

My thanks to Dan for the invitation to bring one of the messages in this series *Taking New Ground*. For those worshipping with us today that I've not had the opportunity to meet, my name is Gary Johnson, and I used to be one of the pastors here at The Creek for a number of years. A little over a year ago, I was able to pass the baton of ministry to Dan and I am now leading a ministry called *E2: Effective Elders* that trains and equips elders in churches across the country. And the best part of this new season is that my wife, Leah, and I are still able to call The Creek our home.

Have you recently asked yourself - or thought to yourself - "how much longer?" And I'm not referring to this sermon, but to sheltering in place! Weeks ago, over breakfast, the day got off to a rocky start. I said to Leah, "Well, happy 54th!" She looked at me and asked, "Fifty-four what? We've not been married 54 years." Then I said, "Fifty-four *days* - today is day 54 of sheltering in place." Leah then asked, "And are you counting?" And I answered, "Why no, dear. Why would you think that?"

There comes a time when we must move on to move out, and that is exactly what happened with the Israelites. For forty years, they had sheltered in place in the wilderness and there came a time when they needed to move on into the Promised Land. We are reading of those very days in the book of Joshua when God's people "took new ground."

Before we get into today's passage, we must remember what is taking place in the book of Joshua. It is *always* context before content. Joshua was leading the Israelites into a land where they had never been. And remember, Moses has died by this time. Joshua was now responsible for leading a few million men, women, and children into the Promised Land - a land on the other side of the Jordan River.

It is reasonable to think that young Joshua was struggling with this new responsibility. After all, not once, but over and again, God told Joshua to "be strong and courageous." God did so *four times* in just the first chapter of Joshua! Here is a quick and easy question. When an angel appeared to someone in the Scriptures, what were the first words spoken by the angel? "Fear not! Don't be afraid!" And why did the angel always say 'fear not!?' Because people were always frightened with the sudden appearance of an angel. Why did God repeatedly say to Joshua, "Do not be afraid?" Joshua was afraid! It is reasonable to think that Joshua struggled with fear from time to time, particularly when he was about to go into battle against one king after another. Another name for the Promised Land is Canaan, and the people who lived there were called Canaanites. The Canaanites had no fear of or belief in God. They even practiced human sacrifice in the worship of their idols, and they were known to burn their children as such sacrifices.

We are entering a land where we have not yet been, and it is not a land on the other side of the Jordan, but of COVID. As we enter this new land, like Joshua, we will encounter one battle after another. Many people are battling unemployment. At the end of May, more than 40 million Americans were out of work. The unemployment rate is the worst since the Great Depression. Some people are battling grief with the loss of loved ones, the closing of their business, the

cancellations of graduations, weddings and more. Grief, depression, panic, worry and anxiety are real enemies. Every battle has an enemy. Joshua fought the Canaanites – the enemy in his battle.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that “our enemy is not flesh and blood (i.e., people), but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). And Jesus said that our enemy has come to “kill, steal and destroy” (John 10:10). As we enter this new land on the other side of COVID, we have an enemy who seeks to kill, steal and destroy our lives, our marriages and families, our dreams, our hopes and more.

Now, here is the good news: Joshua fought more than just the Battle of Jericho. He fought battle after battle, and he won time and again—and so can we. As we walk through the content of two chapters in Joshua, three things clearly stand out as to how we can fight the war with our enemy and win, one battle at a time.

### **Joshua 6:1-5**

Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one came out and no one came in. Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. 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. 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.”

### **Joshua 10:7-14**

So Joshua marched up from Gilgal with his entire army, including all the best fighting men. The Lord said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to stand against you.” After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took them by surprise. The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, who defeated them in a great victory at Gibeon. Israel pursued them along the road going up to Beth Horon and cut them down all the way to Azekah and Makkedah. As they fled before Israel on the road from Beth Horon to Azekah, the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites. On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: “O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the valley of Aijalon.” So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a man. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!

As we walk through these two battle scenes, identify *your* battle. Bring it to mind and watch for the three ways in which God fights for us.

In the battle with Jericho, God said to Joshua, “I have delivered Jericho into your hands” (6:2). In other words, it was a done deal. God already determined that Joshua would win the battle. In the battle with the five kings, God told Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them. I’ve given them into your hands” (10:8); and in verse 14, the text reads: “...the Lord was fighting for Israel.” That should not surprise us because before Joshua set foot in the Promised Land, God told him, “Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” God made a promise to be present with Joshua and God kept His promise! During the battles, God was present – and not only then, but He is present in our battles *even now*.

It is in God’s nature to be present with us. From the opening pages of Scripture in Genesis 3 where God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, to the very end of the Bible in Revelation 21 when God creates a new earth and the “dwelling of God is with us throughout all eternity,” God’s desire is to be with us. The pages between Genesis and Revelation tell us of the many instances when God revealed His presence with His people. In Daniel, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into an enormous, blazing furnace to kill them, a fourth person was seen in the flames protecting the men from certain death. Acts 27 records a time when the Apostle Paul (along with 276 men) was caught in a raging storm on the Mediterranean Sea, and an angel of God stood beside Paul, reassuring him that no one would lose their lives. Moreover, there are strong statements declaring God’s presence.

Zephaniah 3:17 – “The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save.”

Hebrews 13:5 – “For God has said, ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.’”

Matthew 28:18-20 – “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always – even to the end of the age.”

The Great Commission comes with a Great Companion, Jesus himself. Even one of His names declares that truth: Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” And remember that God is immutable. God never has and never will change for He said, “I, the Lord, do not change” (Malachi 3:6). That means that no matter what battle we find ourselves fighting, it is God who *still* fights for us! God is with us in the battle! What stands out? God’s *presence*!

Eighteen years ago when Benaiah, our first grandchild, was born, I remember a guy telling me that life would be forever different with grandchildren – and he was right. As a matter of fact, I heard of a grandfather going to his daughter’s house to play with his one-year-old grandson. When grandpa walked into the house, he heard his grandson sobbing and screaming in the family room. He was in a playpen while his mom scolded him. Grandpa reached in to pick up his grandson and the guy’s daughter said, “Dad, do not pick him up! He has been a bad boy. He stays in the playpen. This is my house. I am in charge. I’m going upstairs to make the beds and when I come back he had better be in the playpen. Do you understand me?” “Yes, ma’am,” the dad said to his daughter. Thirty minutes later, the young mother couldn’t hear anymore crying. She walked downstairs and into the family room – and much to her surprise, her baby boy was still in the playpen – along with grandpa! Grandpa climbed into the playpen and made all the difference. Peace is not the absence of *trouble*, but the presence of *God*.

God's presence was accompanied by God's *power*! Think with me. Archaeological digs at Jericho have discovered not one, but two walls around the ancient city, both upper and lower walls. The debris field indicates that the walls were enormous. Joshua and his army could have been intimidated by the size and scope of those walls. Joshua and the Israelites hit a wall, but God made a way! Yet those walls amounted to nothing when compared to the power of God. In the same way, when Joshua and his one and only army attacked not one, but the joint forces of five armies, that was nothing when compared to the power of God. After all, one plus God equals a majority. It was nothing for God to hurl enormous hailstones down on the enemy forces. It was nothing for God to put the brakes on planet earth, slowing down its 1,000-mph rotation. It was nothing to keep the earth from suffering a global whiplash of catastrophic proportions. God the Creator can do anything with His creation. God did not show up, He showed off! God is omnipresent – always present everywhere. He does not show up as if He has been absent. To the contrary. He shows off! God's explosive power made all the difference in the battles Joshua faced. When we hit a wall, God makes a way! His presence and His power are undeniable.

Jeremiah 32:27 – “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for Me?”

Isaiah 40:12 – God has “measured the waters of the earth in the hollow of His hands.”

Psalm 91:14-16 – “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him. I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me and I will answer him. I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

The mouth of the Amazon River is roughly 200 miles across; to put that into perspective, that's roughly the distance from The Creek to the Kentucky/Tennessee state line, or the distance from here to Peoria, IL or to the other side of Columbus, Ohio, or north to nearly Grand Rapids, Michigan! Centuries ago, when sailors drifted in that water without wind to move them along, many would struggle with thirst, assuming that they were in the salty water of the Atlantic Ocean. They had no idea that they were floating on life-giving fresh water! And all too often, we are unaware of the great, immeasurable power of God here with us in the battle!

When in the heat of battle, do not miss seeing and sensing God's presence, God's power – and God's *pattern*. Think about this. In Joshua 6, God told Joshua to march around Jericho once a day for *six consecutive days*! Then, on day seven, Joshua was to march around the city seven times, have the priests blow the trumpets and six hundred plus soldiers were to shout aloud. And the great walls will “come a-tumbling down.” They will collapse on themselves. What was the response of Joshua? Remember, he was a seasoned, highly trained warrior. He could have said to God in response, “Ah, come again? You said to do *what*? Did I hear you right?” Even his hundreds of thousands of soldiers could have been confused. Joshua never told them that the walls would collapse. He just told them the marching orders. Can you imagine warriors – trained for battle – going out for what appeared to be a walk in the park? It wasn't even a fitness run with a 20-lb pack. These “Navy Seals, Army Rangers, Green Berets” would have been confused by this battle tactic. This was nothing less than God's *pattern*.

Simply put, God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.

God put a staff in the hand of a man named Moses to divide the waters of the Red Sea. *God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.*

God puts the jawbone of a donkey in the hands of a warrior Samson and he kills 1,000 enemies of God. *God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.*

God puts stones in the hands of a shepherd named David and with a slingshot brings down a giant of a man named Goliath. *God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.*

God puts five loaves of bread and two fish in the hands of His Son and feeds 5,000 men, plus women and children. *God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.*

Whether shouting at walls so they collapse, hailstones from the sky or putting the brakes on earth's rotation, *God does the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.*

It's His calling card, His pattern! Being that God doesn't change, He is *still* doing the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.

Dr. Thomas Edison, one of America's greatest inventors was known to have said, "Five percent of people think, ten percent of people think they think, and the other eighty-five percent of the people would rather die than think." Sit and think – how is God doing the greatest of things in the least likely of ways in your life?

When bringing the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Moses performed many miracles before Pharaoh. Over and again, Pharaoh's magicians imitated the miracles – that is, for a limited time. There came the day when the miracles of the gnats was performed by Moses. Gnats too numerous to count covered Egypt. When the Egyptian magicians tried to imitate the miracle and failed, they turned to their boss and said, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). The Egyptian magicians did not believe in God, yet they recognized Him. Why can't we? What's wrong with us when we fail to see the presence, the power and the pattern of God at work in our lives?

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote: "Do not be a mere hearer of the Word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22). We are challenged to put this truth into practice.

We must identify our enemy (1 Peter 5:8).

We must identify our battle (despair, life circumstances, etc.).

We must recognize and claim God's presence, power, and pattern as He fights for us.

What if we walked around our neighborhood, what if we drove around our city on 465 – praying for the people who live on our streets and in our city – the 317?

Remember – we have a Promised Land called heaven. Just as God fought for His people centuries ago, Jesus has fought for us against sin and death – and He won! Jesus died a horrific death on a cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb, and He was raised from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is our war hero, having died for our sins. It may be that you have yet to

become His by surrendering your life to Jesus Christ – and this is your next step. *With God fighting for us, we will win the war with evil – one battle at a time.*

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