

An Unusual Strategy For Fighting a War

Joshua 6

Over the years, there have been a number of strange, unusual strategies that have been developed to help people get an advantage over their opponent and help them win a victory. For example:

“For several years a lawyer and a doctor had regularly played golf together. They were evenly matched, and there was a keen sense of rivalry. Then one spring the lawyer's game suddenly improved so much that the doctor was losing regularly. The doctor's efforts to improve his own game were unsuccessful, but finally he came up with an idea. At a bookstore he picked out three how-to-play golf texts, and sent them to the lawyer for a birthday present. It wasn't long before they were evenly matched again.” Maybe you would have thought of such a strategy to win over a golf opponent, but I wouldn't have—before hearing this story that is.

God's strategy for Israel's encounter with Jericho isn't only unusual, but it is one that none of us would have ever thought of. We read in Deuteronomy 9:1 that the cities in Canaan “have walls up to the sky.” What would our strategy have been for tackling cities such as these? Our battle plans would have included ordinary methods and weapons of warfare like battering rams, siege ramps, & scaling ladders. Maybe we would have thrown in a measure of trickery to our plan. Maybe we would have enacted a siege in which we didn't let anyone in or out of the city until starvation began to set in. None of what we would have planned is included in God's plan. God's strategy didn't call for military genius or might on the part of Israel, but for faith in Him to win the battle.

Conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 6-12)

Joshua has led Israel into the Promised Land, but the hardest challenges are yet ahead. The nation still has to deal with the current occupants, the Canaanites. Joshua 6-12 describes how God uses Israel to wipe out these pagans from the land He has given them.

Conquest of Central Canaan (Joshua 6-8)

Israel conquers the cities in central Canaan first. This approach makes sense. In so doing, they make impossible the cooperation of southern and northern Canaan against them. In other words, they divide and conquer.

The defeat of Jericho (Joshua 6)

The first city Israel needs to deal with in central Canaan is Jericho.

The inhabitants of Jericho are afraid and the city is under lockdown (6:1)

Given the successful invasion and escape of Israel's spies, it is easy to understand why the inhabitants of Jericho took the action they did in not allowing anyone in or out of the city gates. The inhabitants are afraid Israel will find a way into their city and are doing everything they can to keep them out. They heard about what God did at the Red Sea and at the Jordan. They heard about Israel's victories over Sihon and Og. Yet, they foolishly think they can keep the Israelites and God out by use of their man made walls. Are these any less subject to the power of God than the waters of the Red Sea or Jordan River? Certainly not! How foolish! Resistance to God's impending judgment is futile. The only means of deliverance is not to put up a fight, but to trust in Him as Rahab did.

God promises to deliver the city into Joshua's hands (6:2)

Jericho's demise will be the LORD's gift to Israel, not the result of Israel's military achievement. The destruction of Jericho is at this point a 100% sure thing. In Joshua 6:2, a prophetic perfect tense verb is employed. This tense is called by some scholars the perfect of certitude. The promise of God regarding what He will do in the future—i.e. He will deliver Jericho into Joshua's hands—is regarded as being as good as done because God said it would happen. The fall of Jericho is a “done deal.”

So when Joshua is told to “see,” he is called to see with the eyes of faith. He is called to envision Jericho as already destroyed. At this point, there is no crack in the wall suggesting a weak point in Jericho's defenses, there is no indication to Joshua as to how God is going to do what He promised, but just the same, Joshua is to see Jericho as an already defeated foe based simply on the God's promise—on His Word. The LORD has already given Joshua the victory before He even reveals His plan for doing so. Praise God that His promises are that sure, that they are as good as done.

God reveals His plan for defeating Jericho (6:3-5)

Here is the plan. The armed men are to march quietly around the city once a day for six days. Seven priests are to follow them carrying trumpets of rams' horns which they are to blow as they march. Following the priests with trumpets are the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant. On the seventh day, the people are to march around the city seven times. When the priests sound a long blast on their trumpets, the people are to give a loud shout. Then the walls will collapse, enabling the men to go straight in and attack.

The people of Israel are responsible to trust God and follow His plan which involves marching, the blowing of trumpets and carrying of the ark by the priests and the shouting of all the people on the seventh day. God will take care of the rest. In other words, God will take care of the battle.

A popular song that kids will often practice when they are first learning to play the piano is “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho.” This is a nice sounding tune, but its words aren’t really true. Joshua didn’t fight the battle at Jericho—God did. Israel simply trusted God and followed His plan and then watched God do all the work.

Israel marches around Jericho’s walls (6:6-19)

Joshua and the people execute God’s plan without question (6:6-16)

The instructions are rather unusual, but the people of Israel trust God and immediately execute the LORD’s battle plan communicated through Joshua. The old Israel was known for murmuring and complaining. They probably would have said something like, “Why are we exposing ourselves to all this ridicule and danger as we march out in the open around this enemy city. Whoever heard of fighting a battle this way?” That was the old Israel. This is a new Israel. They give a totally different response than their predecessors—a response of faith.

As God instructed, on the first day’s march, a group of armed men lead the way at the head of the line. As God instructed, seven priests with trumpets of rams’ horns follow them, blowing their trumpets as they march around the city. These trumpets are not war trumpets, but priestly trumpets used to call people to worship, not to war. Following the priest is the Ark of the Covenant carried by the priests. Again, the Ark of the Covenant is prominent in this account. It indicated that the presence of the LORD was with Israel. Following the Ark of the Covenant was the rear guard.

All the time this unusual procession marches along, the only sound that is to be heard is that of the priests blowing their trumpets. The people aren’t to give a war cry. They aren’t to raise their voices. In fact, they aren’t to say a word until Joshua gives them the instruction to “shout.” Then they are to shout, but not until then.

After the first days march, the people return to camp and spend the night there. The next day, they do the same thing they did on day one all over again. Israel repeats the same ritual for six days. All that is required of them is that they put their faith in God and that they exercise that faith by doing what He says. Israel marches silently by faith, plays their trumpets by faith, walks each day by faith, and eventually shouts by faith. As we learn from Hebrews 11:30, it was faith in God that resulted in the fall of Jericho’s walls- “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.”

Day seven is different from the other days. On day seven, Israel doesn’t go back to camp after one march around. They march around the city seven times. At the end of the seventh time around, the priest’s trumpets sound a long blast and the people are commanded to SHOUT. Before we are informed about what happens next, Joshua gives the people an important reminder.

Israel is reminded that all the spoils of this battle belong to God (17-19)

The city and everything in it is to be devoted to the LORD. This devotion of everything in Jericho to the LORD involves total annihilation of every living person and animal (excluding Rahab and her family) and the placing all of its riches in the LORD's treasury.

Many at this point struggle to accept that a loving God sanctioned the brutal annihilation of the inhabitants of an entire city. At first glance, this does seem disturbing. However, upon a closer evaluation, we see that God demonstrates both His love and justice in His dealings with Jericho.

God is a loving God. As a loving God, He does not want to punish us for our sins. This love is demonstrated in Joshua 6 by His deliverance of Rahab. She trusted in the God of Israel and was delivered as the demonstration of God's love, mercy, and grace towards sinners.

While God is 100% loving all the time, He is also 100% holy and just. As a holy, just God, He cannot allow the guilty to go unpunished. The inhabitants of Jericho are guilty of great wickedness and deserving of judgment.

Deuteronomy 9:4-5 (NIV)- "After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.' No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

The wickedness of the pagans living in the Promised Land must have been especially heinous. Why do I say that? In Deuteronomy 20, Israel is given special instructions for going to war against God's enemies. When Israel marched to attack certain enemies, they are told to offer peace. If the enemy accepted this offer of peace, they could be subjected to forced labor instead of being killed. In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, Israel is specifically told not to make an offer of peace to those living in the Promised Land. They are not to allow anything that breathes to live in these cities.

The inhabitants of Jericho deserve judgment not only because of their wickedness, but also because of their rejection of God. They received all the information that Rahab did about God's work. We know this because of their fearful reactions as Israel draws near. However, instead of trusting in God, they reject Him. God does not allow the guilty to go unpunished and reserves the right to exercise judgment on the wicked when He deems it necessary. It's Jericho's time for judgment.

Not only is total destruction of Jericho important so as to execute God's justice against wicked people, but it is also important for Israel's sake. If Israel allows these people to live, God warns that they will lead Israel into apostasy.

Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 16 (NIV)- "When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you— and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession....You must destroy all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you."

Porter writes, "This isn't the cruel slaughter of innocent women and children. The Canaanites were characterized by exaggerated pagan living and immorality. Their religious worship was filled with prostitution and infant sacrifices. There was no room for passive tolerance and coexistence. Their influence would lead to assimilation and corruption of God's people. They must be eliminated."

All living things in Jericho are to be devoted to the LORD, but so are all the articles of silver, gold, bronze, and iron. The Israelites are to stay away and keep their hands off these things as it relates to taking them for themselves. They are warned of destruction if they fail to obey God's instruction. The precious treasure that the people of Israel find in Jericho is to go to the temple.

God will give the victory and therefore God will get everything

The people don't get to keep anything for themselves because they won't have done anything to earn it

Jericho is destroyed (6:20-21)

In Joshua 6:20-21, we are given a very brief summary of how the battle of Jericho took place with very little detail. The priest's trumpets sounded a long blast. The people gave a loud shout. The wall collapsed and the men of Israel charged straight in and took the city. The city was devoted to the LORD and every living thing was put to the sword. Why isn't there a more detailed account here? The brief nature of this account makes it abundantly clear that Israel defeated Jericho because God gave Jericho into Israel's hands.

Israel didn't achieve victory by their own efforts

This is God's victory

Rahab is rescued (6:22-23, 25)

God is faithful to His promise and delivers Rahab along with her entire family. In spite of her past life, Rahab placed her faith in God and was delivered from judgment. What is absolutely amazing about this deliverance is the fact that Rahab's house was a part of Jericho's wall. The rest of the wall collapsed, but Rahab's house remained standing. God's judgment is specific and thorough, falling upon all those who reject Him. God's display of grace is also specific and thorough, being extended to all those who place their trust in Him.

Jericho is burned and cursed (6:26)

The whole city and everything in it was burned and completely destroyed. So serious is God's judgment on this city that a curse is pronounced on anyone who tries to rebuild it. "Cursed before the LORD is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: 'At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates.'"

The first attempt to rebuild Jericho is recorded in 1 Kings 16:34. In the days of King Ahab, a man by the name of Hiel attempted to rebuild the walls of Jericho, and in so doing he lost two of his sons in fulfillment of the curse pronounced on the site by Joshua.

Joshua's reputation spreads (6:27)

Joshua's reputation spreads quickly throughout the land. This fame is due to the fact that the LORD is with Joshua, not because of his genius or strategy or because of the strength of Israel's army.

What does this story have to do with our life today?

In a world of broken promises, we can trust God to do all He has promised us

God promised Joshua to give Jericho into his hands and He did. Rahab was promised that she and her family would be delivered and they were. Whatever God has promised us, He will do for us as well.

Success in serving God is still the result of God's work, not our efforts

Recognizing this principle of application, the most important thing we do in service to God is not our planning, our publicity, our advertising, our campaigning, our working. To the degree we depend on these things for success in serving God as a church body, we will accomplish nothing. The most important thing we do is to trust God and obey Him.

God's way of doing things may seem strange to those around us, but let's trust Him and do things His way anyway

The way God has us to live or “do battle” will seem as strange to the watching world today as Israel's actions appeared to Jericho's inhabitants. However, we are encouraged to follow His ways just the same recognizing that these lead to tremendous blessing. Yes, we will face opposition and criticism for doing things God's way. However, as was the case with Jericho, God can handle the opposition. Knowing God is with us, that His ways are best, that He knows what tomorrow will bring, that He is strong enough to defeat any enemy that stands against us, let's trust Him and do those things He instructs us to do regardless of how strange these instructions appear to the watching world.

In our present culture, prayer is considered by many around us to be a strange way for getting things done. When we have a special time to focus on prayer as we did on this past Thursday night, I wonder how many of those around us would think of such a meeting as being no different than marching around Jericho and blowing trumpets as a plan for battle. I wonder how many would say, “Why are you doing that? What is that accomplishing?”

Focused prayer is not a strategy for ministry effectiveness that we would have thought up on our own. The strategies we tend to come up with focus on what we can be doing. God would have us to trust Him and express our dependence by looking to Him in prayer for Him to do the work. Will we trust Him and do things His way anyway even when those watching consider our battle strategy to be strange?

In a world where the majority of people selfishly look out for number one, God instructs us, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others ” (Philippians 2:3-4). The world will think it strange that we spend so much time looking out for others and so little time taking time for ourselves. Even so, will we trust God and do things His way anyway?

In our culture where sexual sin is rampant and all too often regarded as normal behavior, God instructs us, “It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6a). Our sexual purity outside of marriage and our fidelity to our spouse within marriage is regarded as strange and unusual to those around us. Will we trust God and do things His way anyway?

In a world that is characterized by retaliation, where people get back at those who hurt them and then some, God instructs us, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21). God’s ways of doing things seem strange to our “get even world.” Even so, will we trust Him and do things His way anyway?

In a world characterized by angry rage and holding grudges, God instructs us, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). The world will question, “How can you just forgive that guy after what he did to you? Why are you still nice to him?!” The world just won’t get it. Will we trust God and do things His way anyway?