

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

¹⁴ *"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord^a have for his servant?"*

¹⁵ *The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

^{6:1} *Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.*

² *Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in." ... When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. (Joshua 5:13-6:5, 20)*

Triumph with the Lord!

Some things seem so hard that you don't want to even start them. There's a section of my backyard where there used to be a deck. The deck is long gone and in its place there's a large weed patch. I want to level it out and plant grass there, but I haven't gotten it done yet. Every time I look at it, I despair how much more work there is to do to convert it into lawn. Do you have a project like that? Many of you probably do. But in the great scheme of things, how important are those projects? I'd like to make the yard nicer, but if I don't get it done this year, my kids won't starve, the house won't fall in, I won't get fired. I bet many of you have much bigger challenges in your lives. Some of you may be dealing with situations that make my yard problem seem trivial. But today, God's Word speaks to all the impossible situations we face. My friends, whatever lies before you, **triumph with the Lord!**

I.

The leader of Israel in our reading for today was a man named Joshua. When Moses died, Joshua took over. That happened just when the people reached the edge of the promised land. They had conquered the territory on the far side of the Jordan River, but God took Moses without letting him enter the land. Joshua had to bring them in. The very first battle they had to fight was at the city of Jericho. Jericho was a walled city that defended the entrance to the land. Joshua was probably anxious about this battle. This was his first test as the leader of the people. If he lost the battle at Jericho, it would be very difficult to continue the campaign to conquer the promised land. And without a doubt, people would begin to grumble about the good old days when Moses was leading them.

At that critical moment, a man appeared to Joshua with a sword in his hand. He identified himself as the commander of the army of the Lord. What is the army of the Lord? Many times in the Old Testament, God calls himself the Lord of hosts – the hosts are the angels in heaven. This man was the commander of God's angel army. Several weeks ago, we studied a reading in Revelation where Jesus was pictured as a king riding at the head of the army of angels. That's who this man is: Jesus long before he was born in Bethlehem. We can see that in two ways. First of all, he told Joshua to take his sandals off because the place where he was standing was holy ground. That's exactly what God said to Moses when he appeared to him in the burning bush. The presence of God made that place holy. The other way we see this is in the fact that when he spoke again, the Bible simply says, "**The LORD spoke to Joshua.**" This was the Son of God talking to him.

Why did Jesus come to Joshua at this moment? Because he knew how important this battle was. God had a plan for Israel. They were supposed to conquer the promised land and live there as his people and teach their children God's word. And when the time was right, Jesus was going to come again to them – not as the

^{a a} Or *lord*

commander of the angel armies, but as a child, born of a Jewish mother. Jesus had to be born and die and rise in Israel. All that began when God gave them the land.

So God made a promise to Joshua: **“See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands.”** But God had a surprising plan of attack. He told Joshua to have the army march around the city once a day for six days. They were supposed to have priests with horns and the ark of the covenant leading the procession. And on the seventh day they were to march around the city seven times and when the signal came, the people were supposed to shout. And the walls would fall down.

That was God’s plan. If you were General Joshua about to fight your first big battle as the supreme commander, what would you think of that plan? Wouldn’t it seem foolish? What was the point of all this marching around? I did a little research this week and I got Mr. Wilson to help me with the math. The ruins of the Old Testament city of Jericho cover about ten acres. Now, you have to assume that the army would have marched out of bowshot from the walls. If you figure that the effective range of a simple bow is about 200 yards, that means that the army had to march a little more than a mile each day. On the seventh day, they marched about a seven and a half miles. Doesn’t that seem like a silly way to start a battle? March your troops seven and half miles, in armor, carrying their weapons, and then have them attack? Wouldn’t they be exhausted?

Why did God give this command? Why didn’t he just wave his hand and make the walls disappear? That wouldn’t have been any harder for God than this whole week of marching around and going nowhere. Why did God do it this way? Because God wanted Joshua and the children of Israel to trust him. He wanted them to put their faith into practice and approach the battle the way he commanded them to. And then when they did, he gave them success.

That is the crucial lesson for us this morning. My friends, nothing in your life is outside of God’s power. If he wanted to, God could supply us all with big, comfy lazy-boys and he could drop food onto plates set on tables next to our chairs. He could make everything easy for us. But he does not choose to work that way. Instead, he sends us to work. He lets us struggle. He makes us think about how much we’re going to save and how much we’re going to give to the Lord. He gives us rules for our lives, and many times, it seems like what he’s asking us to do will make our lives harder. When you have a conflict with someone, God commands you to go talk to that person and work it out in love. But that’s hard. It’s much easier just to talk bad behind their back and try to get everyone on your side. But God tells you to love them – which always means thinking about what’s best for them, not what’s best for you.

Are we willing to love like that – to constantly put other people’s good ahead of what we want? It’s hard to do that even in your own family, let alone with other people. The only way that we can do that is if we trust in God who commands it. Faith moves us to live as God commands because we trust that he would never hurt us with his commands, even when they seem to make our lives harder.

Do you trust God that much? Or do you have to admit that trusting God enough to put other people’s needs ahead of your own is hard? Do you have to admit that it’s hard to live as God commands when it seems like it will cost you money or popularity? We’re all sinners. The sinner inside doesn’t trust God for a moment. He doesn’t care what God wants. All he cares about is what pleases him. Every one of us has that sinful nature inside us. For that pride and sin we deserve death and hell.

But God sent Joshua to conquer Jericho so that in the fullness of time Jesus could be born in Bethlehem and die in Jerusalem. Jesus alone lived a life of perfect trust in God. That’s why he never sinned. He always put God first. That perfect life of Jesus counts for you and for me. And Jesus paid for all the pride and selfishness in our hearts. He paid for all the times we did the math and refused to risk our financial well-being to obey God. He paid for all the times we followed our feelings and didn’t do what God commands. He paid for all the times and all the ways that we loved ourselves first of all. He died and paid for all our sin. Then he rose. And God wiped our sin from his record forever.

Because we know that, we trust him. And God calls us to put that trust in action. He calls us to live for him even in all the struggles and difficulties we face. God calls us to obey him, even when it seems foolish to us. And he promises that when we live as he commands, he will bless us. My friends, **triumph with the Lord! Triumph by following what he commands!**

II.

The city of Jericho was fortified and the book of Joshua tells us that it was “tightly shut up.” The people knew that Israel was coming and they were ready for war. Many armies in history have laid siege to fortified cities only to have illness and lack of sanitation decimate them before the enemy fell. But God kept all that from happening. He made this the easiest conquest of any walled city in history. He had the army march around the city. If our estimate of a mile or so is accurate, it’s very possible that the entire city was surrounded at the moment the walls fell down. The men charged straight in and they took the city. When the walls fell, the defenders who were stationed on the walls fell with them. Any soldiers who were standing near the walls would’ve been crushed. Whoever survived would’ve been so stunned by the sudden collapse of their defenses that they probably couldn’t put up much resistance. It was an easy victory.

That is the other lesson here: success in our lives comes from God. That applies even when his work is less obvious. This was the first battle of a long campaign to conquer the promised land. While there were several other battles where God did miracles, in most of them he didn’t. Israel did have to take walled cities. They did have to defeat enemies in the field. They did suffer casualties in the course of the war. But right at the beginning, God showed them that he was working for them. Whatever success they had in the years to come, he was the source of it all.

That is true for you and me, too. Today, our eighth graders and our kindergarteners are graduating. Later today, the seniors at HVL will graduate. This is the season when we celebrate high school and college graduations. Those events represent years of hard work. I know the students in our eighth grade and I know how much we’ve asked of them over the last few years. I know the success that many of them have had, not just academically, but also in sports and music and other areas. It’s wonderful that God blessed them so much.

But don’t forget that God did bless them. Their success comes from him. All of our success comes from him. Every dollar that you earn at work, every project that you complete in your home, every relationship that you build or repair and all the joy that we get from those things – all that is God’s work in our lives. He gives us the social skills we need to have marriages and families and friends. He gives us the ability to work and create and serve. And he blesses our efforts. He decides when we will succeed and when we will fail. Through it all we triumph with him.

Who gets the credit when we celebrate success? Do we give glory to God or do we let that pride in our hearts come out again and seize all the glory for ourselves? My friends, that too is sin, sin that deserves God’s punishment. But the price that Jesus paid applies here, too. He paid for all our pride and all our sin. God now calls us holy for his sake.

So, my friends, give glory to God today. And go forward in your lives trusting that he is with you and that he loves you and he will give you success. Now, that doesn’t mean that walls are always going to fall down for you. Like Israel, sometimes God is going to make you fight the battle. Sometimes the sweat is going to get in your eyes and your arms are going to get tired. Sometimes it’s going to feel like you’re losing and you’re going to wonder if you’re going to be a casualty today. Sometimes it’s going to look like you lost because God’s battle plan doesn’t always include the things that we want to have happen. Sometimes we need to lose for God to win a greater victory for us.

But in Christ, God has already triumphed over everything for us. Day by day, he carries us through the battle that is life here. One day, he will bring us home to live with him. So in suffering and in joy, in victory and in defeat, we never lose because we are always God’s children. We always have him with us. We are always part of a mighty procession that’s marching all the way to heaven. And we will reach that goal. My friends, **triumph with the Lord! Triumph even when it seems impossible.** Amen.