicitly violent and wicked against the principles of God. The prevailing attitude of the people had become so irreverent that three days before, on Christmas day, the city's newspaper had published a front page article condemning belief in God and publicly challenging the Almighty One to make Himself known by sending an earthquake. Three days later the true God revealed the power of His glory, and Messina and its surrounding districts, were shaken and laid to ruins.

For those who refuse to bow to God, there is a penalty to pay. Deadly consequences await those who reject God's absolute sovereignty over their lives. God understands and forgives with great mercy those who wrestle with their sin. But His justice rules. His righteousness burns against those who follow the path of their own shadows. There are no walls high enough or strong enough to protect those who reject the Lordship of God's reign over their lives. He'll either give them over to the slow death of their sin or crumble the protective fortresses they have built against Him into ruin.

The Kingdom of God is God's redemptive love, righteous justice, and glorious holiness pressed into every facet and dimension of human enterprise and endeavor. God desires to rule over all that He has created – and most specifically to rule over the souls and spiritual hearts of men and women. Jesus told his followers to strive to advance God's kingdom above all. In Matthew 6:33 he said: *“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* Jesus rules and reigns with absolute authority as King within the Kingdom of God. And in being God, He created us, and as His subjects, He expects absolute allegiance and obedience to Him: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”* (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus' words here rang true in Joshua's life. When Joshua succeeded Moses as the new leader of Israel, God told him, *“Be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you”* (Joshua 1:6). What this means is that *we cannot enjoy victory over our struggles in life when we do not have the faith to do what God tells us to do.* Faith begets obedience. We cannot say we truly believe God if we refuse to obey God. Faith without works is dead. Faith without obedience is the devil's faith. The apostle John declared this in 1 John 5:4, *“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”* Faith in God trusts in the true God and in His promises. Faith obeys God's commands exactly, immediately, and with great delight and joy. This is the kind of faith that empowers and brings victory. The power of the Kingdom of God is bold obedience of faith in God.

We find ourselves in such a place today in our text. Last week we left Joshua at the base of the formidable walls of the fortified city of Jericho, positioned before the captain of the Lord of hosts – on his face, bowed down, with sandals off in knowing he was standing on holy ground. Before victory would come over the forbidding walls of Jericho, the walls between God's will and the hearts of God's people needed to be removed; and as Joshua reverently bowed before the throne of heaven, those walls came down. By God's grace I pray that today God's Word will remove the walls within the hearts and lives of those of us who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - because when we truly surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ, we will face our own formidable Jericho's – barriers that stand in the way of our spiritual progress, walls which seem of too great a height and width to overcome, obstacles that stand in our path of progress, keeping us from joyfully making our way ever deeper into the Kingdom of God into the inner heart of God.

History tells us that on his retreat from Greece, after his great military expedition there, King Xerxes boarded a Phoenician ship along with a number of his Persian troops. But a fearful storm came up, and the captain told Xerxes the boat would sink if the ship's load was substantially lightened. The king turned to his Persian soldiers on deck and said, "It is on you that my safety depends. Now let some of you show your regard for your king." The commander of the army bowed to Xerxes and threw himself overboard; many soldiers followed. Lightened of its load, the ship made it safely to harbor.

Such is the place we find Joshua's heart as we open chapter six; humbly bowing before the King of Universe, in readied obedience, he cast himself headlong into the deep unknown waters of what seemed to be an impossible situation before him. But unlike the commander of the Persian army, Joshua knew he would survive. Not only would he survive, but he knew with God at his side, or rather he, being on God's side, he would live to see the joy of the victory God desired for Israel.

In our text for this morning we come to see how it was that Joshua came to know such victory. It didn't come as he expected; victory with God rarely does. God tells us in Isaiah 55:8: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord."* 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 tells us that: *"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."* God's way our not our ways. God almost always does things quite differently that we would expect. Never was that more clear than at Jericho. It made no sense. It wasn't reasonable. But still it was of God. And Joshua believed so. In spite of how it looked and sounded, he obediently cast his heart and soul into the arms of God's sovereign plan, believing that God's Word had more power than the reason of men.

*Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in. And the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him." So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord." And he said to the people, "Go forward. March around the city and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the Lord." Joshua 6:1-7*

And so the battle plan was this - In the first seven verses we read that God tells Joshua to line up his soldiers and march in procession around the city in absolute silence, except for seven priests who were to play their trumpets while carrying the ark of the covenant behind them. They were to do so once a day for six days. Jericho covered about 10 acres, so each day the march took about 25 to 30 minutes. Then God told them that on the seventh day they were to march around seven times doing the same thing and when they finished they were all to stop and shout and the walls would crumble.

*And just as Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the Lord went forward, blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the Lord following them. The armed men were walking before the priests who were blowing the trumpets, and the rear guard was walking after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually. But Joshua commanded the people, "You shall not shout or make your voice heard, neither shall any word go out of your mouth, until the day I tell you to shout. Then you shall shout." So he caused the ark of the Lord to circle the city, going about it once. And they came into the camp and spent the night in the camp.*

*Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. And the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord walked on, and they blew the trumpets continually. And the armed men were walking before them, and the rear guard was walking after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually. And the second day they marched around the city once and returned into the camp. So they did for six days.*

*On the seventh day they rose early, at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it. But all silver and gold, and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord." So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword. Joshua 6:8-21*

Here we see that the power of the Kingdom of God is bold obedience of faith in God. This is true for not only Joshua but also for us. We too must learn that victory over our own "Jerichos" will come only when we learn to *trust and obey God* – and not just with our mouths but also with our hearts and actions. We may not understand God's plan, methods and timing. But, if we want to overcome the walls and barriers and obstacles we face in life, we must obediently submit to His ways. In 2 Corinthians 10:4 the apostle Paul writes: *"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds."* More often than not we see our battle plan superior to that of God's. When His plan doesn't fit into our schedule, opinion, gifting, or comfort zone we then assume that plan can't be that of God. This happens because when we plan and strategize outside the commands and counsel of the Holy Spirit, the flesh of our emotions becomes our compass.

Joshua and the people of Israel were able to destroy a formidable barrier that stood before them because - not only did they receive orders from God but they also obeyed them, without question or revision. That is unheard of in the culture we live in today. The Kingdom of God and Jesus' claims to be Lord of that kingdom challenge our self-supremacy. We intuitively perceive Jesus' claims of lordship as a primary threat to our desire to fully control our own lives. The government and our employers and numerous leaders may tell us what to do. Even our families may make demands that we submit to. But deep down in our hearts there is an area we desperately clutch onto, where *we* control, where *we* decide, where *we* rule. When Jesus Christ approaches the throne of every human heart - He always finds it filled by someone who would almost die rather do what they are told to do.

Does Jesus really lay his deep absolute claim on every life? Viewed through the lenses of what North American Christianity has become, you wouldn't think so – not if what we see around us is normative. But Jesus absolute claim to rule over the hearts of all mankind was his core expectation from the beginning. He commonly allowed others to address him as "Lord" – a word meaning master and a covenant title in the Old Testament for God. Jesus taught that obedience was the only proper response to His demands and His teaching. In the Kingdom of God obedience is not up for negotiation. Jesus' command to "follow him" challenges us to abandon our most cherished dreams for the sake of His Kingdom. Jesus really, really, really expects us to make that commitment.

Jesus Christ was, is and always will be a Savior who freely forgives sin and demands total commitment in return. Looking at what he gives us in return, we know that it isn't too much to ask. He no longer approaches humanity as an itinerant carpenter, but as a King on a conquest. Looking across the ages and galaxies - His purpose is to transform not only individual hearts and lives but also whole cultures, and even physical creation itself. For all of us who've heard his voice and claim His name, Jesus' conquest of a runaway planet by bold obedience should be our main business.

In a society where tolerance stretched to its breaking point is seen as a virtue, we must choose. Uncomfortably, Jesus presents us with only two alternatives. If we're not for Him and His kingdom with all our heart and soul, and mind, then we are against him – or if we shy away from true commitment and put on the shabby rags of religious games and pretense, then we are rebels. Both of those options result in banishment from the Kingdom. The good news in all this is that by the power of the Kingdom of God, Jesus boldly obeyed and sacrificed himself on a cross, in our place, for our sins – so we can be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God – so we might live out our new lives in the Kingdom of God here on earth and forever with God in the glory of heaven.

The writer Mark Noll opens his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, by stating that the scandal of the evangelical mind is that *largely there isn't one*. Today, even born-again Christians find themselves at odds on some of most basic principles of the Bible that have been historically accepted as orthodox truth - by simply taking the position that they have a different view. Truth is now bent to fit our will rather than God's. This isn't how it worked for Joshua and the nation of Israel. They believed God meant what He said – even though they didn't understand it or agree with it.

The walls of Jericho did not fall down because of the ground vibrations created by the marching or the sound waves caused by the trumpets. The walls of Jericho fell because Joshua and the people of God believed God was who He said He was, and *they responded with bold obedience*. Hebrews 11:30 tells us that *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.”* Their faith in trusting God's promise dropped those walls, not ground vibrations nor sound waves. Their bold obedience in trusting in God's ways caused the walls to crumble to the ground.

They also had faith in God's timing. Could God have crumbled the walls after one day instead of seven? Absolutely. Why didn't He? Hebrews 6:12 says that those who practice *“patience inherit the promises”* of God. God's plan said seven days. The Bible tells us that faith and patience go together. God's timing is rarely ours, but it's always perfect. There are no clocks in heaven; eternity cannot be measured. When God puts a period to an end of a sentence, we have no right to change it to a question mark. What God says, he means. Selective obedience is not convenience, it's disobedience. The same is true for delayed obedience. When God speaks it's time to quit asking questions, and start listening and obeying. Everything we need to know is written in God's Word. We are treading on dangerous ground when we subtract, extrapolate, or reinterpret His Word. When we live out our lives by principles of His Word, His presence and power will fill our souls, and we will know victory.

This is extremely relevant to the times we live in. This past week American columnist Cal Thomas wrote: “Deep beneath the lawlessness spreading like the coronavirus across the land is a moral and spiritual drought that politicians do not have the power to fix. In previous generations, fiery preachers would remind the citizens of the consequences of living unrestrained and unaccountable lives. They called it “sin,” but that diagnosis has virtually disappeared, along with the generation of Billy Graham, and we are left with the current moral desert. We can't say we have not been warned by history and experience about the dangers inherent in unrestrained living.” The first leaders of our countries knew that “personal and national freedom are in jeopardy if the people become wicked and immoral. “America's second president, John Adams, said, ‘Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.’”

Today we stand before walls of fear and anger and chaos and division caused by a viral pandemic and intellectual arrogance and personal entitlement and individual rights and gender manipulation and economic instability and political incompetence and anarchists and racial conflict. We are living in a day of unrestrained wickedness and unaccountable immorality. It is so because everything we do outside of obedience to God's will is simply self-centered activity, filling the space of the breath of time we have here on earth. Thomas a Kempis said: "Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from God's Grace."

Archibald Rutledge tells of a time when he met a man whose dog had just been killed in a forest fire. Heartbroken, the man explained to Rutledge how it happened. Because he worked in the bush, he always took his dog with him. That morning, he left the animal in a clearing and gave him a command to stay and watch his lunch bucket while he went into the forest. His faithful friend understood, for that's exactly what he did. Then a fire started in the woods, and soon the blaze spread to the spot where the dog had been left. But he didn't move. He stayed right where he was, in perfect obedience to his master's word – and died in the fire. With tearful eyes the dog's owner said, "I always had to be careful what I told him to do, because I knew he would always faithfully do it."

Are those the words that Jesus would use in describing us? Are we living a life of bold obedience to the Master's Word? Does He know we will always faithfully do as He commands, regardless the cost or the danger? The cost of obedience is nothing compared with the cost of disobedience. Peter Forsythe was right when he said: "The first duty of every soul is to find *not its freedom but it's Master.*" The church of today is dormant because it is no longer the church militant. We are called to be just as bold and courageous today as they were back in the days of Joshua. The power that began to flow at Pentecost is inexhaustible and is just as available today as it was back then – but we must wake up and claim our birthright as children of the King, declaring the victory He has given us. We are called to shout the same shout of victory of God's people we read of today. When we do, the walls between the power of our Risen Christ and the lost world around us will crumble and all that is of God will be joyfully rescued, redeemed and claimed back to Him.

Dr. B.J. Miller once said, "It is a much greater blessing to do that which God gives us to do, no matter how hard it is, than to face the consequences of not doing it." For the true follower of Jesus Christ – obedience is not an option, it is faithful obligation. God demands it and we should enjoy it. The choice between living an obedient life and pursuing our own agenda through the ways of the world, is a choice which is presented to every one of us every day. The old crisis of the apple of Eden and the voice of God reappears in our every experience. Caesar or Christ, that is the question: the vast, attractive, skeptical world, with its pleasures, ambitions, comforts and promises – or the humble, majestic, dangerous, joy filled victory we can know from this man of God's Kingdom? A few weeks ago we saw Rahab facing that same choice. She chose God. We read of her victory in choosing to trust God in the face of overpowering pressure to choose the ways of the world.

*But to the two men who had spied out the land, Joshua said, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring out from there the woman and all who belong to her, as you swore to her." So the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. And they brought all her relatives and put them outside the camp of Israel. And they burned the city with fire, and everything in it. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho. Joshua laid an oath on them at that time, saying, "Cursed before the Lord be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho. "At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates." So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land. Joshua 6:22-27*

We all face the challenge of our own “Jerichos” at one time or another. The walls will crumble when we obediently trust in God for the victory. In reflecting back over the past two weeks, in Joshua chapters five and six, consider the following five truths as we move ahead as a church.

- 1) Our greatest victories will come by acknowledging how weak we are in our own strength. As Joshua bowed before the Lord in preparing for battle, so we will gain victory in the battles before us, if we are desperately on our knees and on our faces before the Lord in prayer.
- 2) We will never know the victory God desires for us if we do not work together. We need each other. The priests and the people of God obeyed and cooperated with Joshua, and together they overcame the enemy. When we are united our common shout will bring down the walls.
- 3) When we follow God’s methods and principles - we win the battle, God gets the glory, and we gain the victory. God uses foolish and unreasonable methods and ways to accomplish His will. God’s ways are not our ways. His way may not make sense to us, but He knows best.
- 4) Unbelief sees rivers and walls as obstacles, but faith in God sees them as opportunities. Rivers and walls will cause us to take our eyes off of God and look to our own power. We will fail there. Trusting in God means nothing is impossible.
- 5) The ground at the cross is level. We all stand the same before God. He used Rahab just as powerfully as He used Joshua. The difference between God’s grace and God’s wrath is dependant on our bold response of sacrificial obedience to God’s sovereign will for our lives.

The truth is we live in a fallen world that is ruled by the devil and we are all constantly blinded by the self-centeredness of our own sin as we walk and talk and think in this life. And because it is so, much of what God asks us to do will almost always seem strange, unreasonable or impossible. And so we must rely solely on the Word of the only One who rules over all things. God’s Word and our obedient response to His Word give us the power we need to claim the victory. Psalm 119:105 proclaims: *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”*

This morning God’s Word is asking us: Are we willing to obediently submit to God’s demands? The answer to that question will determine whether or not we will cross the uncrossable rivers before us and overcome the impassable walls that stand in our way. I pray we would be boldly obedient to God’s Word. His victory awaits us not only in eternity, but even on this very day, if we are willing to trust and obey. Some years ago, an unknown poet penned the following words.

Where our Captain bids us go,  
'Tis not ours to murmur no;  
He that gives the sword and shield  
Chooses too the battlefield  
Where and how we fight the foe.

When we walk with the Lord, In the light of his word,  
What a glory he sheds on our way!  
While we do his good will, He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.  
Trust and obey, For there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, But to trust and obey. *John H. Sammis*