

# Winning Strategy

GOD GAVE HIS PEOPLE VICTORY WHEN THEY  
TRUSTED AND OBEYED HIM.

Our session's title is an interesting one, "Winning Strategy." What was the "winning strategy" of Joshua at Jericho? It certainly wasn't a military strategy. Instead of military tactics, the early chapters of Joshua are filled with ritual acts: processions, constructed memorial monuments, circumcisions, celebratory meals, and ceremonial marches. After Israel crossed the Jordan and observed the rituals of circumcision and Passover, they marched around Jericho following a highly prescriptive order, once a day for six days, followed by seven times on the seventh day. On the seventh day, there was almost no military engagement, just a military mop-up. By the time the walls tumbled, Jericho was already done for.

In Romans 12:1, Paul used the Greek word for "liturgy" (translated "worship") in an extraordinary way. We get our English words "logic" and "liturgy" from two Greek words from verse 1. Paul urged Christians to present their physical bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Then he said, "this is your true worship." The Greek literally can be translated, "this is your logical liturgy." Liturgy does not just happen on Sunday. Our everyday acts of devotion and sacrifice become habits and those rituals can change our character. Ultimately, all Christian formation is counter formation that goes against the grain of our secular cultural rituals. Think about an athlete's rituals. His (or her) physical training often involves doing the same thing in set patterns, over and over again according to a highly structured formula. These rituals have a purpose, changing that athlete to be the person he hoped to become.

This week's focal text recounts the battle of Jericho, the first military engagement fought by Israel during their conquest of Canaan. It highlights that victory did not merely come from military might, but by obedience to God's specific instructions. From beginning to end we observe rituals that Israel followed to the letter. God's people placed their faith in God's promise that He would give the land as a gift to Israel.

## Joshua 6:1-27

Joshua 6:1-27 paints the larger context for the battle of Jericho. The instructions for sacking Jericho are highly detailed and repetitive. Even in ancient times this repetition was so noticeable that the Greek translation of the Hebrew original for this chapter is quite a bit shorter, editing out some of the repetition of these ritual enactments.

In verses 1 through 5, Jericho is locked up tight: “strongly fortified” (“shut up inside and outside,” ESV; “securely barred,” NIV). The same Hebrew word is used in Joshua 2:5 and 7 for the locked city gates that shut the spies in. Shut gates constituted a physical barrier, just like the Jordan River was a geographical barrier (3:15). These locked gates presented a dilemma to the Israelite army. The city was highly fortified with a massive wall and complex gate structure. How would Israel’s army ever enter such a fortified city?

The Lord spoke to Joshua, His chosen leader, for the fifth time (1:1; 3:7; 4:1; 5:2; 6:2). God directed Joshua’s every step. The Lord said, “I have handed Jericho, its king, and its best soldiers over to you” (6:2). The battle’s outcome had already been determined by God. The land belonged to God and God alone. God’s gift of the land was an act of grace. This theme of God giving the land recurs over and over in Joshua (1:2-3,11,13,15; 2:9,24; 6:2).

The Lord revealed to Joshua what his next steps would be. First, there was a command, “March” (6:3). But not like soldiers typically march on the battlefield. Israel’s army was to march like soldiers would march in a parade (v. 3). Ritual enactments and military movements dovetail together. Seven priests were to carry seven rams’-horn trumpets. The priests and soldiers would march ahead of the ark (v. 4) This prescribed order was to circle the city once a day for six days (v. 3). On the seventh day Israel’s warriors marched around Jericho seven times while the priests blew the horns, providing the signal to shout (vv. 4-5). After this, the walls would simply collapse (v. 5).

Verses 6 through 11 narrate what happened on day one of the mission. Joshua summoned the priests and the troops and gave them specific instructions. Verse 7 includes three verbs: “move forward,” “march,” and “go ahead.” There was to be no shouting on day one. After marching around the city once, they all returned to Gilgal (vv. 10-11).

## Instructions Obeyed (Josh. 6:12-14)

On the day before the military operation began in earnest, Joshua gave instructions to two groups: the priests and the troops (vv. 6-11). Israel obeyed these instructions (vv. 12-14). Up to this point, Israel had been committed to getting out of Egypt and journeying to the border of the promised land, but not committed to entering the land (Num. 13-14). But now, this new generation stepped up and believed God. They followed God's rigorous instructions to the letter.

### VERSES 12-13

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**Joshua got up early the next morning. The priests took the ark of the LORD, and the seven priests carrying seven rams' horns marched in front of the ark of the LORD. While the rams' horns were blowing, the armed men went in front of them, and the rear guard went behind the ark of the LORD.**

Verses 12-13 describe day one of the assault. Early in the morning, **seven priests** carrying **seven rams' horns** led the way, followed by **the ark of the LORD**. Just like the significance of the twelve representatives from the twelve tribes choosing twelve stones, we now see seven priests following a prescribed seven-day ritual. The number *seven* often means completion or fulfillment. Creation itself was completed in seven days (Gen. 1:1-2:3). These priests marched **in front of the ark**. Why were the priests stationed first? So the people could see this event as an act of their God. And as the priests marched, they blew the rams' horns. While the rams' horns were blown, some of Israel's **armed men** went in front of the ark and the priests while the **rear guard** followed behind the ark. Precision, order, and repetition characterize this ceremonial battle array.

### VERSE 14

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**On the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.**

On days two through six, Israel **marched around the city** once each day then returned to the camp. Repetition may have aroused fear and uncertainty from the city's residents. Remember these residents had years and even decades of advanced warning, because Israel had lurked

just outside Canaan for forty years. During that time Israel's reputation blossomed as they had successfully come out of Egypt and defeated the Amalekites and the kings east of the Jordan.



### Explore Further

Read "Jericho, A Strategic Locale" on pages 292–293 in the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible* and "Jericho (OT)" on pages 871–872 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What was the strategic importance of the city in the period of the conquest?

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## Victory Assured (Josh. 6:15-19)

The theme of God's faithfulness permeates this narrative. God's presence with Joshua, the capture of the city, and the rescue of Rahab demonstrate God's faithfulness. God's people can discover the reality of God's promises when they obey God's commands. As Christians, Christ the warrior overcame our ultimate foe, death itself (1 Cor. 15:55-57). Christ's resurrection is our only sure hope for eternal life (John 11:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:20-23).

### VERSES 15-16

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**Early on the seventh day, they started at dawn and marched around the city seven times in the same way. That was the only day they marched around the city seven times. After the seventh time, the priests blew the rams' horns, and Joshua said to the troops, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city."**

**The seventh day** started exactly as the first six. It began with an early morning march **at dawn**. But on this day, instead of marching around the city once as was done on the first six days, Israel marched **seven times**. After the seventh loop around the city, the priests **blew their rams' horns**. Joshua commanded the troops, **"Shout! For the LORD has given you the city."**

Why the trumpets and the shouting? In the Bible, trumpets warned of imminent threats (Rev. 8:7,8,10,12; 9:1,13). Trumpets preceded announcements and were used as signals (Lev. 25:9; Rev. 10:7; 11:15). And of course

trumpets called people and armies to battle (2 Chron. 13:12,14-15). Shouting was often associated with military attacks (Judg. 7:20-22; 1 Sam. 17:52; Isa. 42:13). Additionally, we sometimes see the non-military use of shouting as a shout of praise to God for His marvelous works (Pss. 95:1-2; 98:4-6).

One abiding truth in this verse lies in Joshua's words, "*The LORD has given.*" This phrase returns once again to the recurring theme of the land as God's gift. The summary at the end of the book of Joshua tells it all with four lively verbs, "So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there" (Josh. 21:43). Notice they did not fire a single shot to bring the wall down.

## VERSE 17

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**"But the city and everything in it are set apart to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and everyone with her in the house will live, because she hid the messengers we sent."**

**But** signals a caveat or warning to this promise that the Lord gave Israel the city. Joshua warned the Israelites that **the city and everything in it** were to be **set apart to the LORD for destruction** [*herem*]<sup>1</sup>—the irrevocable giving over of things and people for annihilation. This jaw-dropping command presents one of the most difficult aspects of the Old Testament for modern readers. It echoes God's command in Deuteronomy 9:5 to drive out all the nations from the land. The expression "Holy War," while often used regarding *herem*, is not found in the Bible so it is best to avoid that designation for what is going on here

What are we to make of this concept of dedicating entire cities to annihilation? How are we to understand the wholesale destruction of an entire city? First, this command shows that these battles were not for profit (Num. 21:2-3). The intent was to purge the land of the threat of idolatry. God's righteousness and His demand that His people be holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7,26) as He is holy could not happen if the Canaanites were allowed to remain among His people. The command was intended to deal with the entire population once and for all rather than have battles and threats to religious fidelity for generation after generation. Israel struggled with idolatry for centuries. God later allowed other nations to destroy His own people for the very same reason that the Canaanites were driven out, their idolatry. In the very next chapter, God used the same language against Israel (Josh. 7:12). God's justice is impartial, and it is a distortion to say God was always for Israel.

Second, as Christians it is important to evaluate this command to set apart the city of Jericho for destruction in light of the New Testament. The New Testament absolutely teaches that God reserves judgment for those who resist Him. But Christians are not the instruments for God's judgment. In Matthew 5:44-45, Jesus presented a very different ethic regarding enemies, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In the New Testament, resistance is not violent resistance. Furthermore, the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. God's love for all humanity is not just a New Testament concept (Isa. 49:6; Jer. 31:3; Jonah 3:8-10).

Third, realize that most Old Testament battles were not *herem* wars. The patriarchs, for example, did not engage in any kind of conquest. Abraham went out of his way to purchase the land he needed. He did not take any land through military engagement. Isaac squabbled with the locals about the ownership of wells. He avoided conflict by moving from place to place to find water that had not been already claimed by others. The prophets repeatedly urged Israel not to rely on military strength. So, what we see in the early chapters of Joshua "is only one aspect of God's plan for nations."<sup>1</sup> This unique command was not meant to be a model for Christians to war against unbelieving cultures. God's plan for the nations includes mercy for those nations (Rev. 7:9-17). In sum, the military strategy in Joshua was limited and unrepeated. The concept of *herem* does not condone ethnic cleansing, but emphasizes giving absolute allegiance to God.<sup>2</sup>

#### VERSE 18

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**"But keep yourselves from the things set apart, or you will be set apart for destruction. If you take any of those things, you will set apart the camp of Israel for destruction and make trouble for it."**

The Israelites were to keep themselves **from the things set apart** [*herem*, "devoted" things] for destruction, or they would be **set apart for destruction** themselves. Any person who took the spoil of battle would **make trouble** for themselves and for the entire camp of Israel.

#### VERSE 19

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**"For all the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, are dedicated to the LORD and must go into the LORD's treasury."**

The items specified that were forbidden for Israel's soldiers to keep for themselves included articles of **silver, gold, bronze, and iron**. They were all dedicated to the Lord and were to go into **the LORD's treasury**. Only these metal objects were saved for the treasury. Everything else was to be destroyed.

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### **Explore Further**

Read "Holy War" on page 761 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Also read Psalm 105:44. Why would a loving God order the wholesale extermination of the nations living in the promised land? How did Israel serve as an instrument of God's judgment?

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## **Walls Destroyed (Josh. 6:20-21)**

The battle itself is told with the utmost brevity, a mere two verses. The narrative devotes more time to ritual preparation ahead of time and follow up afterward. This tells us something. This victory was predetermined by God.

### **VERSE 20**

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**So the troops shouted, and the rams' horns sounded. When they heard the blast of the ram's horn, the troops gave a great shout, and the wall collapsed. The troops advanced into the city, each man straight ahead, and they captured the city.**

Verse 20 basically recapitulates verse 5. **The troops shouted**, and when the rams' horns blew, **the troops gave a great shout**. The brief summary says it all—**and the wall collapsed**, a mere three words in Hebrew. After the collapse, **the troops advanced**, and **they captured the city**.

Jericho's wall, like many others in the region, was a double-walled structure, a stone retaining wall with a second wall made of mudbrick. The two walls provided additional strength against invasion.

For Christians, Jericho represents a metaphorical stronghold as well. A stronghold can be a past hang up, a recurring sin, or a future desire. Second Corinthians 10:4-5 promises that "the weapons of our warfare . . . are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds."

The battle is the Lord's. But our own Jerichos must be faced. We must not leave our untaken strongholds to the next generation.

#### VERSE 21

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**They completely destroyed everything in the city with the sword — every man and woman, both young and old, and every ox, sheep, and donkey.**

The Israelites **completely destroyed** with the sword everything that breathed. In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, God commanded Israel to not let any living thing survive among the cities He was giving them as an inheritance. The reason for this command is also as explicit, “so that they won’t teach you to do all the detestable acts they do for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God” (Deut. 20:18). Such an austere command was not motivated by ethnicity but by morality.

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#### **Explore Further**

What are the strongholds in your life that need to be brought down like the walls of Jericho? Commit to praying every day that God would enable you through His power to bring down those strongholds.

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### **Promises Kept (Josh. 6:22-25)**

The two men who had scouted out Jericho on behalf of Israel kept their promise. They brought Rahab and her family out of the demolished city and settled them outside the camp. Because they kept their promise, Rahab and her family were saved from certain death.

#### VERSES 22-23

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**Joshua said to the two men who had scouted the land, “Go to the prostitute’s house and bring the woman out of there, and all who are with her, just as you swore to her.” So the young men who had scouted went in and brought out Rahab and her father, mother, brothers, and all who belonged to her. They brought out her whole family and settled them outside the camp of Israel.**

Joshua instructed the two scouts to go and rescue **Rahab** and her family, **“just as you swore to her.”** Hebrews 11:31 says, “By faith Rahab the prostitute welcomed the spies in peace and didn’t perish with those who disobeyed.”

Israel settled Rahab and her family **outside the camp of Israel**, a clear note of separation. The remains of sacrificial animals were burned outside the camp (Ex. 29:14; Heb. 13:11). Lepers and the ceremonially impure lived outside the camp (Lev. 13:46). Criminals were executed outside the camp (24:10-16). In a fascinating parallel, the New Testament tells us that Jesus Himself suffered by becoming a sacrifice “outside the gate” (Heb. 13:12). Then the writer of Hebrews urged believers, “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing his disgrace” (Heb. 13:13; see Matt. 27:31-35). Christians are urged to share in the sufferings of Christ (Rom. 8:16-17; 1 Pet. 4:12-17).

How did Rahab transition from living outside the camp of God’s people to being listed in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5)? Rahab and her family are evidence that the ban was not absolute. Indeed, the salvation of Rahab is as important to the narrative as the destruction of Jericho. Over the long term, Rahab was eventually made a part of the family of God. The New Testament affirms her cherished place in the family of God.

#### VERSE 24

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**They burned the city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD’s house.**

Verses 24-25 provide a key summary of what happened that seventh day. The entire city was **burned**. The precious metals were saved. The precious souls of Rahab and her family were also saved. The **silver, gold, bronze, and iron** were placed in **the treasury of the LORD’s house**, the tabernacle. The Hebrew word for “treasure” also took on a symbolic meaning. In Exodus 19:5, Israel is called God’s “possession” [“treasured possession,” ESV, NIV].” In the New Testament, Paul wrote of the treasure of God’s revelation in Christ deposited in the lives of ordinary people, in “earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7, KJV). Jesus urged His disciples to store up treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

#### VERSE 25

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**However, Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, her father’s family, and all who belonged to her, because she hid the**

## **messengers Joshua had sent to spy on Jericho, and she still lives in Israel today.**

In light of Rahab being settled “outside the camp” (v. 23), this verse indicates that this marginalization was overcome by future events. Rahab eventually ceased to be a Canaanite. She was given a completely new identity. There would be no distinction between her and the rest of the people of Israel. **“She still lives in Israel today.”**

The most likely way for this to happen was through intermarriage. Deuteronomy 7:1-4 minced no words about refusing to allow Israel to intermarry with the inhabitants of Canaan. Yet the very first person they encountered in Canaan likely married into God’s family. Rahab was integrated into Israel. She would become the great-great grandmother of King David. Rahab appears in Jesus’s genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 1:1-16).

Joshua uttered a curse on anyone who undertook the rebuilding of Jericho (Josh. 6:26). Centuries later, during the reign of King Ahab (874–853 BC), Hiel of Bethel rebuilt the city and reaped the curse. His firstborn son Abiram died when Hiel laid the city’s foundation, and his youngest son Segub died when he set up its gates (1 Kings 16:34).

Lastly, the text restates what became abundantly clear to Israel and the neighboring nations. “The LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land” (Josh. 6:27).

Jesus is a light to Gentiles. Jesus’s commission is to make disciples of all nations. God in Christ broke through all ethnic and racial barriers. The redeemed multitudes in the book of Revelation attest to this (Rev. 7:9). At the time when God creates a new heaven and earth (21:1), humans will once again eat from the tree of life (22:1-2). Some of the Bible’s last words attest that the leaves of the tree of life are “for healing the nations” (v. 2).



### **Explore Further**

- Read the articles “Canaan” on pages 256–261 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*, and “Who Were the Canaanites?” on pages 822–825 in the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible*. What was it about Canaanite religion that seduced Israel to follow their gods?
- What kinds of various people groups made up the people of Canaan?

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1. Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, vol. 6, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 146.  
2. David G. Firth, *Joshua*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 136.