

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

A Tale of Two Cities – Last week we discussed the ceremonies of redemption remembered and applied on behalf of the generation of conquest. This week we will examine two of the first cities conquered in the land of promise and discuss the similarities as well as differences in how the conquest of these cities occurred. The portion of scripture used for today's lesson is Joshua chapters 6 through 8:29. In these passages of scripture we learn of the very different experiences of the capture of Jericho and the conquest of Ai. Both cities were strategically located along the Jordan River valley; however, Jericho was at the entrance of the valley and Ai was in the foothills. Jericho was a fortress, Ai was apparently less fortified. There transpired a series of events prior to the taking of the City of Ai and shortly after the fall of Jericho that would adversely impact Israel's ability to be successful in their first campaign against Ai. We will explore the conquest of both cities as well as the intervening events with harmful repercussions below.

Part One: The Fall of Jericho. – We know from the account of Rahab and God's reputation that preceded the destruction of the City, that the inhabitants of Jericho were terrified of the covenant people. Again, we recall the words of Rahab, "...the fear of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you..." (2:9), for this reason the city was shut up and prepared for a siege. 5:1 states, "Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None came out and none came in." It was in this context that God instructs Joshua of the specific, supernatural manner in which he would deliver the City into the hands of the people. We read, "And the Lord said unto Joshua, 'See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the rams' horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him'" (6:2-6).

According to archaeologists¹, the ancient city of Jericho had an outside wall and an inside wall. This is more than likely what is meant by the phrase, "...Jericho was shut up inside and outside..." Both walls protecting the interior of the city were heavily fortified. Joshua received the very detailed battle plans from God, plans that defied all human reasoning. Israel was to march about the city of their enemy for seven days. The first six days they were to do nothing, say nothing, and make no noise. They were simply to march in military formation and then return to their camps. James Montgomery Boice is correct to point out that, "The first step in preparation of the people for this climactic week was the

¹ <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/05/Did-the-Israelites-Conquer-Jericho-A-New-Look-at-the-Archaeological-Evidence.aspx>
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command to keep silent.”² This would have undoubtedly proven a near impossible task for an army the size of the army of conquest. For a city that was no more than seven to ten acres in size (according to archeological remains), the thousands of Israel must have formed layers of marching display, all following the ark of God’s presence. On the seventh day of their march, they were to march seven times around the city (a total of forty-nine times around the city). After their seventh time around, the priests were to blow on the trumpets of rams’ horns and the people were to shout with a great shout. This process required obedience to God, and faith in his character. God had already demonstrated his mighty power to this new generation by causing the waters of the Jordan to miraculously depart before them. Their very existence and presence in the land was the result of a miracle covenantally promised by God to their forefathers. They had recently (at Gilgal) put the sign and seal of the covenant in which God promised to give them the land on their bodies. Now, they were tasked with obeying God in the shadow of the enemy. How strange this all must have seemed to the people of God as well as those observing from within the walls of the city.

According to the author of Hebrews, the walls of Jericho fell down because of the faith of God’s people. Hebrews 11:30 states, *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after having been encircled for seven days.”* To draw a pastoral application from this account, we know that for the OT church as well as for us today, faith is the only means by which the battles against the world, flesh and devil are triumphant. Faith, not in an outcome or a desired event, but faith in the good character of God who commands and requires obedience on the part of those who will serve him, this is the heart of the believer’s life of victory. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith comes by “hearing” God’s word. To hear means we must listen, to listen often means that we remain silent. Silence in worship as well as in our own prayer time before God is an undervalued virtue. It is a pre-requisite for listening to God and others. Without silence, we will be overwhelmed by the voices of the world around us and fail to listen to the Word of God.

However, silence, commanded by God during the first six days, was broken on day seven after the seventh trek around the city. The people shouted and a great miracle happened: the wall fell flat and the people were able to walk forward into the city. Such a deliverance can be attributed to the might or military genius of no man, but solely to the wonder working power of God.

Part Two: The Grip of Babylon – According to our text, the city of Jericho was to be utterly destroyed, none of it was to be kept back for spoil. Joshua told the people of Israel, *“...the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent. But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a camp for destruction and bring trouble upon it. But all silver and gold and every vessel of bronze and iron, are holy to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord”* (6:17-19). The reason here given for the complete destruction of the city was because it belonged to the Lord, the city and everything in it. It was *“...devoted to the Lord for destruction...”* The reason for the city and all therein being devoted to the Lord is a subject of speculation for ministers and theologians alike; however, it is likely that it had to do with the fact that Jericho was the “first-fruits” of the land of Canaan. Jericho was the first city during the conquest of the land covenantally promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that God delivered into the hands of his people. This is not to say that the kingdoms of Sihon and Og on the other side of Jordan were not delivered by God into the hands of Reuben, Gad and

² Boice, James Montgomery. *Joshua, An Expository Commentary*, pg. 52
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Manasseh, but the land on the other side of the Jordan was not the historical boundary of the land of promise. The river Jordan marked the historical boundary of the land of promise. Therefore, in the truest sense, Jericho was the first-fruits of the conquest of the land. According to the law of God, upon entering the land of promise and for each subsequent year thereafter, Israel was to refrain from eating of the food which they planted until they had brought the first-fruits of the land as an offering to God. Leviticus 23:9-11a, *“And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted.’”*

This verse demonstrates what was required for Israel to take possession of the land of promise and be accepted by God. The first-fruit of all their harvest belonged to God. In a similar vein, it has been argued that the conquering of the city of Jericho was the first-fruits of their conquest, and for this reason all within the city was devoted to destruction. Although I believe this to be a correct interpretation of the text, there is more here that we can observe in light of the events that followed.

Shortly after the fall of Jericho, Israel continued their campaign by seeking to destroy the city of Ai, a city key in taking control of the Shephelah (hill-country) surrounding the middle of the land of Canaan. Initially, Joshua, optimistic from recent success and confident that God was with them as he had promised, sent fewer men (3,000) to conquer the City instead of the entire fighting force of Israel. However, much to Joshua’s surprise, the men of Israel fled before the enemy and thirty-six were killed. This provoked Joshua to tear his clothes and fall on his face to the earth before the ark of the Lord. God answers Joshua by saying, “Get up!” he informs the downtrodden leader that Israel has sinned and taken of the things devoted to the Lord for destruction. Consequently, they too have become devoted to the Lord for destruction. Herein lies a profound OT principle: claiming for one’s self and using for one’s own benefit what rightfully belongs to God results in judgement from God who consecrates what is to be set apart. Israel became accursed (to use the KJV) because one member of the community had chosen to retain what should have been given away. What should further be noted is the consequence on the community of faith as a result of the actions of one man. Sin is all-pervasive with exponential consequences. The sin of one or many can affect the well-being of the entire community. Note also that Achan, the perpetrator of the sin was either not one of the 3,000 chosen to fight against Ai or he was most certainly not one of the thirty-six who dies at the hands of the enemy. It might be asked by modern man who thinks himself more righteous than God, “Is this just? What did the thirty-six who fell by the hands of the enemy do to deserve death? Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” We see here that God deals with his people consistently. Just as one man’s obedience can bring a blessing on the entire covenant community, so too can one man’s disobedience bring a curse.

So, Achan sinned. When search was made, it was discovered that Achan of the tribe of Judah was the offender in Israel. What was his offence? Let’s examine more closely what scripture says to gain further insight into the nature of Israel’s curse. In 7:20 we read, *“And Achan answered Joshua, ‘Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them.’”* This confession is telling. It is no surprise that the silver and gold would have been appealing to this man, and he might have thought, “What does the tabernacle (God) need with all this wealth? Surely it would benefit me more than God.” The beautiful cloak from Shinar continues to reveal what was in Achan’s heart. It is interesting to observe that Shinar is the land in which Nimrod built his cities. It later became the kingdom of Babylon, but was first called Babel according to Genesis chapter 11. You

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will recall when we were studying the Pentateuch that there is a motif reoccurring throughout the five books of Moses contrasting the city/kingdom of God with that of man. We see here represented an emblematic piece of cloth that attests to the fact that Achan had embraced the culture of his day (represented by a garment from Babylon) instead of engaging the culture in the manner commanded by God, i.e. utter destruction. It is helpful to point out that the desire for the Babylonian garment is not in and of itself wrong, but the desire for such a garment (or anything of greater or lesser value) more than the desire to serve and obey God is the heart of idolatry and will bring the just judgment of God on any community of faith. Can it not be said as we observe the grip of materialism present within our own culture that the extent to which the church seeks to become culturally relevant through compromising the truthful teachings of scripture, can be reflected in the spiritual shallowness and indifference displayed throughout much of the evangelical world? This is not to say that the church is called to escape culture, but rather to engage it. The perimeters of cultural engagement are here well defined by the standard of obedience to the timeless truth of God's Word.

Part Three: The Conquest of Ai – After the stoning of Achan, the one who troubled Israel, Joshua is commanded by God, *“Do not fear, and do not be dismayed. Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land”* (8:1). Unlike with Jericho, no specific battle plans were given. No restrictions on the spoils were made. Joshua was simply instructed to destroy the men of the city, their gods and the king, the rest was left up to Joshua. Of course, Joshua made plans confident that God was among him, and with an increased awareness of the need to remain faithfully obedient to the Lord. Joshua set an ambush behind the city and planned to attack from the front with only a portion of his men. He feigned defeat in the same manner as at the first and then turned on the men when he had drawn them away from the city. The men of Ai were enclosed before and behind. More than 12,000 men and women were put to the sword and the city of Ai was completely destroyed.

There is no reason to believe that Israel was not allowed to take the spoil of the city, unlike their battle against Jericho. The absence of the divinely mandated plan of battle would also become normative throughout the remainder of the campaign. What do the differences in the manner in which these two cities were defeated tell us? Francis Schaeffer states, *“The sequence of events at the fall of Ai was completely different from what had happened at Jericho. At Jericho there had been a miracle: the walls had fallen. At Ai, there was no miracle. When a Christian falls into the idea that because Jericho has been taken one way, Ai must be taken the same way, he has stopped thinking of God as personal.”*³ As we examine the accounts given of these two cities we should bear in mind the person-hood of God, and seek to follow his guidance through the mundane areas of life without requiring supernatural demonstrations to believe. We should also be aware of the seriousness of unrepentant sin in the life of a believer. James Montgomery Boice aptly states, *“If the story of Achan and the defeat of the Jewish armies at Ai means anything to us, it must mean that sin cannot be tolerated in the Christian life.”*⁴

Conclusion: The tale of the two cities of Jericho and Ai is significant for the OT church and the NT church alike. We see here a covenant-keep God who is working his plan of redemption throughout history in a very personal way. He accommodates humanity in our state of finitude and weakness, but he calls us to a higher calling, one in which we have the right to become the children of God (John 1:12).

³ Schaefer, Francis. *Joshua, And the Flow of Biblical History*. Pg. 121.

⁴ Boice, James Montgomery. *Joshua, An Expository Commentary*, pg. 62
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