

## **From Here to There: Pursuing the Promise: 2. Obstacles Overcome**

**Joshua 6:1-5**

**August 16, 2020**

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Obstacles. We all face them. We are driving to some location when we see something in the road that either requires we swerve to avoid whatever it is, slow down, come to a complete stop, or take a detour. And sometimes, due to the circumstances or some distraction, we run right into the obstacle, at great risk to ourselves or others – resulting in an entirely different destination. I remember the evening that I was driving on the LBJ freeway in Dallas, Texas, taking a friend to the airport when suddenly the driver in front of me slammed on the brakes, screeching to a stop – and I attempted to do the same but the distance between us was not enough and I slammed into the back of a pickup truck. There had been a car abandoned in the middle of the freeway and it was dark, making it impossible to see the car until it was too late. And my brand new car was undriveable. And my heart was crushed, because buying the car had been a stretch – and this friend and I had been dating and my offer to take her to the airport was my hope of making a good impression. And now the car was destroyed and she would miss her flight. And as we waited alongside the road for a police car and a tow truck everything seems so uncertain. My car, which was far from being paid for, had been my lifeline to my job, to school, and to this woman I hoped would be my girlfriend. In case you are wondering, a year later that girlfriend accepted my proposal of marriage, and a year after that I graduated, and all these years later, I'm still working for the church. Somehow it worked out, in spite of the obstacle that could have changed everything. It worked out, but I didn't know that then. Obstacles. We all face them.

Last week, the message ended with this assignment: do something hard or do something new. And if you did, whatever that hard thing was or new thing was, there were obstacles – reasons not to do whatever it was – which is why it was a hard thing. My hard thing was not of my own choosing. It dropped into my life – I could not go over it, could not go around, I had to go right through it – like it or not.

And that's where we left the people of Israel last Sunday. They were at the river's edge, staring at the other side and all of the fears and uncertainties they had carried with them for forty years. There were giants on the other side – even Joshua, who was their appointed leader, had seen the giants. And after forty years of storytelling those giants didn't get any smaller. But the land on the other side had been promised to them by God, a promise that went all the way back to their ancestor Abraham. And if they would cross the river, God promised to be with them every step of the way. So, on the appointed day, their journey began. Forty years earlier, they had retreated, but this time with the ark of covenant held high – the ark was a chest that represented the promise that God made with them. With this chest held high, the priests step into the river and suddenly and miraculously, the water coming downstream stood still and just like the time Moses stepped into the Red Sea, the waters parted and everyone crossed on dry land. They made it! They were in the Promised Land, and very quickly the people behave as if the land is theirs when they have not yet faced a challenge far greater than the river. Canaanites live in this land, and the Canaanites have not invited them to come on over.

The people had forgotten why they are in this new land. They completed stage one – the journey from Egypt to Canaan – but stage two is the greater journey – it's why God pointed them in this direction – and that's to serve God's purposes. We can get sidetracked, thinking my life is all about me. I should be able to do what I want, when I want, and how I want. If Moses led the people from slavery to freedom, isn't that what freedom means? But did we create life on our own? How did we get here? In our quest for what we want, it's easy to lose sight of the

One who gave us life – for a purpose. This is not a journey in which we invite God to come along with us. This is a journey in which God invites us to come along. And often the greatest obstacle in our way is us.

It's like this old story of two monks who were walking through the countryside. They were on their way to another village to help bring in the crops. As they walked, they noticed an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she couldn't get across on her own. The first monk kindly offered, "We will carry you across, if you would like." "Thank you," she said gratefully accepting their help. So the two men joined hands, lifted her between them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way. After they walked another mile or so, the second monk began to complain. "Look at my clothes," he said. "They're filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff." The first monk just smiled and nodded his head. A few more miles up the road, the second monk griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it's all because we had to carry that woman. I can't go any farther because of the pain." The first monk looked down at his partner, now lying on the ground, moaning. "Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked. "Your back hurts because you're still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

Some of us are like that second monk who can't let go of the obstacle – and it defines us. Or, we hold the pain of the past and use it like a club to remind others that we are where we are because of something they did years ago. It's not the obstacle but how we respond to the obstacle that determines what's next for us.

The people of Israel had to decide whether they would continue the journey to where God wanted them to go. Would they move forward in spite of the obstacles or would they once again retreat to the other side – back to their comfort zone in the desert wilderness. And with the walls of Jericho looming before them, God sent a messenger to Joshua. **The commander of the LORD's heavenly force said to Joshua, "Take your sandals off your feet because the place where you are standing is holy."** This was the same message that God sent to Moses before God sent Moses on a mission that would set God's people free. The journey before you will require faith. What sort of battle strategy is this? March around the city once a day for six days and on the seventh day march seven times. **Have them blow on the ram's horn. As soon as you hear that trumpet blast, have all the people shout out a loud war cry. Then the city wall will collapse.** When we listen carefully, it's not the marching or the trumpets or the shout that will cause the wall to crumble – it's faith – it's that ark, that chest of the covenant – it's the faith that pursues God's promise. The walls will crumble.

Last week, I was reflecting on the African-American spiritual that is based on this story. It's a song from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sung by slaves who were brought to this country, bought and sold – in a country that prided itself in its freedom. And the spirituals were a way to encourage each other – to keep the faith – in their own struggle for freedom. If Joshua could achieve victory over evil through the blowing of trumpets, then they could ultimately achieve victory over slavery through the singing of songs such as this one. I'd like us to listen to this spiritual as sung by Mahalia Jackson in 1957 at a time when the 20<sup>th</sup> century civil rights movement was underway. [video] I hear in her voice the faith that what God accomplished at Jericho could be accomplished in 1957 – the walls of injustice and segregation could crumble. But it would take faith. And since the death of George Floyd, there has been a reawakening to the fact that walls of injustice still exist – even in our own Twin Cities area. And until all people experience the fullness and freedom of life, none of us are truly free. And maybe, just maybe, we can be part of putting cracks in the wall of injustice by coming alongside. There is a group here at Messiah that has been reading, listening, and learning about that wall of injustice.

Tomorrow evening there is another conversation – and you are invited. And I believe the walls will crumble when we remember that we are serving a God who seeks love and justice for those who have been marginalized and calls us to come alongside to treat each one as a beloved child of God.

This morning's scripture is the story of Joshua and God's battle for the hearts of God's people. The journey is God's and we are invited to make this journey with God. But we've got to let go of the obstacles. We've got to have the faith that will cause the walls to crumble. And there's a third thing I need to mention about this story – and it's the aftermath. The people marched. **They blew the trumpets... They shouted a loud war cry. Then the wall collapsed. The people went up against the city, attacking straight ahead... Without mercy, they wiped out everything in the city as something reserved for God – man and woman, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys.** And that's how this story concludes. It's why some avoid the book of Joshua and much of the Old Testament. God is authorizing even directing Joshua to commit genocide, even innocent children and the animals? This is not the picture of a God that I want to follow. There's no easy explanation to such stories and theologians have offered many. But here's how I make sense of the conclusion to this story.

I love to read, and one of the greatest joys for me when I take a few days of vacation as I did a few weeks ago is the opportunity to read – and I especially enjoy reading novels. There are plenty of times when I have been reading a book and in the middle I thought I knew how it would end, but the ending turned out to be nothing like I had imagined. In fact, the ending even changed my understanding of what was happening early on in the story. The Bible is a book where it's important to begin with the end in mind. If we read selected portions of the Old Testament and think we have a picture of God, we are mistaken. The clearest picture of God is Jesus Christ, who is the one true image of God. What we learn through Jesus is that God is like a father who waits for his rebellious son to come home. God seeks those who are lost and heals those who are sick. And when people gathered to stone a woman accused of violating a commandment of God, God says no – not judgment but grace. Jesus reached out to Jews and Gentiles and Samaritans and Roman – even those that other believed were outside of God's love and care – but not Jesus. He shows us the true character of God.

Here's what I want: To be able to wake up every morning and to get on my knees and say, "God with everything that comes my way today, I want to be able to say "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done." It's not about me. Help me to put aside the obstacles. Help me to defeat the walls of injustice. Because in this journey from here to God knows where – it truly is God who knows where. And I want to travel with you. It's not about God being part of my story; it's me being part of God's story. Let's not waste our lives on what we can do, when we could be part of what God can do.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 16, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, by coming into this world, you brought light and clarity into my understanding of who you are and what you expect from me. Help me to live my life in a way that shows caring for others. Strengthen my faith and my character; lead me forward to completeness as I live my life in you. Amen.

## Monday, August 17

### Scripture: Exodus 34:5-10

The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, “The LORD.” The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: “The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness, showing great loyalty to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion, yet by no means clearing the guilty, punishing for their parents’ sins their children and their grandchildren, as well as the third and the fourth generation.” At once Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. He said, “If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession.”

The LORD said: I now make a covenant. In front of all your people, I’ll perform dramatic displays of power that have never been done before anywhere on earth or in any nation. All the people who are around you will see what the LORD does, because I will do an awesome thing with you.

**Observation:** As we heard on Sunday, there are disturbing stories in the Bible. But even in Israel’s earliest days, God’s love was the key to other stories. Egyptians and Canaanites didn’t think their gods loved them. When God revealed his character to Moses, though, “compassionate and gracious” were the key characteristics.

**Application:** Egyptian and Canaanite “gods” didn’t make covenant promises. Their followers offered sacrifices mostly to try to stay on their fickle gods’ good side. But Israel’s God told Moses, “I am making a covenant” (as he had with Abraham). In what ways have you experienced God’s covenant—God sticking with you through both good and bad? How have your experiences with human relationships affected your ability to trust that God’s love for you is truly steadfast?

**Prayer:** Lord God, I admit that I usually prefer simple and easy to understand parts of the Bible. As you move me to engage with you in the Bible, give me a thirst to know you better. I’m so glad you want to be known, loved and trusted. Amen.

## Tuesday, August 18

### Scripture: Micah 6:6-8

With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

**Observation:** When Jesus said to love your neighbor, many in his day wanted to limit that to their Israelite neighbors—and even then, it was a hard ideal to live up to. The prophet Micah saw that. He said God didn’t want God’s people to practice violence (physical, social or economic) toward other people. Pious rituals were no substitute for simply treating people well.

**Application:** What word or phrase speaks to you from this passage? Using irony, Micah kept making the proposed sacrifices in verses 6-7 bigger. He ended with child sacrifice, a ghastly practice among some of Israel’s neighbors. God didn’t want any of that. God calls us “to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” What do these three requirements tell you about what God is like? “To walk” was the Hebrew way of speaking of a person’s lifestyle. In what ways does your lifestyle reflect your choice to “walk humbly” with your God?

**Prayer:** O God, I want to live a life that honors and pleases you. Help me to offer you my heart, my inner being, before I offer you anything else. Guide me in my journey toward you each day. Amen.

### **Wednesday, August 19**

#### **Scripture: Joshua 5:13-15**

When Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up. He caught sight of a man standing in front of him with his sword drawn. Joshua went up and said to him, "Are you on our side or that of our enemies?" He said, "Neither! I'm the commander of the LORD's heavenly force. Now I have arrived!" Then Joshua fell flat on his face and worshipped. Joshua said to him, "What is my master saying to his servant?" The commander of the LORD's heavenly force said to Joshua, "Take your sandals off your feet because the place where you are standing is holy." So Joshua did this.

**Observation:** A divine messenger tells Joshua that God is neither on the side of Israel nor Israel's enemy. God's desire for justice transcends Israel's desire for land and freedom. Instead of instructing Joshua on a particular military strategy, he tells Joshua to take off his sandals and take on a posture of worship.

**Application:** Already, the people of Israel were at risk of forgetting their dependence on God. Joshua didn't know it yet, but the battle of Jericho would be the moment that would make Joshua a great leader. Joshua is on the verge of greatness – and the risk of becoming great is that he will lose his dependence on God. Have there been times when you acted but wish you had paused to worship instead? Or at least took time to pray?

**Prayer:** God, I know that my life is a gift from you, but it is easy to be so focused on a day's tasks and responsibilities that I forget how I am to live. This day is meant to honor you. Let this be a day when my words and actions honor you. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 20**

#### **Scripture: 1 Samuel 17:4-11, 32-37, 41-45**

A champion named Goliath from Gath came out from the Philistine camp. He was more than nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore bronze scale-armor weighing one hundred twenty-five pounds. He had bronze plates on his shins, and a bronze scimitar hung on his back. His spear shaft was as strong as the bar on a weaver's loom, and its iron head weighed fifteen pounds. His shield-bearer walked in front of him. He stopped and shouted to the Israelite troops, "Why have you come and taken up battle formations? I am the Philistine champion, and you are Saul's servants. Isn't that right? Select one of your men, and let him come down against me. If he is able to fight me and kill me, then we will become your slaves, but if I overcome him and kill him, then you will become our slaves and you will serve us. I insult Israel's troops today!" The Philistine continued, "Give me an opponent, and we'll fight!" When Saul and all Israel heard what the Philistine said, they were distressed and terrified.

"Don't let anyone lose courage because of this Philistine!" David told Saul. "I, your servant, will go out and fight him!" "You can't go out and fight this Philistine," Saul answered David. "You are still a boy. But he's been a warrior since he was a boy!" "Your servant has kept his father's sheep," David replied to Saul, "and if ever a lion or a bear came and carried off one of the flock, I would go after it, strike it, and rescue the animal from its mouth. If it turned on me, I

would grab it at its jaw, strike it, and kill it. Your servant has fought both lions and bears. This uncircumcised Philistine will be just like one of them because he has insulted the army of the living God. “The LORD,” David added, “who rescued me from the power of both lions and bears, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine.” “Go!” Saul replied to David. “And may the LORD be with you!”

The Philistine got closer and closer to David, and his shield-bearer was in front of him. When the Philistine looked David over, he sneered at David because he was just a boy; reddish brown and good-looking. The Philistine asked David, “Am I some sort of dog that you come at me with sticks?” And he cursed David by his gods. “Come here,” he said to David, “and I’ll feed your flesh to the wild birds and the wild animals!” But David told the Philistine, “You are coming against me with sword, spear, and scimitar, but I come against you in the name of the LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel’s army, the one you’ve insulted.

**Observation:** This is probably the best known story of Israel’s King David. Even persons unfamiliar with the Bible know this story. In sports and business, we often talk about a “David and Goliath” story when a “little guy” takes on an established power. The Philistine giant, whatever his exact size (ancient manuscripts differ), was big enough to terrify King Saul and the whole Israelite army. But he didn’t scare David. For David, the size of the God he served mattered much more than the size of his enemy. (And, of course, the story goes on in verse 46 and following to say the giant lost—badly.)

**Application:** When have you had to face a “giant” problem or person? Were your inner feelings (whether you showed them externally or not) more like those of Saul and the army, or like David’s? What role, if any, did your trust in God play in the way you faced the intimidating situation? Did you learn anything that helps you with giant problems or persons you face today, or may face in the future?

**Prayer:** Lord God, giants don’t always have to be nine feet tall to feel that way to me. Teach me that you are bigger than any human “giant,” and help me “cut them down to size” by trusting in you. Amen.

## **Friday, August 21**

### **Scripture: Psalm 73:1-13; Daniel 8:12-25**

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are have a pure heart. But me? My feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped because I envied the arrogant; I observed how the wicked are well off: They suffer no pain; their bodies are fit and strong. They are never in trouble; they aren’t weighed down like other people. That’s why they wear arrogance like a necklace, why violence covers them like clothes. Their eyes bulge out from eating so well; their hearts overflow with delusions. They scoff and talk so cruel; from their privileged positions they plan oppression. Their mouths dare to speak against heaven! Their tongues roam the earth! That’s why people keep going back to them, keep approving what they say. And what they say is this: “How could God possibly know! Does the Most High know anything at all!” Look at these wicked ones, always relaxed, piling up the wealth! Meanwhile, I’ve kept my heart pure for no good reason; I’ve washed my hands to stay innocent for nothing.

In an act of rebellion, another force will take control of the daily sacrifice. It will throw truth to the ground and will succeed in everything it does. How long? I then heard a certain holy one speaking. A second holy one said to the first one: “How long will this vision last—the one concerning the daily sacrifice, the desolating rebellion, and the handing over of the sanctuary

and its forces to be trampled?" He said to me, "For two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary will be restored."

Now I, Daniel, needed help understanding the vision I saw. Suddenly standing in front of me was someone who looked like a man. I then heard a human voice coming out of the center of the Ulai canal. It called out: "Gabriel, help this person understand what he has seen." Gabriel approached me, and I was terrified when he came. I fell with my face to the ground. Gabriel said to me, "Know this, human one: the vision is for the end time." As soon as he said this to me, I fell into a trance. My face was still on the ground. Then Gabriel touched me and set me up on my feet. He said, "Now, I am going to tell you what will happen during the time of doom that is coming, because at the appointed time there will be an end. The two-horned ram you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. The long-haired he-goat is the king of Greece, and the big horn between its eyes is the first king. The horn that snapped so that four came up in its place means that four kingdoms will come from one nation, but these four won't have the strength of the first one.

When their kingship nears its end and their sins are almost complete, a king will step forward. He will be stern and a master of deception. At the height of his power, he will wreak unbelievable destructions. He will succeed in all he does. He will destroy both the mighty and the people of the holy ones. Along with his cunning, he will succeed by using deceit. In his own mind, he will be great. In a time of peace, he will bring destruction on many, opposing even the supreme leader. But he will be broken—and not by a human hand.

**Observation:** Psalm 73 reflected a spiritual puzzle. People who completely ignored God seemed to be having success—no troubles at all (verses 3-5). If that was the case, maybe serving God was futile (verses 11, 13). Daniel 8's apocalyptic vision pictured an evil power (probably, originally, the oppressive Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes). Three times it said he would "succeed," but only in the short term. In the end, "he will be broken—and not by a human hand."

**Application:** For this psalmist, it was "the prosperity of the wicked" that nearly caused him to give up faith in God. At what times in your life, if any, has the "success" of the wicked led you to ask, "Does the Most High know anything?" (v. 11) Whose position, possessions or prospects do you envy? How much does it matter to you how "success" is reached?

**Prayer:** O Lord, give me more and more of your eternal perspective on success. Keep my steps from slipping at the times when I see the apparent success of the wicked. Amen.

## **Saturday, August 22**

### **Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:3-5, 4:8-16**

When I left for Macedonia, I asked you to stay behind in Ephesus so that you could instruct certain individuals not to spread wrong teaching. They shouldn't pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. Their teaching only causes useless guessing games instead of faithfulness to God's way of doing things. The goal of instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

While physical training has some value, training in holy living is useful for everything. It has promise for this life now and the life to come. This saying is reliable and deserves complete acceptance. We work and struggle for this: "Our hope is set on the living God, who is the savior of all people, especially those who believe." Command these things. Teach them. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. Instead, set an example for the believers through your speech, behavior, love, faith, and by being sexually pure. Until I arrive, pay

attention to public reading, preaching, and teaching. Don't neglect the spiritual gift in you that was given through prophecy when the elders laid hands on you. Practice these things, and live by them so that your progress will be visible to all. Focus on working on your own development and on what you teach. If you do this, you will save yourself and those who hear you.

**Observation:** On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul met a younger man named Timothy (Acts 16:1-4). Timothy became one of his most trusted associates, one Paul trusted to lead some of the churches he planted, and to continue leading them after Paul was gone. Such a large responsibility must have frightened Timothy at times, especially in the light of his youth (1 Timothy 4:12). But Paul urged him to lead with confidence and trust in God.

**Application:** What examples of either spiritual courage or timidity are parts of your family's spiritual legacy? In what ways have parents, grandparents and other important people given you confidence to fearlessly value and use your God-given strengths? What effect have they had on you? How can you mentor and encourage someone who is younger than you are?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as I live in this age-conscious culture, remind me that from your eternal view, age is one of the least of your concerns. Empower me to live without fear, now and in all the years of earthly life that are left for me. Amen.