

The March of Silence

Joshua 6:1-21
August 19th, 2012
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Please open your Bibles with me to Joshua chapter 6 and one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament. But before we read, let me pray.

[Pray]

[Joshua 6:1-21]

If you pole non-church going people, most will have at least heard of the walls that came a tumbling down as the African Spiritual sings. Yet, as I was studying and looking at several different sources this week I was blown away by how this story has been misunderstood even in the church.

Many use the verses of this story to outline keys to spiritual victory or principles for overcoming impossibility as though if we implement certain secret steps like walking around what we want to conquer 7 times or shouting out in faith, then we can get God to help us overcome the impossible.

The problem with that kind of idea is that it treats God like a Divine vending machine seeking to manipulate Him to do what we want.

Friends that is not the Gospel, and today I have no secret steps for you, instead in today's text we get a call to obedience at all costs in response to God's command. And the thesis that I want to prove to you today is as follows:

When the doors to what God commands are shut, obedience in faith and holiness will connect us with our Saviour.

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So let's start with the first part of our thesis:

1.) When the doors to what God commands are shut...

As we get started it is essential to note the context of this chapter. Last week we looked at chapter 5 where Joshua found himself standing face to face with God.

And when Joshua asked what God wanted him to do God's first words were not words of command, but words of comfort and perspective. "Joshua I brought you out of the desert, I brought you through the Jordan River, I have brought you right up to the gates of Jericho, what makes you think I'm going to leave you now?"

God's words to Joshua in 5:15 were "remove your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy" – I'm here, I'm in command. The conquest of Canaan is My job not yours Joshua.

And only after this perspective adjustment do we get the words in chapter 6 verse 1.

[Read Joshua 6:1]

Chapter six starts out by once again establishing the impossible situation Israel finds itself in front of. Jericho is a fortress city with walls up to the sky¹ and a stockpile of supplies² to withstand siege and its gates tightly shut. Israel's opportunity for victory is dismally small.

And here we come to something interesting. Often within Christian tradition we hold to an open door theology. The idea is that God opens doors of opportunity for us and that's how we know His will. You are familiar with this thinking right?

When opportunity presents itself we say "well this must be God's will for me" but if doors shut then we console ourselves with the words "I guess it just wasn't what God wanted." Don't we do that?

But look at what is going on here.

The doors of Jericho aren't open, they are shut, the walls aren't down they are up. The impossibility is obvious, but yet God commands Israel forward.

Verse 2.

[Read Joshua 6:2]

The story of the Battle of Jericho is not a story about how we can enjoy victory over impossibility; it is a story about obedience in the face of impossibility.

And these are not the same things. God commanded Joshua to cross the Jordan River. God led Moses through the Red Sea. God told Moses to strike the rock in the desert.

Each of these stories involved impossible things, but never did God promise that we could repeat these feats in our own lives. If you stand at the shores of the Jordan there is nothing you can do to manipulate God to dry up that river. No matter how hard you pray, no matter how many times you walk around that rock shouting in the desert the Bible gives no promises that we will defeat the impossible.

¹ Deuteronomy 9:1

² They were in the middle of harvest season Joshua 3:15

Instead what we get is a promise that when God calls us to obedience He will be faithful to do what He has said He will do. The difference is the initiation of the action starts with God not us.

Paul tells us:

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” 1 Corinthians 10:13

If God commands obedience, obedience on our part is possible even if impossible stands before us.

Often we face things in our lives or as a church were God calls us forward but we see the impossibility and retreat. If we can't see a way forward, if the money isn't there then we assume God must have something else for us, perhaps something smaller.

Did you know that an African Impala can jump over 10 feet high and cover a distance of close to 30 feet each jump and yet it can be kept in zoos where the walls are only three feet high and it won't escape. The reason is that an Impala will not jump if it can't see where its feet will land.³

Isn't that like us? God I'll do whatever you want just show me what the outcome will be. I need to know that I can accomplish what you are calling me to before I will jump.

But as Christians we don't have that luxury. If we are going to be children of God we must obey the command of God. Our response cannot be “God this looks too difficult for me”, it must be “God I'll be obedient, You deal with the impossibility”.

Friends when we are called to move in obedience don't expect open doors of opportunity. Instead expect opposition and laugh in its face. The only thing that is important is the command of Christ in Scripture. Search that out and obey, leave the state of the doors to God.

2.) And this brings us to the second part of our thesis: When the doors to what God commands are shut **obedience in faith** ... will connect us with our Saviour.

Look with me at verses 3-5 and what the command of God looked like for Joshua.

³ <http://bible.org/illustration/african-impala>

[Read Joshua 6:3-5]

In these verses God lays out the plan of attack for Joshua. At a first reading it should be blatantly obvious that what God commands here is not designed to bring the walls down.

Any theory that this was a clever plot to use the sound waves generated by marching and blowing horns to collapse the walls stretches this story in a way it was never intended to be stretched.⁴ Don't go there.

The point here is not how God brought the walls down, but that it was God not Joshua who did the action. And God's call to obedience forced Joshua to admit this. All Joshua was allowed to contribute to the battle was very foolish looking obedience.

Unlike the African Impala God's children are called to jump into the unknown at the command of God.

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Hold on you say. Isn't acting when we can't see a clear path to the goal ignorant and unwise? How could God call rational people like us to that?

There is a thin line between faith and ignorance but the line is incredibly important. Faith is action done in response to the command of God while ignorance is something we come up with all on our own.

On July 19th 2010 at the Skagit Raceway just north of Seattle two crew members brought an empty 45 gallon drum out to the parking lot and put 4 gallons of methanol in it. They then attached a fuse to it and climbed on top. Their plan was to go sliding around the parking lot yelling like cowboys with a streak of fire shooting out behind them.

When the fire hit the four gallons of methanol it exploded with such force that the top of the drum landed 120 feet away and both gentlemen landed up in the Seattle hospital where one passed away the next day.

Upon recovering the man who survived learned that his buddy was the honoured recipient of a Darwin award.⁵

For those who don't know what the Darwin Awards are, they are given to people who remove themselves from the human gene pool by acts of ignorance – survival of the fittest.

As Christians we are called not to ignorance, but to faith. We are not called to think up impossible or foolish things ourselves and then set out to achieve them;

⁴ <http://www.squidoo.com/walls-of-jericho>

⁵ <http://darwinawards.com/darwin/darwin2010-07.html>

but we are called to obey God even though what He calls us to may seem impossible or foolish to everyone around. And God doesn't apologize for this.

1 Corinthians tells us:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18;22-23

The reason God calls us to acts of faith that look foolish is because the message of the Gospel does not turn us into respectful model citizens. Instead the message of the Gospel brings us to the foot of the cross and turn us into people of faith who seek the glory of God above everything else.

Friends what we are called to is crazy. It will never make sense in the world's eyes because the world cannot understand a life lived for God's glory. And that is why stories like the one we are dealing with today can never boil down to keys to live by.

Hear this, the Gospel that we are commanded to follow is not human wisdom and when followed will not result in our becoming good respectable people that the rest of the world wants to emulate.

It won't be our work ethic and happy families that draws the world to Christ. It will always be the fact that God Himself set aside His divinity to take our place dying the brutal death we deserved. That is the power of the Gospel and that will always be foolishness to the world's eyes.

But like Joshua, when we give ourselves in faith to what God commands He will bring forth the fruit He desires.

Faith isn't about understanding how our actions will accomplish what God commands, faith is about believing God will accomplish what He commands as we obey.

And here is where we get to the next part of our thesis.

3.) When the doors to what God commands are shut **obedience in faith and holiness** will connect us with our Saviour.

Obedience in holiness.

Here is where we get to the most troubling part in our text starting in verse 17

[Read Joshua 6:17-18;21]

This is an incredibly difficult text. How could a good God allow Israel to kill off an entire city of people, men, women, children and even animals?

Now I don't have any easy answers for this – actually I don't think there are any. But I do know that the only way this possibly makes sense is when looked at through eyes of faith. And that's what I hope to help us do now.

First it is essential to note that all throughout the book of Joshua we have been emphasizing the fact that this is God's story not Joshua's. He is the one who is acting, and here He is the one who is fighting. And so He is responsible for what happens here.

Several times we have referenced commentator Arthur Lewis at this point who says:

“[the book of Joshua] is...the story of how God, to whom the whole world belongs, at one stage in the history of redemption re-conquered a portion of the earth from the powers of this world that had claimed it for themselves, defending their claims by force of arms and reliance on their false gods”⁶ and dedicated it as the place where He would live with His people.

So let's look first at what God calls Israel to do here. In verse 17 God tells Israel that “the city and all that is in it are to be *devoted* to the Lord.” And this word “devoted” is the Hebrew word *cherem* which means “devoted to be killed as a sacrifice.”

Then look what God says in verse 18.

“But Keep away from the *Cherem* – the things devoted to be killed as a sacrifice – so that you will not bring about your own *Cherem* by taking any of them - The same word is used here.

Stay away from the sinful things devoted to be killed as a sacrifice because if you don't you will become one of the sinful things devoted to be killed as a sacrifice.

God takes sin seriously. People tend to be lax with sin. While I might judge you for sins you commit I am pretty lenient with the sins I find myself doing over and over again. People are like that. But God is never lenient with sin.

⁶ Lewis Arthur “The Conquest and the Ethical Question of War” in NASB Study Bible (Zondervan) 1999, pg 271.

And Archeology confirms that Jericho was an incredibly sinful city. Their religion involved child sacrifice and ritual prostitution and witchcraft.⁷ And God must destroy sin.

But God is also patient giving lots of opportunity for repentance. In fact 400 years earlier when God promised this land to Abraham in Genesis 15 He told him that not until

“the fourth generation [will your children] return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” Genesis 15:16

God was waiting, giving them a chance to repent like Rahab, but just because God was patient doesn't mean there aren't consequences for sin. The Bible tells us “the wages of sin is death.”⁸ And if we are going to live with God we must live as God commands.

But there is something else going on at a big picture level in this text that might help us clear this up.

Here is what I mean. In the Old Testament Israel's understanding of Heaven was different from our own. The emphasis was not put on life after death, like we do on living with God in the Promised Land – that was Heaven!

Now this doesn't mean that Old Testament people didn't go on to live with God after they died – Jesus assures us they did.⁹ But this wasn't what they focused on.

Now here is the parallel. In the New Testament Jesus tells us that one day all humanity will face judgment, the sheep and the goats will be separated¹⁰ and those who have placed their trust in Jesus will go on to live with God in the New Jerusalem while those who have not will enter punishment for their rebellion against their Creator in Hell.

Now I don't happen to like the fact that those who have chosen not to honour God with their lives will go to Hell, but God has given us the choice of whether we want to live our lives for Him or not and choices have consequences.

Ok, now get this, what God was doing for Israel in the Promised Land – expelling evil from His presences to make a place where He could live with His people – is an exact parallel for what He will do with all people at the end of time.

⁷ NASB Study Bible (Grand Rapids, Zondervan) 1999. Notes Genesis 15:16

⁸ Romans 6:23

⁹ Mark 12:26-27

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-46

Do you see it? Judgment day had arrived; the goats were set on their way as God made a place where He would live with His people. And a second judgment is coming when God will expunge all evil from the face of the earth and every man, woman and child who chooses to reject God will be cast out of His presence.

Friends I don't like this, or revel in this at all. But this is what the Bible says. God will not force those who hate Him to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. And those who do want to spend eternity with Him are called to separate themselves from *Cherem* - from the sin that He will destroy.

And this brings us to the final section of our thesis:

- 4.) When the doors to what God commands are shut obedience in faith and holiness **will connect us with our Saviour.**

In verse 20 we get the culmination of this story.

[Read Joshua 6:20]

Acting in faith and obedience Israel sees the fulfillment of God's promise. But walls falling down was not the point, the point of this story lies where it began in chapter 5 verse 15.

Having chosen to obey God's command in faith and holiness in spite of the foolish impossibility of it all Israel saw what Joshua saw, that they were standing on holy Ground. God was in their midst, or rather they were in God's midst – this was His Land.

And it is when we choose to obey God's commands to us in faith and holiness that we too will see God move.

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In conclusion I would like to draw out three things we need to take away from this text.

- 1.) First don't fall into the temptation of looking to the Bible for principles to follow in order to achieve great things for God or become successful happy people. That isn't what the Gospel is about; instead the Bible calls us to live in obedient response to what God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The cross will always be foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the wisdom of God.

2.) Second, if we are going to live in obedience to what God commands our greatest energy needs to be spent finding out what it is that God wants from us.

To this end I would earnestly ask you to pray for your deacons. Your deacons are men and women you have chosen to lead our church towards what God has for us as a body. In three weeks we will be heading out to Ness Lake for a spiritual retreat where we will be seeking the Lord for this very purpose. We will be praying that God will lead us and show us what it is that He wants us to do and be.

Please if you value your salvation and the future of this church pray for us.

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And if you are a deacon or a deacon's spouse then in the few weeks we have between then and now begin praying and asking God to put His heart within you. Leading God's people is an incredible responsibility and we need to have soft hearts.

3.) And finally as we need to be prepared to obey God's command in faith and holiness at all costs.

Don't look at the closed doors in front of you. Instead let's be a people of faith trusting God to accomplish what He calls us to do. Only as we obediently live in faith and holiness will we be connected with our Saviour and what God is doing in our city.