

9. From the Red Sea episode, the Hebrews writer jumped ahead forty years to the time of Israel's entrance into Canaan and its confrontation with the Canaanite city of Jericho. In that regard, he mentioned two distinct examples of faith: the faith of the Israelite people (and Joshua) in relation to the fall of the city, and the faith of the Canaanite harlot Rahab and the deliverance it secured for her and her family (11:30-31). These two instances of faith pertain to the same circumstance, and so belong together. And yet, each has its own unique dimensions and qualities, making it appropriate to treat them individually. That is the approach taken here.

- a. The first example of faith, then, pertains to the Israelite nation as it existed at the end of the forty years of wandering and testing in the wilderness. That nation wasn't the same community of Hebrews that departed Egypt following the Passover and plague of the first-born. Many children had been born during those forty years, but more importantly, Yahweh had responded to the people's relentless unbelief by prolonging their time in the wilderness until all of the adult generation who'd come out of Egypt perished (Numbers 13-14). Only Caleb and Joshua among that generation survived to enter the promised land; even Moses himself wasn't permitted to set foot in it (Deuteronomy 32:48-52).

Israel's time in the wilderness was defined by *faithlessness*, and this likely explains the Hebrews writer's decision to omit it from his narrative. It was only when the faithless multitude had perished that the covenant household was ready to take possession of the inheritance promised to their fathers. The account of Israel's entrance into Canaan is recorded in the book of Joshua, and the text notably highlights two further matters of preparation. Yahweh's pledge of the land of Canaan was His pledge to be a father to covenant children – to gather Abraham's offspring to Himself to be with Him in the place of His own habitation. *Thus entrance into Canaan was a covenantal and relational phenomenon rather than a geographical one*; Israel was entering Yahweh's holy habitation as elect covenant son to dwell with the covenant Father in His house, and thus the people needed to be fully consecrated to their covenant identity and calling. And so, immediately after crossing the Jordan River into the promised land, God required that all male Hebrews be circumcised and the entire multitude celebrate His Passover (Joshua 5:1-12). As their deliverance from Egypt had been a kind of new birth from death into life, so that new life was now to attain its goal in their intimate cohabitation with their covenant Lord and Father (ref. again Exodus 15:17). The sacred observance that forty years prior heralded the Israelites' journey toward their inheritance now heralded their reception of it.

- b. The Hebrews writer here associated the Israelites' faith with the collapse and conquest of Jericho, and so it's appropriate to consider this ancient city and its significance as the first point of Israel's possession of Canaan. The scriptural text doesn't provide many details about Jericho itself, but it does hint at an impending battle there by stressing its proximity to the Jordan River (cf. Numbers 22:1, 31:12, 33:48; Deuteronomy 32:49, 34:1-3; etc.). The best indication of the city's greatness comes from Joshua's account of its remarkable fall (Joshua 2-6).

Jericho was located just northwest of the Dead Sea about five miles west of the Jordan River. The text describes it as a *walled* city, which suggests that it was a city of some importance. Protective walls were common in the ancient Near East, but tended to be associated with more significant cities because of the cost in material and labor to build them. Even if the resources were available to accomplish such a project, only a serious legitimate need justified the expense; most towns and villages were not worth that level of defense. But Jericho *was* worth it, so much so that its walls were constructed in a way that made them nearly impregnable. It's quite possible that Jericho was one of the cities seen by the twelve spies Moses sent to Canaan shortly after Israel departed from Mount Sinai (Numbers 13:1-3). Those men returned marveling that "*the people of the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very great*" (Numbers 13:28). One thing that seems clear – the people of Jericho felt no threat whatsoever from the Israelite multitude who now were amassing east of the city.

Jericho was an extraordinarily fortified city, and this was justified by the fact that it was an important mercantile city situated on a major east-west trade route. Vast amounts of money and goods passed through it, making Jericho a vibrant and prosperous Canaanite city whose wealth and commercial success needed to be protected. Jericho's strategic and financial importance is perhaps part of the reason the city had its own king and military force on site, and its bustling prosperity was well suited to a thriving prostitution trade, among whom was a prostitute named Rahab (Joshua 2:1).

Jericho was the first city the Israelites confronted as they made their way into Canaan, and the city's proximity to the Jordan River partly explains this. But God could have had them cross the river farther north, which would have led them to other Canaanite cities. The way He dealt with Jericho, and the effect He intended it to have, indicate that this crossing point and path into Canaan wasn't random, but intentional and calculated. Israel's first test of faith in believing God for the inheritance He'd promised was a supreme test: *He was requiring them to confront one of the most fortified and militarized cities in Canaan, and to believe that they would somehow pass through impregnable walls to carry out their conquest.*

- c. This, then, was the challenge of the Israelites' faith, and the Hebrews writer stressed that their faith was instrumental in the collapse of Jericho's walls. It was also implicated in the strange phenomenon of their repeated parade around the city. The account of this is found in Joshua 6, and the text records that Yahweh directed Israel's fighting men to march around the city each day for six days, with a procession of priests carrying His ark in the center. On the seventh day, they were to circle seven times, after which the priests would sound a long blast on their trumpets. That would signal the men to give out a great shout, at which point the city walls would come down, allowing them to enter Jericho and sack it as the Lord prescribed (6:1-5). This weeklong spectacle seems to have been an act of psychological warfare directed against Jericho's king and warriors (ref. Joshua 2:8-11, 22-24, 5:1-2), but it was also an act of faith on the part of the Israelites.

First of all, Yahweh was requiring His people to believe Him for another mighty act of power. Only the Lord's direct intervention would see the massive wall of this great city fall to the ground (note Joshua 5:13-15). Many scholars believe an earthquake achieved this, and the Israelites themselves may have speculated that this was how Yahweh was going to fulfill His word. (After all, hadn't He used the sea and its power to give them victory over Pharaoh's army?) But even that sort of natural phenomenon would have to be divinely orchestrated, for a typical earthquake would have no substantial effect on Jericho's wall system. It would take a massive and violent shaking to take it down.

But Yahweh was also requiring the Israelites to demonstrate their faith *publicly* in a way that subjected them to repeated humiliation. He directed them to parade themselves before the people of Jericho as a ragged, ill-equipped force, walking the length of the city wall in slow procession carrying a strange gold box on poles with a handful of priests announcing their presence with ram's horn trumpets. And they were to do so in complete silence, as the priests' shofars drew the city's soldiers and residents to the walls to see the spectacle playing out on the plain below them. Then, after circling the city while taunts and jeers rained down on them, the Israelites were to turn away and return to their camp.

The people of Jericho knew about Israel's astonishing triumphs over Egypt and various kingdoms east of the Jordan, and it must have troubled them to see the Israelite fighting men outside their city wall. At the same time, their defenses had protected them against many attacks, and this rag-tag force appeared more comical than threatening. The Israelites must have felt the same way; the last thing they could claim was that they came across as a formidable fighting force, despite their superior numbers. They knew their strange show wasn't likely to intimidate the king and his warriors. Quite the opposite, from a human standpoint their claim on Jericho must have seemed like a spectacular fool's errand.

It would be hard to endure such humiliation even once, but Yahweh required them to endure it repeatedly over the course of a week. It would take greater resolve with each passing day to depart the camp and make their way back to Jericho, knowing what lay ahead. But more than mere resolve, the Hebrews writer insisted that it was faith that empowered the Israelites to stay the course. They continued on in this strange display by keeping Yahweh's ark and promise in sight. *He hadn't sent them out alone; He circled Jericho with them and endured the same mocking scorn.* Israel's God was with them, and He would surely keep His word.

- d. The sixth chapter of Joshua recounts the episode of Jericho's fall, and the Lord did exactly what He promised as the climax of Israel's faithful obedience to His instructions. Jericho's wall fell and the fighting men went in and took the city, slaying all the city's living inhabitants (man and beast) except Rahab and her family, and burning the city to the ground. When the destruction was complete, Joshua made the Israelites take an oath to never rebuild it; doing so would come at the cost losing one's children (6:15-26).

This raises the question of why God imposed such severe judgment on this particular city. He was giving Israel the entire land, and other cities would fall to their swords, but not to the extent of this absolute destruction that included every living thing (cf. Joshua 8:1-2, 11:1-14; etc.). God had instructed Moses to destroy all the peoples of Canaan, but His goal wasn't the death of human beings as such, but the destruction of all of the idolatrous ideas and practices of the Canaanites. The sanctuary land needed to be purged of its spiritual uncleanness in order to be a fit dwelling for Yahweh and His covenant children. Moreover, any remaining uncleanness would inevitably defile His children and draw them away from Him (ref. Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 20:10-18; cf. also Haggai 2:10-14).

This principle, then, underlies the concept of the *ban*. This concept refers to people and things that God sets apart to be destroyed, and so it is the negative component of *consecration* (consecration referring to a thing's utter devotion to the Lord). People and things can be consecrated for worship, service and fellowship, as in the case of the Israelite people, their priesthood, their sanctuary, and their offerings. Certain spoils of conquest were also devoted to Him in this way (cf. Exodus 3:21-22 with 25:1-8; ref. also Joshua 6:15-19, 7:1-26; 2 Samuel 8:1-12). But God also consecrates (sets apart) things and people for destruction. This was the case with the Canaanites and their idolatrous cultures and practices. He'd taken the land of Canaan to be His holy dwelling place, and this meant that everything within it was devoted to that end; anything that defiled, contradicted or opposed this ordination had to be eliminated (note Exodus 23:27-30, 33:1-2). This applied to the Canaanite peoples, but also the Israelites who were drawn into their corruption (Numbers 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 7:16-26, 18:9-14, 28:15ff).

Jericho was one of the most glorious examples of Canaanite culture and power, and so was eminently suited to being the *first-fruits* – the first and the best – of Canaan's devotion to the Lord. It served as the first of that consecrated offering and heralded to both Israel and the Canaanite peoples that Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, was going to bring in the rest of the harvest. He'd gathered in by His own mighty hand this splendid flower of Canaan's power, and that same hand would complete the harvest.

- e. One final consideration is the role of Israel's faith in this triumph. Some have reasoned that faith was the effective mechanism that brought down the wall of Jericho, if not the direct cause. The account in Joshua might seem to suggest such a cause-and-effect relationship, especially as the wall's collapse followed immediately upon the people's boisterous shout (6:5, 20). Indeed, the Hebrews writer's statement appears to make the same sort of suggestion: "***By faith the walls of Jericho fell down.***" But a more careful look shows that Israel's faith/faithfulness (which stood on Joshua's faith, as with Moses before him) played no causal role in what transpired at Jericho. The Israelites' enacted faith was simply their manifest ownership of God's revealed purposes and work; their faith enabled them to bring God's ordained future into the present, and so perceive the substance of what their senses could not detect (11:1).