

“The Commander of the Lord’s Army”

The seventy-sixth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 5:13-6:7; Revelation 19:11-21

Everything seems to be in place for a dramatic victory. All Israel has crossed through the Jordan River on dry ground and is now camped at Gilgal, just a few miles from the gates of Jericho. The Israelites have renewed their covenant with YHWH, as all the men of Israel have undergone circumcision and the people have celebrated their first Passover in the promised land. Israel has a standing army of at least 40,000 men and the people of Canaan are terrified at the news of Israel’s rapid and miraculous advance into their territory. It will not be long before the Lord grants his people a stunning victory at Jericho. But first, Joshua will encounter a mysterious man who identifies himself as the commander of the Lord’s army, a man who is none other than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Joshua is then given specific instructions by the LORD for the Jericho campaign. All Israel and all the inhabitants of Jericho will know that YHWH is the Lord.

As we continue our series on the Book of Joshua, we come to Joshua’s account of the fall of Jericho, a heavily fortified city which blocked Israel’s way into Canaan. The city of Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world, the archaeological evidence showing that it has been continuously inhabited since the 8th millennium B.C. This same evidence shows that city had been destroyed during some point about 1400 B.C, a date which would correspond with the entrance of Israel into the promised land about that same time.¹ While Jericho was not a large city, the walled portion of the city taking up but seven acres, although, no doubt, many people lived outside the walls.² And it blocked Israel’s way into Canaan.

In the first part of chapter 5, Joshua contrasts the faith and piety of this current generation of Israelites who have just entered Canaan with that of the previous generation which left Egypt forty years before. That generation which left Egypt was sentenced to wander throughout the Sinai because they doubted that God could make good on his promise. That generation grumbled at God’s gracious provision of manna in the wilderness. But this generation would eat the bounty of Canaan. That generation grumbled under Moses’ leadership, while this generation obeyed Joshua’s every command. That generation neglected circumcision, which is the sign and seal of the covenant. But the men of this generation willingly underwent circumcision while camped at Gilgal. During the lifetimes of this generation, Israel had become a great nation and the people were trusting in YHWH instead of in their own strength to ensure the conquest of Canaan. No, this generation was not like that one which left Egypt. Although raised in the wilderness, this generation believed God’s promise and obeyed God’s covenant.

After Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan we read of a large Israelite army, but we don’t read of military preparations being made by that army. Instead, we read of the men of an entire nation undergoing circumcision—hardly the best way to prepare for an upcoming battle. We also read of the entire nation of Israel celebrating the Passover for the first time in Canaan after consecrating themselves to the Lord. We read of the people of Israel seeking to be obedient to the terms of the covenant and submitting to Joshua’s direction. We read of how the people willingly built a monument at Gilgal to

¹ Howard, *Joshua*, 179.

² Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, 228.

commemorate the crossing of the river because YHWH commanded this of them. So, instead of reading of a nation preparing itself for battle, we read of a people zealously striving to obey the terms of their covenant with YHWH. It is truly a remarkable, but sadly, a short-lived period in the history of Israel.

Throughout our series on Joshua so far, I have made reference to the pre-incarnate Christ's presence with Israel as the people enter the land of Canaan. Now in the closing verses of Joshua 5 and the opening verses of chapter 6, the fact of Christ's presence with his people becomes clear.

In Joshua 5:13-15, we read of a fascinating meeting between the commander of Israel's army (Joshua) and the commander of the Lord's army (who is none other than the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ). *"When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you for us, or for our adversaries?' And he said, 'No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.' And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, 'What does my lord say to his servant?' And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, 'Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.' And Joshua did so."*

Very likely, this incident occurs during those few days when the men of Israel were healing after the mass circumcision at Gilgal. Joshua doesn't tell us much about the particular circumstances of how this meeting with the stranger came about, but we can assume that it occurred at a time when Joshua left the camp, most likely to scout out the route from Gilgal to Jericho, a distance of just a few miles. Joshua simply says he was "by Jericho" when this meeting took place.

It is clear that Joshua is taken aback by the sight of this mysterious stranger with drawn sword. This way this account is framed brings to mind Jacob's famous encounter with a mysterious figure at Peniel in Genesis 32:22-32, where we read that Jacob wrestled with this mysterious figure until daybreak, which ended with Jacob's hip out of joint. There are also echoes in Joshua 5 from the account in Exodus 3, when Moses encountered the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4:17). But in these two earlier incidents, the key figures do not willingly comply. Jacob wrestles with the messenger, while Moses argues with the one speaking to him from the bush. But Joshua does not do this. At no point does Joshua doubt God's plan or purpose. He willingly obeys, unlike Moses and Jacob who are more reluctant. And unlike Moses and Jacob, Joshua willingly accepts the role that he will play in the upcoming events. He's approaching Jericho in anticipation of a great victory. Joshua believes YHWH's promise just as much now as he did when he was sent by Moses to scout the land of Canaan nearly forty-years before.

This mysterious figure was quite menacing because he held a drawn sword.³ This dramatic imagery—a mysterious figure with drawn sword—has appeared earlier in redemptive history. In Exodus 23:20-23, YHWH himself promised to Moses that "my angel" (i.e. my messenger) would lead Israel into the promised land. *"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. 'But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out.'" Indeed, Joshua may have recalled these words, which would explain his willingness to obey this man's instruction.*

³ Hess, Joshua, 126.

In Numbers 22:22-31, the angel of the Lord appeared—sword in hand—in order to block Balaam’s way before he met with Balak just before Israel defeated Og and Bashan and moved into Moab, their last stop before entering Canaan. This same mysterious figure will appear again in Israel’s future as recounted in 1 Chronicles 21:16, where we read, “*And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.*” Clearly, then, this mysterious figure encountered by Joshua is the angel of the Lord, who is none other than the pre-Incarnate Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the symbolism conveyed by this figure holding a sword is that of impending divine judgment. This encounter is the proof that YHWH is Israel’s shield and defender and that Jesus Christ has been present with his people as seen in the ark of the covenant and the pillar of fire.

We read in verse 13 that while startled by the man’s appearance, Joshua’s primary concern is with discovering this man’s loyalties. Whose side is this stranger on? The stranger never answers Joshua’s question directly, but instead boldly asserts that he is the commander of the LORD’s army. Since the phrase “commander of so and so’s army” appears throughout the Old Testament and always in reference to the king or ruler named, in this case, the phrase “commander of the LORD’s army” means that this figure is that one who leads YHWH’s army into battle. In this case, that heavenly host will do battle for Israel.⁴ While some have argued that this is an angelic commander of Israel’s army (i.e., the angel who directs Joshua and his army so that things go favorably for Israel), the reference to the Lord’s army more likely applies to the hosts of heaven. The language here echoes the declaration in Psalm 103:19-21—“*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!*” When this stranger tells Joshua that he’s the commander of the LORD’s army, the stranger is, in effect, saying that he will lead the heavenly host against Israel’s enemies, in this case, Jericho and the Canaanites.⁵

Given the man’s true identity, which Joshua is just beginning to grasp, Joshua’s response is utterly appropriate. Joshua fell at the man’s feet and worshiped him. Since Jews don’t worship mere creatures (not even angels), and since this man received Joshua’s worship, there can be no doubt as to his true identity. This is the preincarnate Jesus Christ who does indeed command the hosts of heaven. At this point in redemptive history, Joshua would only know that this man represented YHWH in some way and had come with YHWH’s own authority.

Recognizing this man’s rank and authority, Joshua humbly asks the man “*What does my lord say to his servant?*” Joshua, who is himself a mighty warrior in his own right and who leads a powerful army, and who has seen a number of manifestations of God’s mighty power with his own eyes, now willingly submits to this man. In fact, Joshua will do whatever this man tells him to do. Joshua even refers to this man as “my Lord” (*adonai*), and he recognizes that while he is in this man’s presence, he is this man’s servant. This is why Joshua falls at his feet and worships him.⁶

Although this mysterious commander never actually answered Joshua’s question about which side he is

⁴ Howard, *Joshua*, 156-157.

⁵ Howard, *Joshua*, 158.

⁶ Howard, *Joshua*, 158.

on, it is clear from the exchange between them that Joshua knew that this man appeared to Joshua *because* he was going to fight for Israel. Furthermore, the man now orders Joshua to remove his sandals because that place was “holy,” because the commander of the LORD’s army was present there. Remarkably, these are the exact same words that YHWH spoke to Moses at the burning bush. In Exodus 3:5, YHWH said to Moses, “*Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*” This is yet another concrete way in which Joshua is being confirmed as Moses’ successor. Just as the preincarnate Jesus spoke to Moses, so now he speaks to Joshua.

We know that we are correct in making this identification between Jesus and this mysterious commander because of the words of Jesus himself. In John 8:56-59, Jesus told the very hostile Jewish religious leaders, “*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’ So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*” Just as Jesus was the I AM who made the covenant with Abraham and who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, so too, Jesus is that one whose very presence makes the ground Joshua is standing upon, “holy.”

The reason for the appearance of this mysterious individual becomes clear in chapter 6, when the LORD informs Joshua of the way in which Israel was to undertake the conquest of Jericho.

In verse 1, we are given a description of the conditions in Jericho at the time of Israel’s advance. “*Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in.*” As we read in chapter 2, the king of Jericho knew that two Israelite spies had entered the city, and he ordered the city’s gates closed to keep the spies from escaping. Since the Israelites had miraculously crossed the river and at least 40,000 enemy soldiers were just a few miles away, the only hope the city of Jericho had to defeat the Israelites was to batten down the hatches (so to speak), to “shut up inside.”⁷ While the Israelite army was large, they did not have not the equipment used by armies of that period for conducting an attack on a fortified city. Without YHWH’s help, Jericho could have held-out from some time, effectively blocking Israel’s way into Canaan. But even a strong fortified defensive position like that of Jericho is no match for the power of YHWH.

Having encountered the commander of the LORD’s armies, Joshua is now given explicit instructions as to how the armies of Israel will overcome these formidable defenses. This will not be the fruit of Joshua’s brilliant tactics or the great ferocity of Israel’s army. No, the conquest of Jericho will be the gift of God. Thus we read in verse 2, “*And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor.’*” Not only do the walls of Jericho constitute a strong defensive position, but its king and soldiers are not to be taken lightly either. But neither Jericho’s walls nor its soldiers can prevent the city from falling to Israel. Why? Because the Lord has given the city to Joshua and Israel. All Joshua and the people of Israel must do to realize this victory and receive the spoils of the city, is to obey the LORD’s command.⁸

According to the LORD’s instructions to Joshua, what will bring down the city of Jericho is not a military assault, but a worship service. These instructions are spelled out in verses 3-5. “*You shall march around*

⁷ Hess, Joshua, 128.

⁸ Hess, Joshua, 129.

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 ram's 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.” We should immediately notice the many references to the number seven, which occurs fourteen times in this chapter and four times in verse 4 alone. The number seven is used throughout the Scriptures as the symbolic number of completion or perfection.⁹

Israel has already been consecrated unto the LORD, which means that the people have been set apart for YHWH's own purposes. This act of the army marching around the city for six days behind the ark of the covenants and the priests with their ram's horns, before the seven priests sound the seven trumpets seven times on the seventh day after marching around the city seven times, not only reminds us of the Sabbatical pattern—we labor for six days and then rest on the seventh just as God did when he created all things—but this symbolic act also recalls to mind the Feast of Unleaven Bread, when no Israelite ate bread with yeast for seven days as a sign of consecration to the Lord. The use of the number seven and the connection of this to the Feast of Unleaven Bread, indicates that the battle for Jericho will be part of Israel's Passover celebration. The act of marching around the city serves as a powerful memorial to the fact that not only did God rescue his people from their captivity in Egypt, he promised to give them the land of promise.¹⁰ That promise is now being kept.

This whole procedure then emphasizes the perfection of YHWH's plans and purposes and demonstrates to his people that when we rest from trusting in our own power and righteousness, and simply do as YHWH commands, we will take possession of all that which has been promised to us, in this case, the city of Canaan and all its spoils. Therefore, the scene is one in which Israel marches in a sacred procession which enters the land to accomplish YHWH's purpose. The ark goes in the front of the army and the people, symbolizing God's presence with his people follow it. In fact, this holy processional must continue (the people processing behind the ark, in some sense) until at long last the ark is brought up to Jerusalem (as recounted in 2 Samuel 6).

The plan revealed by the Lord to Joshua is perfect, which means that the eventual outcome is simply announced in advance. God has already given the city of Jericho to Joshua and the people of Israel. The act of marching around the city for seven days and then the seven priests sounding the seven trumpets on the seventh day amounts to a divine worship service of sorts, wherein all of YHWH's perfections and power are made known to those who have rejected him (despite their knowledge of his great power and holiness) and then who dwell in that land which they knew YHWH had promised to Israel. As the citizens of Jericho watched this event take place for six days before the grand climax on the seventh day, they would know that YHWH is the LORD and that his people, Israel, are in covenant with him. There was time to repent and turn to the LORD (as Ninevah would do in response to the preaching of Jonah). But other than the prostitute Rahab and her family, no one repents and turns unto the Lord. The inhabitants of Jericho love their pagan deities and fertility rights more than they fear the power of true and living God. But then, this is the true nature of unbelief and demonstrates how deeply it resides in the human heart.

⁹ Howard, Joshua, 169.

¹⁰ Hess, Joshua, 130.

And so in verses 6-7, Joshua gives the people of Israel their marching orders, recounting to them those instructions which God had given him: “*So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark of the LORD.’ And he said to the people, ‘Go forward. March around the city and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the LORD.’*” In seven days, the city of Jericho would fall and the city and all its spoils will be Israel’s. The road to all of Canaan will be open. And all the inhabitants of the promised will know that YHWH is the Lord of all the earth. And it is to the account of the fall of Jericho, we will turn, Lord willing next time, in seven days.

The fall of Jericho plays a very significant role in redemptive history—much more than the city’s historical importance. Not only does this event allow Israel to enter the promised land which will soon be theirs, the fall of Jericho becomes a picture of God’s judgment coming upon the rebellious city of man and the kingdom of Antichrist.

When the commander of the LORD’s army appears to Joshua, it becomes clear that not only will God’s army fight on behalf of God’s people to ensure they will receive all that God has promised, but we also are given a glimpse of judgment day when God’s wrath falls upon Jericho. In fact, in Revelation 19:11-21. John is given a vision of that same mysterious commander of the LORD’s army who appeared to Joshua. This time the scene is not the forthcoming battle of Jericho, but the end of the age when that same commander comes to raise the dead, judge the world and make all things new. This is the ultimate fate of all those not covered by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, which alone can turn aside God’s wrath.

Listen carefully to what John describes. “*Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.’” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”*

This horrible fate awaits all those who know not Christ—the same fate as those in Jericho who knew YHWH’s power and presence but rejected him. Just like Jericho, the city of man will face the commander of the LORD’s army in all his wrath, that one who will bring judgment upon those who oppose the kingdom of God. But for those who are Christ’s the commander of the LORD’s army is even now preparing the way, so that we receive our promised inheritance. For that same commander has laid down his life upon the cross, taking upon himself that same wrath which is meted out upon his enemies, so that we, the people of God, will enter that good and bountiful land which the Lord has promised to us. Amen.