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WAR STORY Joshua 6

Since we are observing Veteran's Day this weekend I thought it appropriate to tell a couple of war stories this morning. The end of the Second World War in Europe was near, but the Nazis were still fighting in April of 1945. They still had submarines prowling the Atlantic seeking ships to sink. One of them, the U1206 under the command of Karl Adolph Schlitt was submerged at 200 feet 10 miles off the coast of Scotland. Earlier German subs had toilets that could only be flushed at shallow depths, but the new U1206 had high pressure valves on its toilets that could be flushed at any depth. However, an improperly flushed toilet malfunctioned. The valve stayed open causing sewage and seawater to flood into the compartment. Before the crew could get the flooding stopped the water reached the sub's massive batteries creating chlorine gas that began poisoning the air in the boat. The captain was forced to bring the boat to the surface to clear the air and repair the damage. While the boat was on the surface it was spotted by British Navy patrols and fired on. In a hopeless situation the captain was forced to scuttle his boat. One crew member was killed by British gunfire and three others drowned. The other 46 members of the crew were captured. As far as is known the U1206 is the only war ship ever to have been sunk by a toilet.

The other war story I am going to tell is found in Joshua 6. War is a dirty and dangerous business. Unfortunately you and I are in a war. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:10-12 that our battle is not against humans, but against forces in the spiritual realm. We have an enemy who is clever, intelligent, powerful and bent on our destruction. This is a war that rages day in and day out without respite. Our enemy fires away at us using various weapons, including battering us with discouragement and depression, luring us with temptation, harassing us with doubt, and bombarding us with hardship and pain. Our only options are to fight or to become tragic casualties of combat. Today we are going to look at a familiar war story and learn that there is good news for God's people as we face our daily combat. The story is found in Joshua 6.

THE INCIDENT GOD CAME UP WITH A WEIRD PLAN

In the first 5 chapters of Joshua we have seen God preparing his people Israel to finally enter the land of Canaan, the land God had promised to them since the time of Abraham more than 400 years earlier. Joshua 6 is D-Day. At last the invasion of

Canaan begins as Israel faces its very first battle in its efforts to claim what God had promised them.

Standing in the way of their conquest of Canaan is a formidable obstacle, the fortified city of Jericho. As we have seen it presented a major problem for an attacking force. The city was not an unusually large one. Likely during the invasion there were several thousand people inside the city walls. But a fortified city was a threat that had to be removed. It would have presented a threat to Israel's flanks and rear as they invaded Canaan if they just bypassed it. It had to be conquered.

The defenses of Jericho presented a difficult challenge. It had an outer wall at the base of a slope with an inner wall on top of the slope, the whole thing standing perhaps 46 feet high. For the technology of that day it was essentially impregnable. That's why Joshua earlier sent a recon team into the city, hoping to find some chink in the city's defenses that they could exploit. Unfortunately for Israel no such vulnerability was discovered. It appeared that the only possible strategy for attack was a siege. Though a siege had a high probability of success eventually it was not the ideal strategy for Joshua. For several reasons he needed a quick and decisive victory.

We saw in the last chapter that while making his final reconnaissance Joshua had a divine encounter. In that incident he accepted the rule of his holy God and committed to obey no matter what God called on him to do. That commitment was about to be tested. The plan of attack that the Lord gave Joshua was pretty odd. The people were to put the ark of the covenant, which represented the presence of God with them, right in the middle of the invasion force. They were to put 7 priests with rams horns in front of the ark. When they got everybody in place they were to march around the city once.

That was it. Just march once around the city. Then they were to go back to their camps. The next day they were to come out and do exactly the same thing. It was sort of a wash, rinse, repeat kind of thing, except they were to repeat it every day for 6 straight days. Day 7 was different. Once again they were to line up for their usual march, only this time they were to march around the city 7 times. At the end of the 7th circuit the priests were to blow one loud blast on their rams horns and the people were to shout. According to verse 5 "then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in."

Right. March around the city once a day for 6 days, then 7 times on the 7th day, shout and the walls will fall down. Are you kidding me right now? Exactly what is the engineering behind this feat? How is marching in a circle around the city and then shouting going to knock down walls? Are you under the impression that all that marching is somehow going to cause a vibration transmitted through the ground that is going to weaken the walls to the point where they will fall down? Of course, there was no explanation of how the plan was going to work. God simply gave an order. Joshua had already committed to the fact that he is a holy God who is to be obeyed, so he put the plan into action.

GOD GAVE A GREAT VICTORY

So we see beginning in verse 6 they launch the invasion plan. The priests blow their rams horns, the people march, and around the city they go. Each day they made one pass around the city. Joshua told them to keep quiet as they marched. I suspect that took some restraint. When this all started the walls and fortifications of the city were fully manned. Jericho's armed men had to be ready for anything. They likely expected a long siege, but had to be prepared in case the Israelis tried anything crazy. As the Israelis marched the defenders almost certainly rained down taunts on them. They probably had all kinds of edifying things to say about the mothers of the Israeli soldiers and about their personal shortcomings.

Joshua told his people to just ignore them. Their silent marching would likely have been more unnerving for the people of Jericho than anything they could have said back to them. In my days as a coach of my son's high school hockey teams we had a few games where there was a fair amount of trash talking and some dirty play. I had to continually tell the kids on our team not to retaliate. I told them to ignore the talking, not fight back, but just go out and play. Let their play on the rink answer all the garbage. I told them the best answer to all that unsportsmanlike activity was to say at the end of the game, "scoreboard." Joshua is telling his people just focus on the job God has given us and ignore all the taunts because at the end we'll be able to say "scoreboard."

After several days of this my guess is that the defenders of Jericho are no longer paying much attention. They're thinking that they are likely going to be seeing this every day for the next year. The Israelis are essentially lulling them into a much less alert posture. The defenders are likely thinking, "Let them march. All it's doing is wearing them out."

On that 7th day though the pattern changes. They march around the city 7 times, they shout, and sure enough the walls collapse allowing the Israelis to storm the

city. As soon as the Israelis are inside the walls the outcome is a foregone conclusion. Earlier we had read that the Israelis had 40,000 armed men. The entire population of Jericho was a fraction of that. The walls were their only defense. When the invaders got inside the walls it was all over for Jericho.

ISRAEL KEPT A PROMISE

In verse 17 Joshua told Israel, “The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared.” By devoted to the Lord Joshua meant for the most part it was to be destroyed. Only metal items, especially precious metals, would be spared, but they would be put into the treasury of the Lord.

This was an unusual way for conquerors to behave. We all know the saying, “to the victor belong the spoils.” That’s the way it has always been. Conquerors took whatever they wanted. They divided up the loot among themselves. But God said there was to be no loot. The metal items would not be easily destroyed. Typically they would be divided up among the conquering soldiers with the best and most going to the leaders. But God didn’t want it divided up. My guess is he didn’t want Israel to be divided over who would get the most valuable items like a dysfunctional family squabbling over the estate of a wealthy deceased relative. They would only keep the metal items because they were difficult to destroy, but they wouldn’t be used for personal gain. Rather all of it would belong to God.

Everything else was to be burned. There was a pretty strong message in this. I think God was telling Israel a couple of important things. The first was that the Canaanites and their culture so bad they were dangerous, and not only were they dangerous they were virulently contagious. They were so bad and so hotly contagious that Israel was to have nothing to do with them. Imagine that there is an outbreak of cases of people suffering from e. coli O157 H7, which causes severe diarrhea and vomiting. The outbreak is traced back to a particular restaurant. Suppose that restaurant owner says to you, “Hey, I’ve got some free food here. Would you like to have it?” What would you do? You wouldn’t want any part of that. If there’s been e. coli anywhere in the same time zone I want no part of it. That’s kind of like God’s message to Israel.

God was saying to the people of Israel the people of Jericho have a deadly spiritual disease. You don’t want any part of that. So anything they have touched is off limits. It was a physical way of saying, “stay away from everything those people are.” The normal human response to that would be, “But we can use their food supplies. We need them. We haven’t established ourselves in the land and so have

no way to produce food. We can use their grain and their flocks to live on until we get established in the land. It's just common sense." God was saying, "You don't need what they have. I provided manna in the wilderness when there was nothing to eat there, and I can provide food now that you are in the land."

There was one exception to the "destroy everything" command. That was Rahab and her family. The recon team had promised her that since she had helped them they would save her. So the order was given to spare her life and the lives of all who were in her house. Rahab and her family were the only ones who survived the attack. Israel kept the promise to rescue her from the destruction.

THE IMPLICATIONS

There is a pitfall we can fall into when we study historical events from the Bible. We can easily draw lessons from them that they were not intended to teach. Hey, the lesson of Jericho is that God will always knock down the walls that are in your way, right? No, it's not. God *can* always knock down the walls, but that doesn't mean he will. He didn't always do that for ancient Israel, and he won't necessarily always do it for us. What we need to glean from this is principles of what God is like and how he works in our lives that are confirmed in the rest of Scripture. So what are some of those principles?

GOD WANTS US TO BE INVOLVED IN HIS WORK

In some ways this is a curious story. Let's assume that the story is correct and that God had the power to cause the walls of Jericho to collapse no matter what happened. What did Israel contribute by marching around the city 13 times in 7 days? Nothing. What they did had no effect in bringing down those walls. Yet God wanted them to do it. Why? Apparently he wanted Israel to participate in his work.

We know from previous incidents in the Bible like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that God did not need Israel to defeat Jericho. He could have destroyed it just as he destroyed those cities hundreds of years earlier and Israel could have just sauntered on by the smoking ruins of the city. It seems characteristic of God that he wants us to participate in his plan and in the work he does on this earth even though our participation may not always be vital.

The work God is doing in our lives is to restore his image in us, the image we were created in that has been so vandalized by the fall. He wants to transform us, to make us like his Son. Ultimately this is a work that only he can do. If we ever forget that we are going to create huge problems for ourselves spiritually and emotionally.

Yet it is characteristic of God that he involves his children in his work. He involves us even in the process of changing us that in the end must be his work. There is an interesting description of this in Philippians 2:12-13. "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." It is God who is working in you. So you join him in that work. You do all you can to know his word and apply it to your life and choices. You talk to him, you strive to obey him, to trust him and to the best of your ability to live as Jesus lived.

Ephesians 2:1 says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." Then down in verses 4-5 he says, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." Then Jesus calls on us to be his witnesses. In 1 Peter 3:15 we are to be ready to make a defense for the hope that is in us. Why? We can't talk people into becoming alive in Christ. They're dead. Only God can make the dead come to life. You and I can never argue people into the kingdom. We can't convict them of sin and their need for a Savior, we can't open their eyes and give them a new heart. Only God can do those things. Yet for some odd reason God wants us to participate. Our work may be about as effective as walking around a city to make the walls fall down, but for his own reasons God wants us to walk. He wants us to be involved.

Imagine if God had said to Israel walk around the city of Jericho and make those walls fall down. What an impossible task! He didn't do that. He said, "walk around the city and I will make the walls fall down." And so he says to us, "work at my work in your life and in others." He doesn't say change yourself and change others. He simply says, "Join me in the work and I will do the changing."

We have a picture that is priceless in my mind. Carissa was maybe 3 or 4 years old. I was mowing the front lawn of the house we were living in. Carissa was helping me. I was pushing the lawn mower and there she was in front of me also doing her all to push the mower. I was delighted to have her join me in the work. Had I not been there pushing that thing how much grass would have been mowed? None. The mower would have gone exactly nowhere. Yet I wanted my little girl to be with me in the work.

If God hadn't worked no walls would have fallen. If God doesn't work today no lives are going to change. Yet he gives us the incredible privilege and joy of participating in his work. This has a couple of seriously important implications. If

it is God who works in a powerful way to bring remarkable growth in a person or brings a lot of people into his kingdom who gets credit? Not the individuals, but God, for he was the one making it happen. What if there isn't as much visible effect? Should we grow discouraged and feel like big fat failures? No, it is God who does the work. Our job is to march around the city, so let's march and rejoice and let him decide what the effect of it all will be.

WE NEED TO KEEP ON GOING

I envision what it must have been like for the average Israeli grunt, the guy who was literally the tip of the spear for the Israeli army. Along about the fourth day poor Private Asher Ben Eliezer gets up and his sergeant is barking at him and the rest of the squad to fall in so they can march around Jericho again. "Seriously, Sarge? We're going to march around the city *again*? Why? Let's get on with it. If we're going to lay siege to this city let's get started. Let's start shooting a few arrows over the wall. Let's set up our perimeter and focus on cutting the city off completely. Maybe we should be building some siege engines. This walking around the city is dumb. Makes me wonder if maybe General Joseph has been eating some bad mushrooms or something."

Poor Private Asher is correct. From a human perspective walking around the city is dumb. You can walk around a city from now until pigs start flying and it's not going to get you even one inch closer to conquering a city. There is precisely zero connection between walking around a city and its walls collapsing. Yet it was important for Israel to keep marching even when they didn't understand why.

There is quite a bit of history of God's people doing what God called them to do when it seemed to make little sense. Noah had to spend years, probably decades, building a big ship in preparation for a flood when he had no visible evidence that such a flood was coming and there is no indication that he lived anywhere near a body of water where such a ship made any sense.

In 2 Kings 5 there is the story of Naaman, commander of the army of Aram. He contracted leprosy. A Jewish servant girl told him to go see the great prophet Elisha, for he had the power of God to heal him of the dread disease. So he went. Elisha told him to go wash in the Jordan River. Verses 11-12 say, "But Naaman went away angry and said, 'I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of leprosy. Are not the Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?' So he turned and went off in a rage."

The prophet instructed him to do something that made no sense. If washing in a river could solve the problem he would have been healed long before. What possible good could it do to go wash again? Was the Jordan supposed to have some magical healing powers? The idea was absurd because people washed in it all the time and it had no effect at all. Naaman wasn't interested in wasting his time by taking a bath in some random river in Israel. Fortunately Naaman's servants appealed to him and convinced him to at least try. After all, what would it hurt? So Naaman did the thing that made no sense and the result was that he was in fact healed.

"I don't understand." Those are powerful words for us. We hate being told to do things when we don't understand the reason. Unfortunately God has a habit of calling us to do things we don't understand and trust that somehow he is making that work in his great plan. I have problems with authorities ordering me to do things I don't understand. This week our car failed its smog check. It passed the emission test with flying colors, but the computer reported a fault with the catalytic converter. The technician at the state licensed facility said the converter is working fine. The test results were perfect, so maybe it was just a sensor fault. Our mechanic and others saw the same thing. Yet the state says I have to replace the converter, which could not have come at a worse time because it is absurdly expensive. The state has a phone number you can call to argue your case. I called. I explained the situation and the guy said, "law says you have to replace the converter." I said "But your test showed the converter is working fine. The car literally had zero emissions, which could only happen if the converter is working." He said, "Well in the test garage at 25 miles per hour it is working, but that doesn't tell you anything about what it's doing on the freeway at 65." He couldn't seem to see the obvious problem. If the test doesn't tell us anything about what the car is actually doing on the freeway then why do we have to do it? It doesn't do any good at all. He said, "You have to replace the converter." I don't understand why the state makes me do things that make no sense. It irks me when they do that because I don't believe they know what they're doing. They're bureaucrats exercising power just because they can and they don't want to be bothered with my little problems.

Our problem with authority telling us to do things that make no sense can, at times, transfer to God. When God says "march around the city" we might easily get irked, impatient and frustrated, maybe even rebel. It's so funny, preparing to teach this passage this week I had a day on Friday that was a "march around the city" day. Everybody I dealt with that day seemed to make it their goal to frustrate me, make

me wait while twiddling my thumbs and failing to do the job they were supposed to do. It was just uncanny how bad the day went. I had to say, "Okay, Lord, if you want me to march around the city all day today for no discernible purpose, so be it." The difference is that God is always wise, good and loving. He does care about us and is working for our good. His will is good and perfect. So we need to remember that even though it makes no sense to us whatsoever, we must march. And we must keep marching day after day. One day goes by, another passes, still a third goes by and nothing has happened. The walls still stand and it seems like we're accomplishing nothing whatsoever except wearing out our sandals. The message is keep marching. Don't ever grow weary of doing what God has commanded that you should do. Keep on keeping on.

GOD CAN DO WHAT WE CANNOT

God did in fact cause those walls to collapse when there was no explicable reason for that to happen. Why did they fall? Earthquake? Meteor strike? Faulty construction? Some sort of sinkhole undermining the foundation? None of those are mentioned. Even if they were it would be remarkable timing if the earthquake, meteor, sink hole, bad construction hit just at the time Israel finished its last circuit around the city as God had said. This was nothing but a work of God.

Let's be real clear that Israel had no ability whatsoever to bring down the walls of Jericho. None. They simply couldn't do it. In fact, they couldn't even imagine how such a thing could be done. But what they could not do, God did. Did you notice the repetition of the number 7 in this story? There were to be 7 priests marching. They were to march for 7 days. On the 7th day they were to march around the city 7 times. Do you think that was coincidental? It was not. There is a message there, and it has to do with the 7th day, the Sabbath. What does the Sabbath mean? It means that God is the creator and our lives are in his hands. Our lives totally depend upon what he provides. What God provides is enough. So the message at Jericho was that what God would provide there would be enough for the defeat of that seemingly impregnable obstacle. They had to depend upon what he provided, but what he provided was enough. God is able, he has the power to provide what we need even when it is beyond our ability.

Jeremiah 32:17 says, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and your outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you."

The human condition is a condition of limitations. No matter how great and powerful you are you still have limitations. There are some things, many things, that are too hard for you. Suppose that you are the strongest, richest, most powerful

human on the planet. Can you insure that you don't get cancer? Can you keep time from robbing you of your youth and your strength? Can you overcome gravity? Can you make another human being choose to love you? Can you choose to have the athletic ability, size and strength to make you able to play for an NFL football team? You can do a lot of things, but there are many more things too hard for you. You cannot cause the walls of a fortified city to just collapse for no discernible reason. But God can.

That verse from Jeremiah reminds us that nothing is too hard for God. He has no limitations! In Matthew 19 Jesus was talking about how it is nearly impossible for rich people to be saved. This shocked his disciples who thought the rich were the ones who were blessed by God those closest to him. Stunned they ask, "then who can be saved?" If it's impossible for those who are blessed by God to be rich, then what hope is there for the rest of us poor shmucks? In verse 26 Jesus answered, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Do you believe that? Do you believe that all things are possible with God, that with God in the equation everything is possible? This story from Joshua does not mean that God will knock down the walls of every city you encounter. He didn't do that for Israel. It does mean though that if God is there, anything is possible.

I saw an interesting blog this week written by a guy named Anthony Ashley. It was titled, "How I Shut Down Two Porn Shops." The title is intended to be a little humorous. It seems that there were two porn shops on roads that his family used and that they would drive by them nearly every day. He hated it and wanted them to go away, but what could he do about it? He recalled how when he was a kid every Sunday on their way to church they would go by a strip club with big billboards advertising its purpose. His dad had his family pray that the place would shut down. So they began consistently praying that it would close. He didn't know how long they prayed, but he remembered the day they drove by and the club was closed with a For Sale sign on the building. The club was gone. So he started praying about the porn shops. He saw them as places of addiction, spiritual oppression and dehumanization of both men and women. He prayed for 6 years that they would close. He wrote the blog because God answered that prayer. Both of those places have recently shut down. He believed that God could bring down the walls.

I want to share another story of God breaking down the walls. Kirsten Powers is a news commentator who appears often on Fox News to represent the more liberal spectrum of the political scene. After college she worked in Democratic Party

politics. She said everyone she knew, all her friends were left leaning and overwhelmingly atheist. She derided Christians as anti-intellectual bigots who were too weak to face the reality that there is no rhyme nor reason to the world. She was an impossible candidate to be a believer in Jesus. But she started dating a guy she really liked who turned out to be, of all things, a Christian. One night he came to her apartment and said he needed to ask her a most important question. He asked if she believed Jesus was her Savior. She said her reaction was “Oh, no. He’s crazy.” She said no and he asked if she thought it possible that some day she could believe it. She didn’t want to mislead him. She said no, it wasn’t possible. That was one thing that would simply never happen. He then asked her if she could have an open mind about it. He had her. She was confronted with the reality that she in fact did not have an open mind. She realized that she was at least as closed, narrow minded as those anti-intellectual bigots she despised. She agreed to try to have an open mind and to go to church with her boyfriend. She was creeped out by it, she said, but what she heard surprised her because it made so much sense. She kept going. She started reading the Bible. Eventually she concluded that the weight of evidence was on the side of Christianity, but still she felt no connection to God and didn’t want one. Then one night she awoke and she said in that state somewhere between being fully awake and being asleep Jesus showed up and said to her, “Here I am.” It shook her up. She didn’t know what to make of it. Her boyfriend broke up with her just after that but she said she was much more upset about the Jesus thing. It traumatized her.

Kirsten wrote, “I tried to write off the experience as misfiring synapses, but I couldn't shake it. When I returned to New York a few days later, I was lost. I suddenly felt God everywhere and it was terrifying. More important, it was unwelcome. It felt like an invasion. I started to fear I was going crazy.” Not knowing what to do she talked to a Christian friend who told her she should attend a Bible study. This was not at all appealing to her since she thought only weirdos and zealots went to Bible studies. Nevertheless, desperate, she agreed to go. She did so, hating it, having a knot in her stomach. In her words here’s what happened, “I don't remember what was said that day. All I know is that when I left, everything had changed. I'll never forget standing outside that apartment on the Upper East Side and saying to myself, ‘It's true. It's completely true.’ The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it. I had not an iota of doubt. I was filled with indescribable joy.” Quickly the horror of being a Christian came back and she tried to wrestle away. She says it was pointless. Everywhere she turned God was there. She said the Hound of Heaven had caught her whether she liked it or not.

God is still powerful and still active in this world. You may not know why things happen the way they do. You may feel like you are walking around the city day after day with no effect doing something that makes no sense to you. But with God all things are possible. In every situation you face there is hope because God is with you. So stay at it. Keep on faithfully doing what God has given you to do. Anthony Ashley prayed for 6 years before God showed up. Don't give up. Don't despair. With God all things are possible.