

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THE WALLS FALL?

JOSHUA 6

If you visit the city of Berlin in Germany today, you can still see sections of the infamous Berlin Wall here and there – left up as a canvas for graffiti artists, as a tourist attraction, and as a reminder of a sad chapter in that city’s history. I can still recall seeing the Berlin Wall way back in 1975 when it was still very much intact. On the West Berlin side you could view old pictures which revealed how a particular street looked before the wall was erected. I also had the opportunity to visit East Berlin. It was like entering a time machine and going back to the 1940s. Buildings damaged during World War 2 still hadn’t been demolished. Ancient street cars when Adolph Hitler was in charge still creaked along picking up passengers. East Berlin – still under the mantle of communism – seemed drab and lifeless. West Berlin felt alive, active and vital. The Berlin Wall was about the most unnatural barrier you could possibly imagine. Major highways were simply divided in two and brought to dead ends. Try to imagine a big brick wall built right down the center of Interstate 71 cutting through the middle of Columbus dividing it into two cities – east and west – and you begin to get a sense of what Berlin was like when that infamous wall separated the city in half for over 28 years – from 1961 to 1989.

Well, today’s message is about another famous wall – the wall around the city of Jericho. That walled city was a great obstacle that the people of Israel had to defeat by the power of God if they were going to fully occupy the Promise Land of Canaan. “Get What You’ve Been Given” is the title of this summer’s message series through the Old Testament book of Joshua. I’m convinced that the story of how the Israelites possessed Canaan illustrates spiritual principles that you and I can apply to our own relationship with God. Israel had been given this incredible gift as God’s people – a fertile, beautiful land in which to live. But they had to get what they’d been given. They had to march into the country itself, defeat the people who already lived there, live in the captured cities, farm the land and build their own culture. Likewise, the Bible says that you and I have been given every spiritual blessing in Christ the moment you placed your faith in Jesus and became His follower. But just like the Israelites, you and I have to get what we’ve been given. This is not somehow earning your salvation by doing enough good deeds; that’s not possible anyway. Instead, it’s fully experiencing and receiving the gift of God’s salvation. To do that we need to do some stuff; we need to defeat some enemies; and, most of all, we need to enter into the spiritually rich, full, and abundant life that God wants us to experience as His children. Along the way, you and I are going to confront some walled cities – spiritual Jerichos, so to speak. Like the old Berlin Wall, there are spiritual walls in your life and mine that are unnatural barriers. God wants to tear them down and destroy them. How does the story of Jericho relate to your life and mine? Well, first of all, it’s a story about...

GOD’S PRESENCE IN MY WARFARE

There is an important similarity between literal Jericho and any spiritual Jerichos that are present in your life and mine. It’s God’s presence that made -and makes - those walls fall. What do we know about the literal city of Jericho? It wasn’t a large city by our

standards – perhaps less than a total of 600 yards all the way around if you measured the circumference of the walls themselves. Jericho was really more of a fortress than a city. But it could not be ignored by the Israelites. If they were going to possess the Promised Land fully which had been given to them by God Himself, this Canaanite fortress and its inhabitants had to be conquered. Archaeologists tells us that the ancient fortress of Jericho was actually surrounded by two walls about 30 feet high that ran parallel to each other. The inner wall was perhaps 11-12 feet thick and the outer wall was some 6 feet thick. From a military perspective, it was considered impregnable.

Just like the literal Jericho, a spiritual Jericho is anything that stands in your way preventing you from experiencing fully the abundant spiritual life God wants you to have through His Son, Jesus. Spiritual Jerichos stand there with their great, thick, massive walls between you and all God wants you to be in Him. All of us experience outer Jerichos and inner Jerichos. An outer Jericho is something that happens outside of us – events, situations, circumstances over which we have little or no control – but they have a profoundly negative impact on your inner life just the same. I'm thinking of things like a serious illness, the death of a loved one, losing your job, your spouse deciding the marriage is over, experiencing a terrible accident, a financial reversal, or having a child who is struggling profoundly in some way. Outer Jerichos just happen – they're an inevitable part of life regardless of how good a person you are or how prepared you might be. Outer Jerichos have the power to pump enormous amounts of anxiety, grief and heartache into your life so much so that even your relationship with God begins to feel unreal. You might even question whether God is present and truly cares about you.

Have you ever wondered why God allows these Jerichos in your life? It might have been the same question some of the Israelites asked about the literal Jericho. Why didn't God just destroy Jericho before the Israelites ever crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land? He could have "nuked" Jericho miraculously just like He did the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah centuries earlier? Part of the answer of why God allows both literal and spiritual Jerichos – these walled cities of opposition – is because only by facing and defeating them will you and I ever develop an inner strength of character. Like it or not, facing and defeating Jerichos is really the only way to learn how to trust God. God can and does allow very troubling circumstances and very upsetting events into our lives because He has a larger and a loving purpose. Because He is a Father, He wants to see His kids – you and me – develop spiritual maturity. A perceptive dad doesn't step in and solve every problem in his child's life. No, he allows that child to struggle with the issue – and even fail – in order to build character.

Why doesn't God just remove Jerichos instead of making us face and defeat them? Another part of the answer is that God doesn't prevent all the effects of living in a sinful, fallen world from crashing down upon even His own children. We live in a world that is in massive, perpetual, relentless rebellion against God. The fact is that even godly people who love Jesus will sometimes face exceptionally painful and difficult circumstances that are in no way God's perfect will for them. God doesn't always step in and prevent a train wreck in your life or mine. God doesn't always step in and prevent the consequences of other people's sinful choices from causing you great pain

even if you're completely innocent and faultless. God sometimes has an unknown or undiscernible purpose in allowing what He allows in your life and mine. Some years ago now, I lived next door to a family where a beloved 9 year old daughter had been killed in a tragic diving accident. It was a nightmare for that family as I'm sure you can imagine. But somehow out of and in that experience that family was brought closer to God. Out of great pain, great good can come. God is capable of using the most terrible Jerichos of life – events and circumstances that are not His perfect will for us – for His purposes and plans. God can redeem and use just about anything if we let Him.

There are inner Jerichos as well. These are personal attitudes and behaviors that are ungodly – they're just flat out not of God and not pleasing to God in any way, shape or form. They will damage your relationship with God. Like what? The love of money and what money can buy, resentment and bitterness for some past wrong you will not let go of, an abusive temper, an addiction to alcohol, drugs or pornography, envy and jealousy of certain people, racial prejudice, lying and your ongoing attempts to justify your lies, indifference to God and things of God – just to name a few of those inner Jerichos. All of us have inner Jerichos and the Holy Spirit probably reminded you of a few of yours... right now! What's God's attitude towards those inner Jerichos? He wants to utterly destroy them just like He did literal Jericho so many years ago. Just like Jericho stood in the way of the Israelites fully possessing what God had given them, spiritual, inner Jerichos prevent you from experiencing the fullness of new life in Jesus.

That brings me to a very controversial matter raised in this story. Many people are deeply offended by God's command here that His people destroy every living thing in Jericho: men, women, babies, children, dogs, cats, cattle – everything. What is that about? Why? The culture of the original Canaanites had become so decadent, so evil, so unbelievably horrible that God finally decided to exterminate the entire culture. The religion of the Canaanites involved worshiping idols by having sex with male and female priests. Little babies were sometimes thrown into the red hot metal arms of idols – living sacrifices to appease these demonic gods. So strong was the stench and rot of sin and evil that God used His people to annihilate Canaanite culture. One reason was to keep His own people from being tempted towards the same terrible idolatry and evil.

Like it or not, what does that tell you about God? Yes, God is patient, kind and loving – not willing that any should perish – but God is also the Judge of the universe and His mercy has limits. He set His face against the literal city of Jericho – so full of ungodliness and evil - and said, "Enough. Destroy it. All of it." Understand that God has the same attitude towards whatever is ungodly, wicked, and sinful in your life and mine. God will not forever tolerate in you and me what is evil. He loves you too much to allow it or permit it. God comes to us at points in our lives and says, in effect, "That thing in you... that attitude... that behavior. Enough. Destroy it. All of it." Now notice this.... What God said of literal Jericho way back then is what He says about these walled cities of opposition to Him in your life and mine today: "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands...." (Jos 6:2 NIV) When did He say that? Was it before or after the walls actually fell? It was before. Your Jerichos are already defeated in Jesus Christ. Your battle with anger, with gossip, with lust, with resentment is already won.

What is defeated must be destroyed. What is potential must be made real. You must get what you've been given. By faith and with God's presence active and working in us spiritually, you and I are called to root out and then systematically and ruthlessly exterminate, annihilate and put to death any and every attitude or action that stands between us and God. Just like with the Israelites and Jericho, God will go before us and prepare the way, but we have to cooperate with Him.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author and defender of the faith in the 20th century, explained it like this. When he was a child he would often get a toothache. He knew that if he went to his mother, she would give him something to deaden the pain for the night and let him get to sleep. But Lewis didn't go to his mother – at least, not until the pain got very bad. Why not? He learned she did more than give him an aspirin; she also would do something more. Lewis knew she would take him to the dentist as soon as possible. He couldn't get what he wanted out of her without getting something more, which he didn't want. He wanted immediate release from pain, but he couldn't get it without having his teeth set right. And Lewis knew all about those dentists! They started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth in his mouth which hadn't yet begun to ache. Those dentists just wouldn't leave well enough alone. If you gave them an inch, they would take a mile!

My friend, God is just like that. If you give Him an inch, He will take a mile. It's as if Jesus says to you and me, "Make no mistake about it. If you let Me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that's what you are in for. Nothing less and nothing other than that. Yes, if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you don't push Me away, understand that I will see this job through. I will never rest – or let you rest – until you are literally perfect – until My Father Himself can look at you and say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with Me." That's exactly what it means to be a follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ. What is it that makes the walls fall? How does the story of Jericho relate to your life and mine? Secondly, it's a story about...

GOD'S POWER IN MY WEAKNESS.

The Bible says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Is 55:8-9 NLT) There is no better illustration of that truth than the story of Jericho. It seems as if God went out of His way to underline Israel's inability to conquer Jericho in any ordinary way by giving Joshua the most unusual battle plan ever devised. In fact, it appeared to be more like some kind of unique worship service than a military attack at all. The Ark of the Covenant – this box of gold which symbolized God's presence and power among His people - and the priests were far more prominent here than soldiers and weapons.

Jericho was sealed up tight expecting a long siege. Every day for six days, the army of Israel got up early and circled the city of Jericho followed by the Ark of the Covenant. At the end of the trip around Jericho, the priests blew their trumpets and the army went

back to where it was camped. Then on the seventh day, the army walked around Jericho seven times doing the same thing. I wonder if anyone felt a little foolish... I wonder if anyone rolled their eyes and thought to himself, "This has to be about the goofiest way to conquer a city I've ever heard of! Sometimes, I wonder about that Joshua...!" Thirteen times they marched around those immense walls. Thirteen times they were reminded of the seeming impossibility of taking the city. I wonder if they got heckled by the Jerichoites sitting up there on their great wall looking down on this very odd sight. "Yeah, fellas, out for your morning walk again today? Come on up, we'll give you some exercise! How are those feet feeling today? Oh, we really like that trumpet stuff at the end, but how about a new tune this morning?!"

That march around Jericho underlined Israel's inability to Israel. Every soldier in that Israelite army realized that if the walls of Jericho were going to come down, God would have to do it. That's the same lesson you and I have to learn in this business of getting what God has given to us in Jesus. Sometimes, we walk out ready to take on some outer or inner Jericho and we get thoroughly pasted. Often God will allow you to come face to face with your own inability in order to underline that only when and if God helps you can you ever defeat and destroy any Jericho.

The great Christian leader, Paul, had some kind of an outer or inner Jericho in his own life that he referred to as his "thorn in the flesh." No one knows for certain exactly what it was, but what Paul learned when he battled against this Jericho in his own life was profound. Paul tells us that on three occasions, he asked the Lord to remove this thorn in his flesh. But finally God said to him, "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness." (1 Cor 12:8 MSG) Here was Paul's reaction to what God said, "Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks (you could call them Jerichos!). I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become." (1 Cor 12:9-10 MSG) God's power gets released into your life and mine precisely when we face up to and admit our own inability and inadequacy.

Let's not misunderstand the principle here. God's presence and power don't allow you to get all passive and become inactive. This chapter in Joshua – Joshua 6 – is full of action, isn't it? March here! Carry this! Blow that! Shout! Charge in! Destroy! This is not a lesson in how be passive spiritually. Just like with Israel, God always gives your faith and mine plenty of things to do. "By faith, the Israelites marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days, and the walls fell flat." (Heb 11:30 MSG) It's a lesson in defeating big, scary, formidable enemies in our lives by doing things God's way. The real battle at Jericho was not about the walls of the city but about the walls that get erected in the human heart – walls that separate us from God. God wanted to do more than just overthrow the inhabitants of Jericho. God wanted to do something eternal in the lives of His people that day. He wanted their faith in Him to grow. He wanted their love for Him to grow. He wanted them to freely choose to obey Him and His instructions – to prefer His will over their own. What is it that makes the walls fall in your life and

mine? Ultimately, it is God alone. Jerichos are just too big for you and me alone. Only He can really defeat any inner or outer Jericho. So, let's learn – as the Israelites did that day – to trust God, obey God, wait upon God and then act on God's instructions when He gives them. That's what makes the walls fall.

It's been called the greatest rescue mission of World War 2. Have you ever heard of Operation Halyard? Late in that war, American bombers were sent on dangerous missions over southern Europe to cripple the Nazis' oil supplies. Hundreds of crews soared through storms of anti-aircraft shells. Many American pilots were forced to bail out from their shot-up planes. All of the airmen – some of them injured - drifted by parachute into occupied Yugoslavia, expecting to be captured or killed. Instead, on the ground, remarkable rescue teams were already getting into place. Serbian peasants tracked the path of the parachuting airmen. Their sole mission was to grab them and bring them to safety - before the Nazis arrived. At the risk of their own lives, the peasants fed and sheltered the soldiers. Now, these rescued soldiers were in friendly hands but on enemy soil. They still needed to escape. That became known as Operation Halyard – a daring mission that involved a secret landing strip and a secret evacuation plan. Amazingly, those Serbian peasants rescued every single American airman—over 500 in all. Here's the fascinating subplot to the rescue. To travel to the evacuation site, the airmen had to spend weeks following the Serbian freedom fighters, who alone knew the path to the evacuation site. The direction, the pace, and the destination were in the hands of their rescuers. The men had been saved from their enemy, but the journey had just begun. They still had to live into that freedom and fully claim it. Despite the profound language barriers and all of the obstacles they encountered, they made it.

The story of Operation Halyard sheds light on an important spiritual reality: to be rescued from something sets us on the path toward something. For the American airmen it was a journey of survival. For us it's a journey of faith. The One who saved us is now calling us to follow Him. Get what you've been given. Possess your possessions. Even though you've been snatched from slavery to sin, spiritual death and eternity in Hell, you soon discover that the Christian life isn't about an arrival; it's about an adventure. Yes, Jesus rescues us, but then He expects us to follow Him. And along that road will be some inner and outer Jerichos. You don't ignore them. You must destroy them. Those Jerichos will indeed fall in our lives. Maybe not easily. Maybe not all at once. But as we invite God's presence and His power into our lives, that's what makes the walls fall.