

Joshua 6 Demolishing Strongholds

Faith is a risky business. The very nature of faith is to be a matter of trust and we find trust a hard thing to do. A teenager has a group of friends, people she has grown up with, people she trusted; and then they make fun of her behind her back; she finds out and declares that she will never trust them again, because the trust that she placed in her friends was broken. It is such a common story. So when trust becomes a quality in our relationship with God, it gets even harder: when we can't trust people that we see, how can we trust God whom we cannot see? So faith becomes a risky business. Those who criticise us say that "faith is blind, a leap in dark!" But that's not the Bible's way: faith is not blind; faith is a response to God and what God is like and what God has done and what God has promised. That kind of faith can achieve amazing things in our lives and in our world.

Joshua is an example of that kind of faith! We said at the start of this little series that he came to his new challenging job as the leader of Israel with potentially all kinds of fears: that he wasn't good enough, that he had big shoes to fill and so on, but he also came armed with this promise of God: "*do not...*" (*Joshua 1:9b*) That promise inspired him to trust God again and again, for some of the biggest decisions of his life, the biggest moments of his leadership. Last week, you heard the story of the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land: that was an exercise in faith with the river in spate – "*as soon...*" (*Joshua 3:13*) That's exactly what happened; God did as He promised and the people crossed into the Promised Land, safely through the river. The risk that Joshua took in trusting God paid off and his faith was rewarded. Each experience of faith rewarded inspires him the next time that risk is required.

Here we go again; this time he is confronted with the enemy city of Jericho and as we said earlier God has a strange way of going about winning the battle. What is Joshua commanded to do? To take all the weapons of war at his disposal and use them to destroy city? No! "*March round...*" (*Joshua 6:3-5*) It is not a strategy that would win many friends in the Strategic Command at NATO; this is not the way to win a war! But it is God's way to let His people win this battle. What is this all about? It is about 2 things: it is about God's power and Joshua's faith. The people of Jericho had heard all about God's power and now they were about to see it at first hand. Joshua had trusted God before and now he was about to be challenged to trust God again. He took the risk; he trusted God; he had the people march around the walls and you can hear the city guards of Jericho laughing their heads off all week. But on the seventh day, marching, blowing their trumpets, shouting, all the laughing stopped and by the power of God Jericho was destroyed and the power of God was seen in the land and the people of God could move on.

Joshua trusted God. His faith was key to this victory for God and the people of God. I'm sure that he didn't see it all from the start, but he trusted God. He had, in his experience bank, times when he had trusted God before and God had not let him down, so he trusted God again. This was not a victory for strength and military strategy; this was a victory for faith and for trust in the power of God. As a side note to chapter 2 two weeks ago, Rahab the prostitute, who also trusted God, was saved along with her family; her faith was rewarded and she was saved. Joshua did what God said; it seemed strange to him perhaps, but he did it; he put his faith into practice and did what God said and his faith was rewarded, and the city was destroyed. The people moved one more step along the way to settle the Promised Land.

What are we to make of this brutal story? Is this a template for Christian mission in our world today? There have been times in the history of the Church when it seems as if that has been such a template. The Crusades, 1000 years ago, was an attempt to destroy strongholds by using the weapons of the world, by force of arms to conquer and win back Jerusalem; we have to say that it generally didn't work and that it stands at odds with much that we read in gospels. When new were on holiday in the summer, in Budapest, we visited the huge church/cathedral

in the centre of the city, a church covered in gold and full of the symbols of power and glory and victory; I'm becoming increasingly uneasy with churches like these because I'm not sure where they sit with the values of a suffering servant and a crucified Saviour! The story of Jericho is of a time and a culture that was brutal; 3000 years ago, this may well have been the appropriate way to demonstrate the power of God in violent times; it is a language that the peoples around understood and they revered God who showed His power in this way. For us, the story is picture of the power of God at work and we marvel at God's power and we see the faith of God's people in action in their time. We pray for the power of God to be at work in our world and are challenged to put our faith into practice in our world.

Seemingly insurmountable problems – do you know of any? We live in a world of violence: the war in Syria is a huge, seemingly insurmountable problem, as is domestic violence and child abuse. Many people live in fear: the fear of human trafficking and slavery is real, as is the fear of failure, or the fear of being bullied at school. There is a climate of anti-church, anti-God, anti-religion around in our sophisticated, secular, Western world and we're not sure how to overcome that or defeat it. Then there is 'me-generation', the attitude that is in so many people in our culture, to put themselves first, second, last; the only person they think about is themselves, at the expense of everyone else around them at work, at home, with the neighbours and it is becoming ingrained now to second and third generations so that children are taking on the attitudes of their parents in this regard. These are just a few seemingly insurmountable problems!

"The weapons..." (2 Corinthians 10:4) What do we as Christians do in face of these seemingly insurmountable problems? Paul talks about the weapons we use. The world's weapons in face of these problems are these: in Syria the way of the world is to face violence with violence and so there are more bombs dropped; you drop bombs on us and we'll drop bigger bombs on you! In the face of pride and arrogance, do we just become more arrogant back? "If you shout at me, I'll shout back even more loudly and who has loudest voice wins argument"? These are the weapons of the world, but Paul speaks about using other weapons, different weapons, weapons that still have divine power and still demolish strongholds. God's power, God's Spirit are still at work in the world, but in different ways; still powerful to demolish strongholds and overcome seemingly insurmountable problems.

We read Ephesians 6, the picture of the soldier and his armour; some suggest that Paul wrote this while he was under house arrest so he used the picture of the soldier at his door as an image. Others have shied away from these military pictures now because they don't like them. But this picture of the soldier is armed with weapons that are different. "Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Bible" – these are the weapons God uses in our world to demolish strongholds! It is a very different set of weapons from those we see elsewhere. God is at work in the world; His power is at work in the world to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems and these are the weapons and the ways He uses; these are the ways by which the power of God is at work in our world.

You meet someone who is an atheist, anti-church, anti-God, anti-Jesus and when he discovers that you're a Christian, he is very scathing, he laughs at your Christian faith! He maybe even calls you an idiot for believing in Jesus. What is going to make that person change his mind? Is he going to change his mind by you calling him an idiot back? By you beating him over head, either literally or metaphorically, with the Bible? Not really. What might win this person over will be the truth of gospel, the stories of Jesus and the notion that these stories are true; what might win him over is your attitude, full of love and grace; what might win him over is the passion for faith that you display, that faith is something of great and lasting value to you; what might win him over is the quality of your life. These are the weapons that God uses to change the world. We pray; we live by the Bible; we live by faith; we try to do what is right; we seek to discern God's will together and not fall out. These are the ways in which we overcome seemingly insurmountable problems and these are the ways in which we see God at work.

How do we contribute to the end of the war in Syria? We pray. A colleague of mine from Northern Ireland said of the troubles there, when we prayed and there seemed to be no end, "can you imagine how much worse it would have been without your prayers." How do we overcome our fears? How do we overcome the sense of failure, a stronghold in so many lives? The answer to these and to so many other seemingly insurmountable problems is to be found in the qualities of truth, faith, prayer, the Bible, grace; these are the weapons that God uses to destroy strongholds. God is at work in our world; the collapse of Jericho's walls is a fantastic picture of the power of God at work and of the way in which faith is rewarded. It is not a template for mission; let's not rush out to buy a stock of trumpets; but let's see it for what it is, a picture of the power of God at work in the world and a picture of one man's faith and how that faith impacted on his seemingly insurmountable problem. There is our inspiration: God is still powerful; God is still able to help us; God is still worthy of our trust. Let us take the risk and live our lives by faith!