

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## FAITH TO CONQUER AND CONVERT

Hebrews 11:30-31

By

Steven J. Cole

November 14, 2004

© Steven J. Cole, 2004

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, Updated Edition  
© The Lockman Foundation

November 14, 2004  
Hebrews Lesson 42

Faith to Conquer and Convert  
Hebrews 11:30-31; Joshua 2:8-14; 6:2-5, 22-25

John Gardner wrote [source unknown], "We are faced with a series of great opportunities—brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems." What *disguised opportunities* do you face today?

Some have trusted Christ as Savior, but have the *disguised opportunity* of some besetting sin that keeps bringing them down. They promise God that they won't do it again, only to repeatedly fail. Some are engulfed by problems in their marriages, or with their kids. They don't see any viable solutions. Some struggle daily with serious health problems or personal problems. Some face problems at work. Others wish they had work to have problems with! They struggle to make ends meet. Some have drifted into worldliness and spiritual apathy, but they don't even realize that they have a problem. Churches have problems, too, which are a conglomerate of all of the problems of their members.

As a leader in Israel after Moses' death, Joshua had a pile of *disguised opportunities*. He had to lead this fledgling nation of refugee slaves out of 40 years in the wilderness, across the Jordan River, and into the promised land that happened to be filled with evil, violent giants. The first *disguised opportunity* was to conquer the fortified city of Jericho. God gave Joshua the plan for victory. *By faith*, the walls of that fortress crumbled.

Meanwhile, inside the city, a prostitute had a huge *disguised opportunity*. She had heard of how God had miraculously delivered this people from Egypt 40 years before. She heard how they had defeated two powerful kings across the river. She knew that her city was next and that she and all of her family would perish, unless somehow the God of the Jews—the God of heaven and earth—intervened on their behalf. Then the impossible happened—two spies from that feared people came to lodge with her. She hid them from the authorities and they promised to spare her family and her, if she followed their directions. *By faith*, she and her family did not perish when her city was destroyed. These two stories that took place during the conquest of Jericho illustrate how...

God conquers our powerful enemies by faith  
and converts hopeless sinners by faith.

1. God conquers our powerful enemies by faith (11:30).

Faith is not some magical force. Rather, faith links us with the unseen God, who spoke the universe into existence. Faith is the channel through which God's blessings flow to us.

Jericho was the first obstacle of many that Joshua and the army of Israel faced in conquering Canaan, which God had promised to their forefather, Abraham. As he was pondering how to take this walled city, the Lord appeared to Joshua in human form as the captain of the Lord's army and revealed to him the plan for victory (Josh. 5:13-6:5). The Israelites were to march silently around the city once a day for six days with the tabernacle, while seven priests blew on rams' horns. On the seventh day, they were to circle the city seven times. When Joshua gave the signal, the priests were to blow the rams' horns and the people were to shout. The walls of the city would crumble and the Israeli soldiers would march straight into the city and take it.

There are many lessons in that story, but I focus on five:

A. Salvation brings us into conflict with powerful enemies.

We saw this with Israel and Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. But it bears repeating. Salvation does not insulate you from huge problems. Rather, it often brings you into conflict with problems that didn't even bother you before you were saved. Before you were saved, selfishness, pride, greed, lust, and many other sins didn't trouble you. You may even have thought that some of them were virtues! But then you get saved and realize that there are many fortified cities that must be conquered, and many of them are entrenched in your heart!

Not only do you face these enemies within, but now you face enemies from without that previously caused you no problems. Family members don't like your newfound faith, because it threatens their favorite sins. Bosses don't like the fact that you won't help them cheat to make a profit. Former friends malign you because you won't join them at their corrupt parties (1 Pet. 4:3-4).

- B. God's way of victory over these enemies accentuates His power and our weakness.

Marching your army around a walled city for seven days while blowing trumpets is *not* a sensible plan for victory! It must have seemed silly to many in Israel and to everyone inside Jericho. If Joshua had held meetings with his top commanders, none of them would have suggested this plan. One might have argued for a direct assault, with siege ramps and battering rams to overpower the city. Another may have suggested waiting it out until the city was starved into submission. But no one would have suggested doing what God commanded Joshua to do.

Why did God choose this strange approach? I think that He wanted to teach Israel a major lesson at the outset of their conquest of Canaan: *Victory over powerful enemies comes when we do not trust in ourselves, but trust totally in the Lord.* The repeated trips around Jericho served to drive home the lesson, "You cannot conquer this city in your strength. You must trust in My power."

Often our problem is not that we are too weak, but that we think that we are strong in ourselves. Because we're so prone to pride, if God granted us victory, we would take at least some of the credit for ourselves. So God's plan for victory humbles our pride by accentuating His power and our weakness.

You see this in the story of Gideon and his army trying to conquer the hordes of Midianites (Judges 6-7). He rallied an army of 32,000 men against 135,000 enemy troops, but God told Gideon that he had *too many* soldiers, not too few. If they won, they would boast in their victory (Judges 7:2). So, Gideon sent home 22,000 warriors who were afraid. But God said, "You've still got too many." So Gideon weeded them out until he was left with 300 soldiers. Finally, being *weak* enough, God could grant them victory and they would give Him the glory!

Paul entreated the Lord to take away his thorn in the flesh, but the Lord told him that His power is perfected in weakness. Paul testified, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Hudson Taylor said that when God wanted to open inland China to the gospel, He looked around for a man *weak enough* for the task.

So God's means for victory always involves faith, because faith acknowledges our inability and God's total ability (see 2 Chron. 20:1-12). Faith humbles our pride and exalts God's glory.

C. Faith must obey God implicitly.

Faith and obedience are inseparable, just as unbelief and disobedience go together. Genuine faith *always* obeys God. Israel could have said, "That's an interesting plan, Joshua, and we believe that God could do it that way. But we're going to try a more sensible approach." That would have been faithless and disobedient.

To obey God, they had to march silently around the city once a day for six days. The seventh day, when Joshua told them to march around it seven times, there may have been some groans. Each time around the city took between 30 minutes to an hour (depending on whom you read), so the seven times took at least three and a half hours. By the seventh day, some could have been grumbling under their breath, "This is dumb. Nothing has happened yet." But if any said that, it is not recorded. They obeyed what God had commanded. When they shouted, the walls miraculously came crashing down.

There are two factors involved in such obedience:

- (1) To obey God, we must know what His Word says about our situation.

God had appeared visibly and spoken audibly to Joshua. While I often wish that He would do that today (I'd settle for the audible voice!), such direct communication from God is very rare. How does God speak to us? He "has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:2), and the sum of His word to us is recorded in the Bible. While sometimes it is difficult to know how the Bible applies to our specific problem, it is obvious that we cannot obey His Word unless we know what it says and how it applies. Yet I've often seen Christians who are disobeying the clear commands of God's Word, but they wonder why God isn't blessing their lives!

- (2) Knowledge of God's Word must be followed by obedience, no matter how much it goes against conventional wisdom.

God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways His ways (Isa. 55:8). Moses' leading two million refugee slaves down to the Red Sea, with no way of escape from Pharaoh's army, was not in line with conventional wisdom. But he did it in direct obedience to God. Taking the same group out into the barren wilderness seemed like a sure formula for major disaster, but God had commanded him, and Moses obeyed.

Conventional wisdom says, "You can't get ahead in your business unless you cheat your customers and lie to the IRS." Faith obeys God, even if it leads to financial loss. Conventional wisdom says, "Everyone sleeps together before marriage. How else will you know if you're compatible? Besides, God will forgive." Faith says, "I'm going to obey God. I won't compromise, even if other Christians are doing it." Faith obeys God.

#### D. Faith must wait upon God.

Why didn't God say, "March around Jericho once, blow the trumpet and shout! The walls will fall down"? Every night they marched back to camp thinking, "We didn't accomplish anything today!" Each day tested their faith, and each day that victory was delayed, the test increased in intensity. Perhaps they heard jeers from those on the wall who were watching this futile daily parade. The jeers tempted them to take action to silence these scoffers. But they had to wait for God's timing. Finally,

#### E. Faith must wait on God expectantly.

They believed that God was going to act when they obeyed. There is no record that Joshua told them in advance what was going to happen. They just knew that he knew what God had commanded, and they obeyed. But when he told them to shout, they shouted expectantly, and God caused these impenetrable walls to crumble. Even though faith waits, faith waits expectantly, knowing that God *will* act in His power in His time.

But while Israel was marching around Jericho that week, another drama was taking place inside one house in the city. A prostitute named Rahab was crowded into her house with her extended family, waiting anxiously to see what would happen. Her story, condensed into one verse, shows us that...

## 2. God converts hopeless sinners by faith (11:31).

Rahab's story is a wonderful exhibit of God's grace! It contains seven lessons that I can only touch on briefly:

A. Rahab was an unlikely candidate for salvation.

From a Jewish perspective, Rahab had three strikes against her: she was a woman; she was a Canaanite; and, she was a prostitute. Except for Abraham's wife, Sarah, Rahab is the only woman mentioned by name in Hebrews 11. Jewish men would sanctimoniously pray, "Lord, I thank You that You didn't make me a Gentile or a woman!" But God saw fit to save this Gentile woman.

But not only was Rahab a Gentile woman, she was also a prostitute. From early times, many commentators have tried to dodge this, saying that she was only an innkeeper. But the Hebrew and Greek words are clear: she was a prostitute. (There is a different Hebrew word for temple prostitutes.) I've wondered why these spies would go to a prostitute's house. Thomas Aquinas (cited by Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 503) explained that they did not go there to sin, but because it was a good hiding place. Such houses are open, especially at night, when the men arrived (Josh. 2:2). Harlots receive their guests without discrimination or asking many questions. The king of Jericho seemed to accept as normal that these men would visit her in the night and leave almost as quickly as they had come.

But behind all of the spies' reasons for going to Rahab's house was God's providence. Even though Rahab was an unlikely candidate for salvation, God's grace had reached down to her. The fact that she is called "Rahab, the harlot," even after her conversion, underscores God's abundant grace toward sinners. The spies did not know when they went there that God had a mission for them besides spying, but He did. Sometimes we go somewhere on some errand, but God has another purpose, to use us to lead to salvation someone whom we would call an unlikely candidate.

I once met a man who had been a full-blown hippie, living with his girl friend and doing drugs. One morning he was driving in a remote canyon in Southern California when his muffler fell off his car. It happened in front of the house of a pastor, who had prayed with his wife that morning, "Lord, give us an opportunity to share the gospel with some lost soul today." That unlikely candi-

date for salvation met Christ that day because God caused his muffer to fall off right at that place in the road!

B. Rahab's faith saved her from perishing.

God commanded Israel to kill everyone in Jericho. Modern critics, who must be wiser than God, think that God was cruel (or Joshua was mistaken) to order the extermination of everyone in Canaan. But God had given the Canaanites 400 years to fill up the measure of their sin (Gen. 15:13-16). For 40 years, they had heard how God delivered Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea. For several years, they had heard how God had defeated the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, on the other side of the Jordan. For seven days, they had watched Israel march around their city. But did they repent of their sins? Only Rahab did, and perhaps her family.

Rahab could have complained that God was unfair to judge her city. She no doubt lost many friends in the conquest. But instead, she knew that she deserved death for her evil lifestyle. She knew that the Lord, God of Israel, is "God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). Although the entire city trembled with fear of the impending attack (Josh. 2:11), their fear did not lead to repentance and faith. Rahab's fear led her to turn from her sin and to believe in God. By faith, she "did not perish along with those who were disobedient" (Heb. 11:31).

Many think, probably correctly, that Rahab had come to faith in God *before* the spies arrived at her house. When God providentially brought the spies to her house, she saw it as the means of deliverance for herself and for her family. Although she did not understand much theology, she had enough faith in the one true God to save her. Her past life of sin did not disqualify her from salvation. God delights to save notorious sinners for His glory!

C. Rahab's faith separated her from her disobedient contemporaries.

Those who perished are called *disobedient* (Heb. 11:31). They were not "basically good people." They had heard of God's power, but they refused to submit to Him. They erroneously thought that their walled city would protect them. To be saved, Rahab had to break away from her people, her culture, and her source of income.

Although that is never easy and she must have wrestled with her decision, by faith she made the break.

We are not told whether she warned her fellow citizens of the coming judgment, or whether they mocked her for holing up in her house while Israel's armies strangely marched around the town. But it is still true today: saving faith means making a distinct break from this evil world, so that we often stand out as weird in their eyes.

D. Rahab's faith was an obedient faith.

James 2:25 lists Rahab next to Abraham as one who was justified by works. James is not denying justification by faith alone, but rather is making the point that genuine faith always results in good works. Her faith led her to hide the spies and send them away secretly, even though it put her life at great risk. She had to obey the explicit instructions that the spies gave her, to put the scarlet rope in her window and to have all of her family inside the house with her, in order for them to be saved. It may have seemed silly to them to watch Israel marching silently around the city for 13 times. They may have been tempted to join others on the wall shouting insults to the troops below. But they obeyed and they were saved.

Granted, Rahab's faith was not perfect in obedience. She was a pagan woman from a pagan culture, and it was a difficult situation when the king's messengers came to her house looking for the two spies, so she lied. Lying is sin, even when it is for a good cause. But God was gracious to take Rahab's obedient faith as seen in her welcoming the spies, and overlook her lie. If you will come to Christ in faith, just as you are, He saves you and then begins to work His holiness into your life.

E. Rahab's faith resulted in the salvation of her pagan family.

We do not know for certain that her family was saved spiritually, although I think it is probable. But we do know that they were saved physically from destruction at Jericho, and they became a part of the people of God. Presumably they not only learned about the true God of Israel, but also came to believe in Him personally. God can use the salvation of an unlikely person, like Rahab, to reach an entire family through her faith.

F. Rahab's faith brought her into covenant with God and His people.

James Boice (*Joshua: We Will Serve the Lord* [Revell], p. 45) points out that Rahab actually became more Jewish than many of the Jews by birth, in that she believed God, whereas they did not. Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell] VI:950) comments, "A true believer is desirous, not only to be in covenant with God, but in communion with the people of God, and is willing to cast in his lot with them, and to fare as they fare." Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5-6) includes the surprising fact that Rahab married a Jewish man, Salmon, and they had a son, Boaz, who married Ruth. Their son, Obed, was the father of Jesse, the father of David. So Rahab, the harlot, became an ancestor of Jesus Christ! What a great testimony of God's abundant grace!

G. Rahab's faith changed her life from futility to fruitfulness.

Prostitution is never glamorous. It is ugly. Men pay to use a woman's body, with no regard for her as a person. Prostitutes are never respected for what they do. When their bodies become too old to be attractive, they are out of work, lonely, and unloved.

But God reclaims the lives of the worst of sinners who turn to Him in repentance and faith. Rahab married and became a mother and grandmother. She became a partaker of all of Israel's spiritual privileges, and even became linked to Christ Himself! Any life outside of Christ is futile and headed for eternal destruction. Any life that God saves by His grace through faith becomes fruitful and headed for eternal glory.

### Conclusion

Jericho is a picture of this evil world, opposed to God. Either you are by faith on God's side, with some "Jericho's" in your life that you need to conquer. Or, you are comfortably living in Jericho, thinking that you are safe. But you're headed for destruction, whether you know it or not.

Whichever describes your situation, the key to victory is *faith*. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross in your place will deliver you from the coming destruction. If you're in God's camp, faith in His mighty power will give you victory over the intimidating enemies that threaten to destroy you. What great opportunities, disguised as insoluble problems, do you face? God has whatever resources you need to overcome them. Trust Him!

## Discussion Questions

1. Why doesn't God grant instant deliverance from our problems? Why do some problems linger on for years?
2. How can we know God's will in specific problem situations?
3. How can we get faith when we lack faith? Where is the heart of the problem of unbelief?
4. Must sinners clean up their lives *before* they can be saved? Where does repentance fit into the process?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2004, All Rights Reserved.