

Joshua 6 (1984 NIV)
God's Way: Strange but Sure

Introduction

Here's a true story. The year was 1820 and Peter Richley was on board a ship. Unfortunately, it sank. But Peter was rescued by another ship. By some strange twist of circumstance, this second ship also sank.

He was rescued again. But the third ship sank likewise. He was rescued for a third time. Yet, his fourth ship sank as well. And unbelievably, he was rescued for a fourth time, but the fifth ship that picked him up sank like the other four.

On the high seas, however, he floated with the serene confidence that somehow God did not want him to die. And sure enough, another ship came by and answered his call for help.

This ocean liner, The City of Leeds, was bound from England to Australia. The crew hoisted Peter aboard. The ship's doctor gave him a cursory examination, pronounced him fit, and then asked an unusual favour.

The doctor said, "There's a lady on board and she's looking for her son who disappeared years ago. She's dying and she's asking to see her son. She knows everybody on board and since you're the only newcomer, would you pretend to be her son?"

Peter agreed. He followed the doctor and entered into a cabin. There on a bed lay a frail, old woman. She was obviously suffering from a very high fever. Deliriously, she was crying out, "Please God. Let me see my son before I die. I must see my son!"

The ship's doctor gently pushed the young man towards the bed. Suddenly, Peter Richley began sobbing. For lying there on that bed was the reason why he couldn't seem to die. Lying on that bed was none other than Sarah Richley—who had prayed for ten years to be reconciled to her son, Peter.

The ship's doctor stood in amazement as the young man fell down by the bed and embraced the sick woman. "I'm here mom! I'm here! It's me!" Within days the fever had subsided and Peter's mother awakened to find an answered prayer seated on the edge of her bed.

Truth is stranger than fiction.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/take-him-to-his-mother-philip-harrelson-sermon-on-mother-s-day-72324>)

Today, we look at the story of Joshua and the battle for Jericho. It is not just a story that's strange but true. More importantly, it tells us that God's way can be strange but sure.

Although God had promised His people the land of Canaan, the mightily walled city of Jericho stood in their way. Unless they found a way to bring down those walls, the city could not be taken. If the city was not taken, the Promised Land would never be theirs. It was humanly impossible to bring down those walls. Yet God's people won a great victory that day.

The victory over Jericho demonstrated that God's way can be strange but sure.

I. God's way can be strange because it is higher than human understanding (vv. 1-5).

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."

The people of Jericho were hiding behind double walls. God promised Joshua the victory and then outlined a very strange strategy. He ordered Joshua to march around the city once every day for six days with armed men in the front of the procession. They were to be followed by seven priests, each blowing a ram's horn trumpet as he marched, followed by those carrying the ark of the covenant, and followed by a rear guard of armed men. Specific instructions were given that the people of Israel were to march silently. On the seventh day, they were to rise at dawn and march around the city in the same manner seven times. On the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, the people were to give a great shout, and the walls of the city would fall down flat.

The inhabitants of Jericho were paralyzed with fear. They'd heard of a God who had led the Israelites through the Red Sea, sustained them during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and held back the Jordan River so that they could cross over on dry ground. Then the Israelites, in their moment

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of greatest strength, were instructed to circumcise all their males, rendering them militarily vulnerable. Now, after their healing, they were ordered to march round the walls of Jericho.

So far what we've got would seem to fall into the category of "Greatest Military Blunders" that you might see on TV.

But note what God said to Joshua before He gave him the plan in v. 2: "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men." Note the past tense—"I have delivered" not "I will deliver". God spoke of Jericho as having already been defeated. That's a key point. God is saying, "It's a done deal. Those walls are coming down. It's just a matter of time." God speaks and it is done—"Let there be light, and there was light."

In a real sense, the battle was over even before it was started. God promised to deliver the city, and in due course He made good on His promise.

Remember that the ark was not just another piece of religious furniture. The ark represented the very presence of God with His people. Putting the ark in the middle was like God saying, "I'm going to lead this battle right in your midst" (v. 4).

Although the people of Jericho did not know it, they lost the battle when God got involved. It's God who made all the difference at Jericho. Those high walls were no match for the Almighty.

Our success against odds is sure only if we let God be involved in our impossibility. As the saying goes, "IMPOSSIBLE becomes HIM-POSSIBLE when God is involved." However, when God involves Himself in His strange yet sure way, it is quite impossible for us to fully understand.

Human understanding is not the reference yardstick with which we measure God's way. God's way is not so much against human understanding, but it is surely higher, and so, it can be beyond human understanding.

And because God's way can be beyond human understanding, we can misunderstand each other's intention when we each try to do things God's way.

I remember that one season when I was pastoring a church. My intention in all that I was doing was to please God and bless others. But some church members might have lamented, "Why on earth did John do that? I just don't understand him." Yes, in doing things God's way even with the best of intention, I might have grieved some of God's people.

I could have said, “Well, I am just doing it God’s way as best as I understand it. Too bad if you don’t quite understand and are grieved. Go bury yourself in your own misery.”

But I had always tried to confess to God’s people, “I might have grieved you as I try to do things God’s way as best as I can understand. I am sorry and seek your forgiveness. It has never been my intention to hurt or grieve.”

God’s way is strange because it can be beyond human understanding. Thus, we can unintentionally grieve others because we act in faith and obey God, but in a way they find difficult to understand.

On the flip side, we ourselves can be grieved when we are misunderstood as we try to do things in God’s way. We say, “This thing about serving God is all one big waste of my time. No more of it for me!” And we stay out on the margin, licking our grief and hurt.

If you are feeling that way today, I want to tell you that the Lord Jesus understands your grief and hurt. After all, He Himself had been misunderstood for doing things in God’s way. He was not raised up on a pedestal like a celebrity, but onto a Cross like a criminal.

If that’s how you are feeling, I want to tell you that the Lord wants to touch you today with His love and peace. He doesn’t want you to stay out on the margin, but to be in the midst of serving and encouraging others. Would you ask Him today to take away that grief and hurt?

Let’s pause for a moment of silent prayer:

- Pray for yourself—ask God for forgiveness for grieving and hurting others.
- Pray for those grieved/hurt—ask God to allow them to experience His love and peace; to replace grief and hurt with joy and healing; to seek to rise above their grief/hurt so that they can move on to serve and encourage others.

The victory over Jericho has demonstrated that God’s way can be strange but sure.

II. God’s way can be sure because He will work when we act in faith (vv. 6-20).

6. So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, “Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it.”

7 And he ordered the people, “Advance! March around the city, with the armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD.”

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8. When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them.

9 The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding.

10 But Joshua had commanded the people, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!"

11 So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the people returned to camp and spent the night there.

12 Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD.

13 The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets kept sounding.

14 So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

15 On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times.

16 The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!"

17 The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent.

18 But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.

19 All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."

20 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.

The guiding principle for Joshua was that once the mind of God was indicated, he could do nothing else except to obey. When we come to that point, we are moving into a spiritual breakthrough.

False worship is to step into the presence of God in an endeavour to manipulate Him to do my will. True worship is for me to step into His presence and allow Him to bring my will into conformity with His will.

The fact is that Joshua didn't play religious games with God. He believed God and was willing to act on His instructions.

All too often we try to live our lives on human terms. We forget that a personal Satan is out to destroy us. We allow him to trip us up in our marriages and in our work lives. We allow him to trip us up in our social relationships because we are not staying in close contact with the Lord. Our worship will become empty when we fail to flesh it out in obedience.

On the seventh day, when the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and the walls of Jericho fell down. Why did God have the people march around the city for six days, and then seven times on the seventh day? It's not because their marching somehow destabilized the stones in the wall. It is, I believe, a lesson about the power of God on one hand and the need for our action on the other. It's not passive faith that He honours; it is active faith, living faith that actually does something.

Think about this for a moment. God could have said, "Sit tight. Don't do anything. I'll knock down the walls and destroy the city myself." Is there any problem with that? No, God is fully able to do that with or without human means. But His normal plan is to use people to accomplish His purposes. So even though God caused the walls to fall down, the people still had to march, they still had to shout, and when the walls fell down, they still had to take the city by fighting from door to door.

Our text today points out to us that our life involves spiritual struggles and battles. There may be a Jericho or several Jericho's in each of our lives.

- What is the Jericho or what are the Jericho's in your life?
- What are the temptations?
- What are the points of spiritual struggle or battle?
- Is it a struggle with doubt?
- Is it a hard time taking God and His Word at face value?
- Is it a struggle with an unforgiving spirit?
- Is it a struggle with illness that is getting the upper hand?
- Is it the loss of a loved one?
- Is it a struggle with an addiction?
- Is it a struggle relationally with a partner or child?
- Is it a struggle with emotions that are confusing?

We need to be honest. We need to admit our area of weakness and allow God to work in our lives, doing what He wills.

The Israelites marched around the walls. Can you imagine the scene?

- Thousands of them line up the first day to march around the city.
- In front are the priests with the Ark of the Covenant. They march around blowing their rams' horns.
- Inside the pagans are scared to death.
- Nothing happens.

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- The next day the Israelites march around again. And nothing happens.
- On the third day they march around again. And nothing happens.
- Only this time the people inside are starting to relax and mock, “These Israelites must be nuts!”
- And outside, some of the people are complaining, “Hey, Joshua! What’s going on, man? This is a waste of time. Let’s attack and get it over with.”
- On the fourth day they march around again. And nothing happens.
- On the fifth day it’s the same thing.
- On the sixth day it’s the same thing.
- But on the seventh day, on the seventh march round the city, the horns start to blow and the people let out a shout.
- And in one miraculous moment, the walls come a tumbling down!

That’s it. That’s how faith works. But one may think that the Israelites were no strangers to walking around because they had been doing it and seemingly in an aimless manner for 40 long years in the wilderness. So, they were marching around the walls of Jericho not so much by faith, but by sheer habit. However, were there no whiners, critics, and doubters among them as they marched round the walls of Jericho? It is very likely there were such people in their ranks. After all, there had been many occasions they complained during their 40 long years of wandering—e.g. about being taken out of the “good life” in Egypt, about the manna being lousy food, about having no water to drink, and about their leaders for endangering their lives before hostile people.

So, I believe there were some whiners, critics, and doubters among the people as they followed this very strange battle plan that God had given to them. But I also believe that they followed it largely by faith. God honoured their march of faith, and the walls of Jericho fell to the ground.

Why does God bring down the walls of Jericho on the 7th day and not on the 1st day? Why does God bring down the walls of Jericho after the 13th march of the 7th day and not the 1st march?

The answer is this—God’s way is sure because He will work when we act and continue in faith and obedience instead of delaying, hesitating, or quitting.

Our individual journeys with the Lord are different. So, we write our chapters of journey with Him differently. But before we start writing the next chapter, we must first place a full stop to the last sentence of the previous chapter. God will only help us write the next chapter when we first act in faith and obedience to put that full stop.

- My first pastorate was a small and simple church. When I decided to leave, I made it a point to reconcile with people. After I left, I was still invited back to preach and fellowship with the people from time to time. I believe I did place a full stop before I moved on from there.

- My years serving in the Singapore Bible College (SBC) were largely fulfilling—I was following my calling and the passion of my heart. After I left, I visited SBC from time to time, and every time when I was there, it felt like I was home again. I believe I did place a full stop before I moved on from there.
- I was serving in the Baptist Theological Seminary (BTS) for some 4 years. It was very challenging as we worked hard to rebuild the school. On top of that, my mum had a stroke and became home-bound. It upset the equilibrium in our family life. When I left BTS, we managed to turn the school around with some positive outcomes—e.g. we had some very good students who're now pastors and playing prominent roles in their churches, the financial position of the seminary had become quite stable. I believe I had also put a good full stop at the time when I moved on from there.

Is there a full stop you need to place before you move on to the next chapter of your life?

- If you are a husband and you are more critical than complimenting of your wife or child, you may need to put a full stop to that.
- If you are a wife and you are more belittling than uplifting of your husband, you may need to put a full stop to that.
- If you are child and you are more spiteful than respectful of your parents, you may need to put a full stop to that.
- If you are still complaining about your boss/colleagues or grieving over your loss of job status, you may need to put a full stop to that.
- Even for Christians who are either fulltime workers or lay people, if you are still badmouthing your previous church and leaders, you may need to put a full stop to that.

We need to put a full stop before we move on to the next chapter/season of our life.

Conclusion

When God wants to do something big, He often starts with something small—as small as the human heart.

The real battle for Jericho was not with the Canaanites. The real battle was in the hearts of the Israelites. If we want to win it out there, we must first win it right here inside our heart. The worst enemy in the battle for Jericho was not the Canaanites or even the walls of Jericho. In the battle for Jericho, the worst enemy was in the heart of the people of God themselves.

God's way can be strange but sure. Will we have the heart-inspired faith to obey?

Pray that we will trust God enough and obey His call for us to act in faith so that the Jericho's in our lives will be overcome by His power.

Amen!