

Joshua, a Leader of God's People

*“And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho.”
—Joshua 4:19*

PART TWO OF OUR REVIEW of the life of Joshua will focus on the experiences of Israel under his faithful leadership which occurred following their entry into the land of promise. As noted in our opening text, the Israelites crossed over the Jordan

River on the tenth day of the first month.

FIRST DAYS IN THE LAND

During Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, circumcision had not been practiced, so the Lord's first instruction to Joshua upon their entering the land of Canaan was to have all the males born in the wilderness circumcised. (Josh. 5:2-8) Then on the fourteenth day of the month they observed the Passover. Forthwith the manna ceased to fall, and the people began to “eat of the fruit of the land of Canaan.”—vss. 10-12

The Israelites had entered Canaan at the eastern border of Jericho, and pitched their tents nearby at

Gilgal. However, Joshua knew they were not to remain here, for they had before them the task of conquering the land which they had now entered. Apparently making his own investigation, we find that “Joshua was by Jericho” when “he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?”—Josh. 5:13

Under the circumstances, we can well understand why Joshua was cautious. He was in enemy territory, and it was wise to make sure with whom he was speaking. The man quickly identified himself, saying, “As captain of the host of the LORD am I now come.” (vs. 14) The Lord’s “host” mentioned here by their “captain” evidently referred to the angelic forces so often employed by God for the accomplishment of his purposes. Their commander had appeared to Joshua in human form to instruct him in the proper procedure for capturing Jericho.

As we have noted, Joshua himself had considerable experience as a military general, but he bowed worshipfully before this mighty one from the angelic world, and in the spirit of true soldierly obedience asked, “What saith my lord unto his servant?” “The captain of the LORD’S host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy.” His true spirit of obedience to Jehovah is eloquently displayed in the words, “And Joshua did so.” (vs. 15) Happy are all God’s people who, when they hear his command, hesitate not to obey, but do so.

GOD'S PLAN TO CAPTURE JERICHO

The people of Jericho were fearful, and when they realized that the Israelites had crossed Jordan, they closed the doors in the walls so that “none went out, and none came in.” As for Joshua, his responsibility was great, but the Lord reassured him. Even before instructing him on the plan of action for capturing Jericho, he said to Joshua, “See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour.”—Josh. 6:1,2

Joshua's faith must have been tested somewhat when he learned from the “captain of the LORD'S host” the method to be used for capturing this heavily walled city. As a military man he would naturally think in terms of heavy and continuous assaults upon the walls, coupled with attempts to scale the walls and thus get as many soldiers within as possible. However, nothing like this was to be done. No usual military strategy was to be employed.

All of Israel's military men were to “go round about the city once” each day for six days. Seven priests preceding the ark were to accompany them, blowing upon rams' horns. On the seventh day there were to be seven encirclements of the city. At the conclusion of the seventh round of the city the priests were to blow their trumpets, when commanded by Joshua, and the people were to “shout with a great shout.”—vss. 3-5

The assurance was given to Joshua that with this shout the walls of the city would crumble, and the Israelites were to immediately march in, every man from where he was located. The walls did crumble, as had been promised. The “LORD'S host,” under the leadership of their “captain,” saw to that. The

same powerful forces that parted the Red Sea and caused the convulsions of nature at Mount Sinai would have no difficulty in destroying the walls of Jericho.

The part played by Joshua and the Israelites, nevertheless, was important. For forty years, according to Rahab, or from the time they first heard of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, the Canaanites had been fearful. Now that this much-feared people were encamped just outside of Jericho's walls, their hearts must surely have melted with fear. To know that an army, accompanied by priests blowing on trumpets, was encircling their city each day, but not striking a blow, would add to their confusion. Then, with that mighty shout, to see and hear the supposedly impregnable walls of their city crumble and fall, they would be well-nigh paralyzed with fear, making it comparatively easy for the Israelites to march into the city and take possession. Had the people within the city been composed and alert, they might have held off the Israelites for a long time, even with their walls destroyed.

However, Jehovah knew how to gain this signal victory for them. It was just as Joshua had said, "The LORD hath given you the city." (Josh. 6:16) The city of Jericho was accursed. Doubtless the wickedness of the people was great, and their presence among the Israelites as captives would have been detrimental, so the orders were that all should be destroyed "both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass."—vs. 21

In keeping with the promise of the two spies, Rahab and her family were saved and continued to

dwell with the Israelites. The silver and the gold found in the city was put into “the treasury of the LORD,” but the Israelites were strictly commanded not to save anything for their private use.—vss. 17,19

A DEFEAT FOLLOWS

Following the victory over Jericho, we read that “the LORD was with Joshua; and his fame was noised throughout all the country.” (Josh. 6:27) However, disappointment awaited him. The next fortified stronghold of the enemy to be taken was the small city of Ai. Following his usual custom, Joshua sent men to “go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai.”—Josh 7:2

Unintentionally, we believe, they brought back what turned out to be an inaccurate report to Joshua. Having conquered the mighty and heavily walled city of Jericho, the little city of Ai seemed insignificant. Thus the spies said to Joshua, “Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few.”—vs. 3

Joshua took this advice, but the small army he sent against Ai suffered a humiliating defeat. As a consequence, “the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.” (vs. 5) How quickly they forgot the miracle of the river Jordan and of the crumbling walls of Jericho! Even Joshua, to whom the Lord had said, “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee,” felt that God had deserted him and the people.

Verses 6 and 7 read, “Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. And Joshua

said, Alas, O Lord GOD, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan!”

Time and again the Israelites had complained to Moses in much this same vein. They asked why they had been brought out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. However, Moses never expressed such sentiments. Joshua did not fully measure up to Moses’ stature in faith and courage. Here, when in difficulty for the first time after taking over the leadership of God’s people, we find him asking the Lord why he had brought them over the Jordan, only to be delivered into the hand of an enemy.

“What shall I say,” Joshua asked Jehovah, “when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies? For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy great name?” (Josh. 7:8,9) Because two or three thousand of Israel’s soldiers had been defeated, Joshua imagined the worst, visualizing all Israel destroyed by their enemies, with even the national name perishing.

Joshua, however, was concerned over something even more important. In such an event, what would happen to God’s great name? The glory which had accrued to Jehovah through the deliverance of his people from Egypt, their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, their being sustained by manna in the wilderness, their passage over Jordan and the defeat of Jericho would be lost, if now the Israelites were to be destroyed.

Joshua's reasoning was correct, but was based upon a wrong premise, resulting from a lack of faith. God had no intention of allowing his people to be destroyed by the Canaanites. However, there was a lesson he wanted them to learn—that of obedience. He told Joshua that the Israelites had sinned and that a curse was upon them. In the capture of Jericho they had been instructed not to take any of the spoils for themselves. (vss. 10-13) The silver and gold found in the city was to be put into the treasury of the Lord, but everything else was to be destroyed, and without exception.

One of the Israelites had disobeyed this order. It was Achan, of the tribe of Judah. He coveted and stole a “goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight.” (vss. 20-22) He had hidden this spoil under his tent, supposing that no one knew about it. However, the Lord knew and, because of it, allowed the defeat at Ai, in order to bring the matter to the attention of Joshua and the people to impress upon them the great importance of obeying instructions if they expected him to continue fighting their battles for them.

With this situation cleared up and Achan himself destroyed as an object lesson to the people, Joshua again undertook the capture of Ai and was successful. This time he acted under direction from God, who said to him, “Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land.”—Josh. 8:1

The victory was complete. Now Joshua paused long enough from further conquest to build an altar

to the Lord according to instructions given by Moses. “He wrote there upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel.” (Josh. 8:32) Then the law was read to all the people. It served to remind them of their covenant with God, and of the necessity of obedience in order to continue receiving his blessings.

The news of Jericho and Ai spread throughout the land, and all the various kings among the Canaanites “gathered themselves together, to fight with Joshua and with Israel, with one accord.” (Josh. 9:1,2) The inhabitants of Gibeon, however, decided upon another course. By a ruse they made Joshua believe that they had come from a far country and were without food and clothing and offered to become the servants of the Israelites, “and Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live.”—vss. 3-27

THE SUN STANDS STILL

This led to another crisis. Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem, an Amorite, heard that the people of Gibeon had made peace with Joshua, so he formed a league with four other kings—Hoham, Piram, Japhia, and Debir—also Amorites, to fight against the men of Gibeon. These, in turn, called upon Joshua and the Israelites to assist them, with the result that the Amorites were defeated. Again the intervention of the Lord played an important part in this victory for the Israelites, for “he cast down great [hail] stones from heaven upon them.”—Josh. 10:1-11

It was at the time of this battle that Joshua called upon the sun to “stand still,” or, as the marginal

translation states, to “be silent.” *Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary* defines the words used here as “to be dumb,” also “to perish.” Faith does not require an explanation of miracles, but it is important to discover as accurately as possible the nature of any miracle which the Bible relates. It is so in this case.—vss. 12-14

A casual reading of this passage suggests that the sun and the moon actually stood still and did not move for an entire day. However, judging from the literal meaning of the Hebrew word used, and the fact that it was a stormy day, apparently what actually happened in answer to Joshua’s prayer was that the sun and moon remained hidden behind clouds. They were “silent,” so to speak, failing to speak in terms of light—their usual effect having “perished” on that day. This played into the hands of Joshua and the Israelites. It is thought that the Amorites were moon worshipers, and for the moon to remain hidden when it would have normally been visible, and for even the sun to fail to shine upon them, would cause them to believe that their god had forsaken them. Thus their morale was weakened and, panic-stricken, they gave up the fight and fled. The five kings hid in a cave, but were found by Joshua, and slain.—vss. 16-26

DIVIDING THE LAND

In the remainder of chapter 10 of the Book of Joshua, through chapters 11 and 12, are related the further victories of Joshua which God gave him over the Canaanites. However, all the land had not been conquered. The Lord said to Joshua, “there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed.”

(Josh. 13:1) Verses 2 to 6 of this chapter list the remaining places to be conquered.

The Lord said to Joshua at this time, “Thou art old and stricken in years,” so he did not look to him to serve any longer as the general of Israel’s army. Instead, he directed him to proceed with the task of dividing the land among the various tribes, with the expectation that each tribe, when receiving the outline of its portion in the land, would undertake the task of wresting it from the Canaanites. The remainder of chapter 13 through chapter 19 record God’s instructions in this regard.

This was never fully accomplished, however, as indicated in Hebrews 4:8, where the name Joshua is translated “Jesus.” The text states that Joshua did not give the people rest in the land. Many enemies yet remained, and these continued to plague the Israelites from time to time. God’s blessings upon his typical people, even as with us, were upon the basis of their faith. Because of their unbelief they failed to enter into the full rest and blessings which might have been theirs.

Joshua 23:1 reads, “It came to pass a long time after that the LORD had given rest unto Israel from all their enemies round about, that Joshua waxed old and stricken in age.” While this speaks of Israel having rest from their enemies, it was based in some instances upon the fact that they made peace with the inhabitants of the land, and this later led to much trouble for them. (vss. 11-13) Caleb had been a notable exception to this. He “wholly followed the LORD,” and the record is that he drove out enemies from his portion of the land, and “had rest from war.”—Josh. 14:6-15

JOSHUA'S FINAL MESSAGE

Joshua, like Moses, made a farewell speech to the Israelites, recorded in chapters 23 and 24. He reminded the people of the wonderful manner in which God had dealt with and blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and of how he had brought the whole nation out of the land of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and kept them alive in the wilderness. He recounted their miraculous crossing of Jordan, and the victories the Lord had given them since entering the land of promise.

With this faith-strengthening background of divine providences as an inspiration to obedience, Joshua warned them against worshiping false gods and called upon them to continue serving the true God. “Choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served, ... or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”—Josh. 24:15

The people renewed their covenant to serve Jehovah, and again Joshua warned, “If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.” (vs. 20) The people again affirmed their determination to serve the true God, saying, “The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.”—vs. 24

Joshua was a faithful servant of the Lord, and a strong leader of God's people. He “died, being an hundred and ten years old.” (vs. 29) Verse 31 informs us that “Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua, and which had known all the

works of the LORD, that he had done for Israel.” What a wonderful tribute to the faithful example of this man of God!

Many helpful lessons may properly be drawn from Joshua’s experiences associated with leading the Israelites across the Jordan River, conquering much of the land of promise, and dividing the land to the various tribes. As Christian soldiers, fighting the “good fight of faith,” we have many enemies to conquer, and it is only by faith in the Lord and the obedient following of his instructions, making use of all the means of grace which he has provided, that we can hope to be victorious, and to enter the heavenly “Canaan” promised to those who are faithful, even unto death.—I Tim. 6:12; Rev. 2:10

Let us “wholly follow the Lord,” as did Caleb, and be “strong” and of “good courage,” as the Lord encouraged Joshua to be, exercising faith that the Heavenly Father will always be with us to help in our every time of need. By so doing, we will enjoy that wonderful rest of faith now, and at the end of the way be counted worthy to receive our heavenly inheritance, and enter into the rest that “remaineth” for “the people of God.”—Heb. 4:9 ■