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Joshua's conquests

"Without Me you can do nothing."

John 15:5 NKJV

From Egypt to Canaan

Through several amazing miracles God delivered His people from Pharaoh's control in Egypt. God's plan was not only to set them free and bring them to the other side of the Red Sea, but also to lead them into the land He had promised the patriarchs (Ex. 14-15). The journey from where they were in Egypt to the land God was giving them could be done in 11 days (Deut. 1:2), but it took them almost 40 years.

Soon after they started traveling, Israel ran out of basic supplies, but God provided for all their needs and even gave them some rest (Ex. 15:22-27). After this pause, the people continued their journey but ran out of food again. When they started to complain, in His grace, God gave them meat to eat at night (Ex. 16:12-13). This reminds us of Christ's unique sacrifice that had the character of a peace offering, of which each one ceremonially clean was allowed to eat. Then, quite early in the morning, God gave them manna from heaven. He also provided water from the rock (Ex. 17:1-7). Much could be said about these miraculous provisions God kept giving throughout their wilderness journey until they arrived in the Promised Land (1 Cor. 10:1-4; Josh. 5:12).

However, right after they received water from the rock, the Amalekites attacked Israel, trying to annihilate them. Moses put Joshua in charge of the battle, while making intercession on the mountain, sustained by Aaron and Hur (Ex. 17:10-12). God gave Joshua and his army the victory and made an oath to blot out Amalek's

memory, although Israel needed to do their part as well (v. 14; Deut. 25:17-19). Moses was led to build an altar, and he called it “The-LORD-is-my-banner” (Ex. 17:15).

Not long after this, Moses and Joshua were on Mount Sinai with God for 40 days (Ex. 24:13-18). In the valley, the people fell into idolatry and immorality, worshipping the golden calf (Ex. 32). Joshua did not yet have Moses’ discernment (v. 17), but he remained his faithful attendant¹ and stayed in God’s presence in the tent (33:11). The LORD was preparing this young and dedicated Israelite for his future task: to lead His people into the Promised Land and take possession of it.

About two years after Israel departed Egypt, Moses sent out 12 spies, one from each tribe, to explore the Promised Land. Hoshea, defined as “salvation,” from the tribe of Ephraim was the young man mentioned above (Num. 13:8). Moses changed his name to “Joshua,” meaning “the LORD is salvation” (v. 16). The spies returned after 40 days, but ten of them lacked faith in God and said the people would never be able to take possession of the land (v. 32). Joshua had shown leadership and faith in God when he defeated the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16). Now he, together with Caleb from the tribe of Judah, kept trusting the Lord. Without this kind of faith, the other spies rebelled and caused the people to want to return to Egypt (Num. 14:4). The entire congregation rose up against Joshua and Caleb, intending to stone them to death.

At this critical moment God’s glory appeared to all at the tent of meeting (v. 10). Moses pleaded with the Lord and asked Him to forgive the people, which He did (vv. 13-20). However, in His righteousness and holiness, the Lord swore that the rebels – all of the older generation – would fall. He promised that those 20 years old or less would enter the land with Joshua and Caleb (vv. 26-38). After the ten unbelieving spies died through a plague (vv. 36-37), there was another rebellion as people tried to enter the land in defiance of Moses’ instructions, but they were defeated (vv. 40-45).

Despite all this, God reconfirmed His plans for the people and the Promised Land. He told Moses what they should do there for God’s glory (Num. 15; see also Deut.

¹ The Hebrew term for “attendant” occurs one hundred times and usually indicates someone who is serving an older person, showing good care. For instance: Joseph serving in Egypt (Gen. 39:4; 40:4); Joshua serving Moses (Ex. 24:13, 33:11; Num. 11:28; Josh. 1:1); the priests serving God (Ex. 39:1,26,41); the Levites serving the priests (Num. 1:50, 3:6; Deut. 10:8); Samuel serving Eli (1 Sam. 2:11,18, 3:1); Abishag serving king David (1 Ki. 1:4,15); Elisha serving Elijah (1 Ki. 19:21) and many more cases.

26). Keep in mind that these things have been written for our instruction – to warn, instruct and guide us (1 Cor. 10:6-13). Also, let us take to heart the encouragement God gave Joshua: “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:9). He had told Moses to let Israel know that Joshua was to lead Israel in taking possession of the land (Num. 27:15-23).

Caleb and Joshua were overcomers

What does it mean to be an overcomer? It implies being fully committed to God’s interests, seeking to obey and honor Him despite tremendous obstacles or opposition, while always relying on Him. Through this we learn and grow, being drawn closer to our Lord. With our understanding of the New Testament, the Lord expects us to follow Him no matter what challenges we face. In that context we first learn of the Lord Jesus (Mt. 11:29), then of His disciples and of many Old Testament believers (consider Heb. 11).

“Overcomer” relates to the term “conquest,” reminding us of a war or a battle to *take possession* of something. Scripture shows that every believer should be an overcomer, to be used by the Lord. Battling the Amalekites, Joshua was a true overcomer who led God’s people to a great victory.

After Moses’ death, God told Joshua to enter the land (Josh. 1:1-2). He described its boundaries and promised to be with His people (vv. 3-7). Joshua obeyed God’s word (vv.8-9) and told all the leaders, including those of the two-and-a-half tribes to the east, to follow His instructions, which they promised to do (vv.10-18). These things provide many practical lessons for us today.

The spies and Rahab

Jericho was greatly fortified and functioned as a barrier to the whole land. Its inhabitants were under their king’s complete control and in bondage to their terrible gods who, they thought, demanded human sacrifices. Rahab was part of this idolatrous system. Historians tell us that many horrible things were done there, all under the control of Satan.

Rahab heard about a nation of former slaves who had traveled a long way and were ready to enter Canaan, even though this seemed impossible. Realizing she was in

bondage and longing to be set free, she identified with this people, which implies a work that God had started in her. When Joshua sent out two spies, God led them to her place, and she received them, eager to hear more about their people. Rahab hid and protected the spies from the king of Jericho. Because of her faith she was guaranteed protection when Jericho would be destroyed during the coming invasion (please read Josh. 2). She received those spies by faith (Heb. 11:31) and, after their oath of safety to her, she, in faith, let them go (Jas. 2:25). The two spies returned to Joshua and, based on what they had witnessed, told him that God had given the land and the people into Israel's hands (Josh. 2:23-24).

Crossing the Jordan

How would Israel be able to cross the Jordan? The moment the Levitical priests' feet touched the Jordan, the water stopped flowing. Even though the river was flooding, Israel passed over on dry ground (3:3-17)! The kings west of the Jordan heard about these unbelievable events and lost courage, greatly fearing Israel (5:1). However, they did not repent and believe as Rahab had.

According to God's instruction, 12 great stones were taken out of the riverbed and placed on the opposite side as a memorial for following generations (4:5-8,20-24). There at Gilgal, Egypt's influence was going to be rolled away (5:9), but meanwhile Joshua had 12 stones placed in the river where the priests' feet had been standing while the people crossed over (4:9). These stones symbolize that we too, believing, have been buried with Christ in baptism as identified with Him, the great risen Overcomer (Col. 2:11-15).

An obedient people

At this point God instructed Joshua to have the Israelite men circumcised and wait for their healing (Josh. 5:2-8). From a human perspective this did not make sense, because at least for a few days their condition made them vulnerable – unable to fight. The enemy did not know these details, for God watched over His people. Their circumcision symbolizes the setting aside of the flesh, an important lesson for us (vv. 9-10; see Phil. 3:3). It signifies that Israel would enter the land not on the basis of their own power but only with God's help.

At the proper time, they celebrated the Passover. Paul explained its important meaning for us (see 1 Cor. 5:7-8). They also ate for the first time of the fruit of the land, without any leaven, meaning this food was free from any corrupting influence

(Josh. 5:10-12). The same day Joshua met the Lord as the Leader of the LORD's army, and he worshiped Him (vv. 13-15). May we follow Joshua's example.

The first conquest – Jericho taken

Joshua 6 describes the amazing story of the ark of God being carried around Jericho 13 times with the people completely silent. When Joshua gave the sign that the priests should sound their trumpets (6:16), the people were to shout out loudly. Then, a great miracle happened – Jericho's strong wall fell flat (v. 20).

Only the part of the wall under Rahab's house remained upright – another great miracle! She had brought her close relatives to her place on the wall, as instructed by the spies. Together with her, they were the only survivors (v. 25). These details describe *God's great conquest* and demonstrate His tremendous power. Jericho's fall occurred before Joshua could make any conquest in the Promised Land. The enemy's great stronghold had been eliminated, and God's people were now free to take the whole land.

Let's consider what happened much later. Satan's stronghold of hostile opposition against God was manifested from the moment Christ came into the world and continued until the cross. After Jesus' victory, Satan resisted in different ways. In weakness, but never failing, and through unfathomable sufferings on the cross, the Lord Jesus obtained complete victory (Col. 2:14-15). He confirmed His triumph with one word, loudly spoken: *tetelestai*, meaning "it is finished" or "paid in full." He was then able to lay down His head (John 19:30), which He could never do before (Mt. 8:20).

Always victorious, He could not be affected by death or decay, nor see corruption – not even in Joseph of Arimathea's new, clean and pure tomb (Ps. 16:10). God overruled the enemy's plans and honored His Son, who had gone through so much shame and dishonor (Isa. 53:9). Jesus demonstrated His total victory through His own resurrection. Nobody had ever been able to step out of the realm of death in His own strength. It cannot be repeated just as the work on the cross cannot be repeated, because that would mean that it had not been sufficient. Peter mentioned that God had raised Him up from among the dead (Acts 2:32), which is not a contradiction. The Lord Jesus ascended, as God exalted Him at His right hand. From there the Holy Spirit was sent and poured out (v. 33). Praise God!

Overcomers, obedience and self-judgment

Good training and constant dependence on the Lord are required in order to be overcomers, but that is not all. After Joshua's victories and successes, humanly speaking, he may have thought that he had, as is sometimes said today, "made it." In fact, after Jericho's fall the people became over-confident and did not realize a serious sin had been committed in their midst. Achan had stolen from what was devoted to God, which made all of the people guilty (7:1,11). This caused Israel's defeat when they attacked the small city of Ai (vv. 4-5).

First, the spies Joshua sent to explore Ai underestimated the enemy's power. Then, Joshua sent out only about 3,000 soldiers, who did not go up from Gilgal where flesh was removed but from Jericho (v. 2), without the Lord's express command. As Joshua decided to attack Ai, the ark is not mentioned, whereas it was very prominent in the siege of Jericho. When Israel attacked Ai the first time, 36 of Joshua's soldiers were killed, causing the hearts of the people to melt (v. 5).

Joshua then humbled himself together with the elders before the people and God (v. 6). After Joshua prayed to God (vv. 7-9), the LORD declared that Israel had sinned: one man had stolen from what belonged to Him alone and had lied, bringing guilt upon the whole nation. This caused them to be unable to stand against the enemy (vv. 11-13). The LORD instructed Joshua what should be done (vv. 14-15), and the next morning He showed all of the people the one among them who had transgressed and caused all to become guilty. Achan, revealed, confessed his sins (vv. 16-21), but now it was too late even for his family whom he had implicated in his sin. This chapter shows that instead of self-confidence, humility is needed with self-judgment, judging and confessing sinful acts and lusts. Otherwise, we cannot be true overcomers.

The second conquest – Ai

The initial failure to take Ai was part of God's perfect ways, as evil had to be judged before He could lead Israel to a successful attack. First, the transgressor Achan and his guilty family had to be put to death, which happened in the valley of Achor, meaning "trouble" (Josh. 7:24, 26). Later, two prophets referred to this place of judgment and predicted that God would turn trouble into blessing: "a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15), and "the Valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down, for My people who have sought Me" (Isa. 65:10). Both linked the troublesome past with the millennial blessings of the future.

Meanwhile, all true Christians are blessed with all spiritual, eternal, heavenly blessings (Eph. 1:3). These surpass Israel's coming millennial blessings. God assured Joshua of a complete victory over Ai and gave him precise instructions to follow (Josh. 8:1-2).

Because of the importance of the battle between Satan and God, the whole city and area of Jericho had been consecrated to God. It was declared to be under a ban – set apart for God, untouchable – with the exception of Rahab and her family (6:17). In the case of Ai, the context was different, as it was a battle Israel had to fight themselves in order to take possession of the land God had given them. For this reason the soldiers of Israel were allowed to take everything as spoil after the battle was won (8:2).

As the Lord instructed, Joshua placed by night an ambush of elite soldiers against the city while he went out with the rest of the army and stayed overnight with them. The plan was to attack Ai in the morning, and Israel would flee before Ai's soldiers (vv. 3-6) just as had happened in the previous attack (7:4-5). At the right moment God would tell Joshua to stretch out his hand with the spear toward the city (8:18), signaling those in ambush to rise up to attack Ai while its soldiers pursued the fleeing Israelites. When Joshua gave the sign, those in ambush rose up, entered and took Ai, and set it on fire (v. 19). Israel turned around against their pursuers and the soldiers who had taken the city came out to join in the attack (vv. 21-22).

Under attack from both sides, all of Ai's soldiers perished in battle, while Joshua kept stretching out the spear (vv. 18-26). This last point reminds us of Moses praying on top of the mountain, sustained by Aaron and Hur, while Joshua fought the Amalekites below (Ex. 17:8-13). In both cases, Israel's victory depended on the LORD's gracious intervention.

Ai's livestock and spoil were taken as plunder, and the city was made a heap of ruins (Josh. 8:27-28). They hanged Ai's king on a tree, but at sunset took his body off it just as God had instructed through Moses. Then they put a heap of stones over the body as a testimony of Israel's victory (v. 29). To honor the LORD, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal (v. 30), the mount of the curse, opposite Mount Gerizim, as Moses had taught before they reached the land (Deut. 11:29-32).

The third conquest – Gibeon’s deceit and surrender

There had been failure with Israel in the second conquest because of Achan’s sin. Now there was a different failure, as the enemy’s subtle deception caused Israel to fall into a trap. We may compare this deceit with developments in Church history as described in the Lord’s message to Pergamos about the false prophet Balaam showing King Balak how to ensnare the Israelites (see Rev. 2:12-17).

In the Promised Land, the Amorite and Canaanite kings were very afraid (Josh. 5:1), yet they united together to resist Joshua’s battle plan through a cleverly designed deception (9:3-15). Just as Eve had been deceived by the serpent (Gen. 3:1-6), so Israel was deceived by the enemy’s tricks. Scripture says, “The men of Israel took some of the provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD. So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them” (Josh. 9:14-15). When Israel discovered the deception the next day, the people grumbled against their leaders, who rightly said that they could not annul the oath they had made. The people of the kings, the Gibeonites, however, would be “slaves – woodcutters and water carriers for the house of ... God” (v. 23).

The fourth conquest – the coalition of southern kings

Joshua initially failed, misled by the Gibeonites’ deception, but God had led Gibeon to surrender, or submit, to Israel. This caused the Canaanite kings to unite against Gibeon. God used the ensuing conflict to destroy all of these southern nations.

Joshua 10 describes Israel’s tremendous battle with those kings and the victory God gave Israel. It is an impressive chapter that includes the account of Joshua’s call for the sun and moon to stand still so Israel could continue pursuing their enemies. Those kings were captured and perished “because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel” (v.42). Joshua and all Israel then returned to the camp at Gilgal, the place symbolizing the flesh being set aside. There they learned to rely on the LORD alone. We need to always depend on Him – before each (spiritual) battle as well as after each victory the Lord gives us in His grace.

The fifth conquest – the northern coalition conquered

The battle against the coalition of the southern kings who attacked Gibeon because it had made peace with Israel led to the conquest of the whole southern part of the

Promised Land. It also triggered the next major battle, namely against the kings of the northern part of Canaan (Josh. 11-12) who united against Israel. The LORD led Joshua to suddenly attack this northern coalition, and He gave them into Israel's hands. After that victory, they destroyed Hazor, which had been the main stronghold of the northern coalition (11:10-11). The other cities were kept intact (v. 13) even though the people had hardened themselves and therefore were smitten (v. 20).

Closing remarks

The following three things are highlighted in God's Word. Firstly, Joshua carried out all that the LORD had commanded Moses (v. 15). Secondly, in His moral government, the LORD had hardened those kings and their people (v. 20; see 5:1). Joshua executed God's judgment of them. Thirdly, the battles Israel won resulted in true rest for God's people, as they were able to dwell in their God-given land and enjoy living there (v. 23). The spiritual lesson for us is to take possession of the heavenly blessings God has given us (Eph. 1:3) and enjoy them, individually and collectively. Doing so, we produce fruit and bring it to our Lord Jesus Christ and to our God and Father in worship and adoration (Heb. 13:15).

Joshua's taking possession of parts of the land west of the Jordan is linked with those parts east of the Jordan, given by Moses to the two-and-a-half tribes (Josh. 12:6). This is important because we need to take possession of both realms. What is west of the Jordan illustrates our eternal, spiritual and heavenly blessings in Christ, whereas what is east of the Jordan represents the temporal earthly blessings we receive from God's hand. We need to take both realms for God's honor and for our own benefit, as He blesses us with them.

The rest of Joshua 12 lists the 31 kings Israel and Joshua defeated. The book concludes with two impressive chapters about Joshua, first addressing Israel's elders and then all of the people, warning them before his death.

Truly, without Him, we cannot do anything!
