

Beloved People of God,

I don't know about you, but it feels to me like it's becoming harder to be a Christian in our culture today. Maybe my grandparents would have felt the same in their day. Maybe not. But what about if that's a good thing for us as Christians? There's an old hymn that says, "Should I be carried to the sky on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?" Being a Christian is about having the tremendous comfort and confidence that our life is safe and secure through Jesus. Then from that place of comfort and security, we can live wholeheartedly for Jesus, regardless of the opposition and struggle we might face. Living for Jesus is not signing up for a life on flowery beds of ease. It's saying, "Jesus, you've saved me and made me eternally secure. Now, let my life bring glory to you, however you see fit and whatever the cost for me."

We have all faced obstacles in our lives, some of them that have a definite spiritual price attached. It could be something like being picked on at school, on the team, at work or possibly even at some church function because of your faith in Jesus. Sometimes our faith might prevent us from getting a certain job; consequently, you have a fear of all the bills you have to pay or fear of losing your job.

Some of us are more worried about the subtle enemies we face in Canada. Maybe Christians in particular worry about the things that influence our children every day. Living in a land of luxury like ours means we are tempted to find our identity in the things we have rather than in being a child of God. With all the ways our society seeks to exalt certain personal identities, the Christian story can be lost on us or our identity in Christ degraded. Worldliness also means some young people today are getting sexually active way before marriage and that's a cause of concern. We also live in a culture where a lot of people turn to drugs: pot, crystal meth, opioids and alcohol. People face all kinds of temptations today and that can be really scary. These are some of the cultural enemies we face.

In today's Bible reading, Israel is facing a big battle. Well, it's a potentially big battle. And God wants to show them that he's a really big God! He wants them to know him, believe in him and trust him to get them through this first battle in their new land. Little by little God is helping this new generation of his people see his power so that they'll live for him. God wants to teach Israel a lesson about himself when he brings them face to face with the enemy in Jericho. And we need to learn that lesson as well.

So as we watch the story unfold, we see that God gives the complete victory over Jericho as a lesson for us in judgement and in grace.

A Lesson on Judgement

We see in the opening verses of this story that God is holy; he is perfect, righteous and awesome. We read,

Josh 5:15 The commander of the LORD's army [said to Joshua], "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."

The commander represents the Lord who is holy and who makes all things holy, even his people. He desires to have a relationship with people on earth, people like you and me and those in Canaan. But the people of Jericho are busy worshiping the creation instead of the Creator. They don't recognize the holy God of Israel and the fact that the land is his in the first place.

So when we look at the situation in Jericho, we see clearly that God is coming in judgement on that city because of their sin. Not only does

Josh 6:2 ...the LORD [say] to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men," according to v.2;

in fact, when Israel entered the city, we read,

Josh 6:21 They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it--men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

You might ask, "Why did God demand the destruction of everyone and everything in Jericho?" Because Jericho represented unholiness. It stood for everything that opposed God's good ways for people. As one person wrote, "Because of their evil practices and intense idolatry, the Canaanites were a stronghold of rebellion against God. This threat to the right kind of living that God required had to be removed. If not, it would affect all Israel like a cancerous growth", making them unholy in the eyes of God. (Life Appl. St. Bible, Jos 6:21 note)

Friends, we need to recognize here that God doesn't come in judgement quickly. The destruction of Jericho repeats a pattern seen before. Remember the destruction of the flood in days of Noah, and similarly when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Abraham and Lot. These are not acts of angry aggression, a violent outburst of sort. No, they are based on God's absolute justice and holiness. God did not send the flood on the earth until the earth was severely corrupted. We read in Genesis 6:5, for example,

Gen 6:5 The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. ⁶ The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.

Likewise in Canaan, the culture and the people were filled with corruption. Wholesale immorality marked everyday life as did gross violence. It was each man and woman for him or herself. And despite their knowledge that God's people are coming their way, no one in Jericho except Rahab repented. They continued on with their godless, unholy living. We could contrast that to Nineveh in the days of Jonah when the king and the whole city repented of their sin when Jonah announced God's coming judgement.

We must appreciate that the heart of God aches when he observes the wickedness of the human race. God is holy and will not allow evil to go unchecked forever. But judgement grieves the Lord. As the New Testament tells us in 2 Peter 3:

2 Pet 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

It is safe to say then that God's heart breaks whenever he comes to the point of bringing judgement on any nation or people or person. But no nation or culture can escape judgement without turning to God. No matter how secure we think we are because we have lots of money or a strong government or anything else, no matter how strong we are or how smart, or even if we think we can do without God, one day we'll find out that we are wrong about ourselves and our false sources of hope.

There is a day coming when the whole earth will be judged. Every person—including you and me—will stand before God when Jesus Christ returns. It will be worse than the judgement on Jericho and worse than the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It will be final and eternal. That's why the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews says,

Heb 10:26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

So, judgment is coming. God is patient but he is also holy and just. However, the Day of Judgement need not be a fearful thing for us or anyone else. We must recognize that it is coming. But every day that the Lord withholds his judgement is a day of grace.

A Lesson on Grace

When we look again at the story we read, we see that God gives Israel the complete victory of Jericho not only to show the world that his judgement is coming but, more importantly, to show us that grace is available. This is the Good News, dear friends. You and I do not have to face the judgement of God with fear. Instead, we must humble ourselves before him and receive his grace.

As the story begins, Joshua meets that heavenly warrior. And in the last line of v.13, Joshua asks him,

Josh 5:13 ... "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

Josh 5:14 "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." ...

This commander won't be dragged into siding with one group of people or another. He's on the Lord's side! And if we are on the Lord's side then you need not fear the judgement.

You see, it is through the Lord that we are made holy. When the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy,"* he is teaching us that anything consecrated to the

Lord is special in God's sight. There wasn't anything about that land in and of itself that made it holy or any better than other land. It was holy because God had set it apart for his people. That's what the word holy means—*being set apart by God for a special purpose*.

Being a Christian means you are set apart by God. He doesn't take you to himself because you are intrinsically better than anyone else. God receives you as a new person, perfected through faith in Jesus. Because of Jesus Christ our sins and rebellion—which result in judgement—are paid in full. Jesus makes us holy in the eyes of God. That's what we receive by the grace of God. We don't deserve it. No one does. We all deserve judgement. But God through Jesus makes a new life available to us and for us by his grace. Because of Jesus, God is always for us, not against us.

That's what we see happening outside of Jericho as well. Israel has to trust that the Lord is for them. Trust him to give them the city. God tells the people to march around Jericho. But the focal point of the procession is not a mighty army but the priests carrying the ark of God's covenant. In that way, the Lord shows us that the victory will come in his strength alone, not through our power and ingenuity or strategy. God alone will give Jericho into Israel's hands because it's his to give to them. When one nation turns against God and pursues wickedness the way the Canaanites were doing, then it is the Lord who can not only judge them but give the land to someone else. And that's what he did for Israel.

Josh 6:16 The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!"

And as we read, those mighty walls—as thick as 25 feet or 7 metres—just crumbled and Israel walked right in.

In much the same way, we need to know when we are nervous or fearful because we don't have what we think we need or we feel like our enemies are too big, the Lord who own everything will supply all that we need according to his perfect plan. He's on our side! The God who created the world in 7 days by his word, showed Israel after 7 days of simply doing what he said—marching around Jericho—that he is their Redeemer and Provider. He speaks the word, like he did in Creation, and it is done. He gives his people all they need according to his perfect plan for them. And often he gives us more than we need.

Look at Rahab. Rahab is a picture of what each of us really is at our core. We look at her as a prostitute and think, "Now that's pretty bad." But that's the good news for us. If the Lord is willing to spare Rahab and her family from his judgement because she turns to him in faith, then he'll spare us from the judgement too when we turn to him in faith. This is what Jesus makes possible for us and what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper today. Grace. All grace.

And it just keeps coming. God doesn't only save Rahab and us; he even enfolds us into his family too. Listen to what Joshua 6:25 says:

Josh 6:25 But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho--and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

She was taken into God's family to become one of his people. She's adopted into the covenant family where Jesus is the head. He is Lord and he directs our lives. He ensures that God is for us!

Rahab's welcome into the family of God reminds us that we are blessed to be part of the Church, God's people. We should cherish this gift and embrace it. Embrace one another. Moreover, Rahab's welcome reminds us to welcome fellow-sinners into our lives, our church, and our homes so that they may know the welcome of Jesus and the blessing of belonging to Christ with us. If there's one thing that stands out on Pentecost Sunday, it's that God brought thousands of different kinds of people into his family when he poured out the Holy Spirit. Rahab discovered that God's grace is found in community, in God's family. Yes, it's ours because of Jesus but it flows through his body, the church, as well.

Dear friends, the holy God who called Joshua to take off his sandals at the edge of the Promised Land was saying that the entire land is to be holy to the Lord. In response to God's grace, it is the same for Christians today. Every part of our lives must be considered holy to the Lord. We are set apart by God. In Jesus, we are consecrated—set apart—for service to God. We are called to be different from the world in which we live. To be a spirit-filled and Holy Spirit empowered light and influence. We have to fight the forces of sin and unholiness in our own hearts and the world that surround us each day. And we can do that in the assurance that God is giving us all we need, regardless of the enemies we face.

We can move ahead in confidence. Amen.