

Joshua 6:1-17 Discussion Guide

Passage Summary

Joshua 6 brings Israel to Jericho, the first fortified city they encounter after crossing into the Promised Land. But this is more than a military campaign. The fall of Jericho confronts us with one of the more difficult themes in Scripture: the judgment of God. The Canaanites had lived for generations in rebellion against God. Yet God's judgment did not come quickly or impulsively. He had patiently endured their sin for centuries. Nor were the people completely ignorant of what God had done. In Joshua 2, Rahab tells the spies that the people of Jericho had heard about Yahweh's mighty acts in Egypt and Israel's journey toward the land. Rahab heard and responded with faith: "The Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." Yet Jericho as a whole remained closed to God.

That makes the walls surrounding Jericho more than physical defenses. The city is closed up in resistance as God's judgment approaches. Yet we should be careful not to read this story with Israel standing neatly on the side of the "good people" and Canaan on the side of the "bad people." Scripture will repeatedly demonstrate Israel's own capacity for idolatry and rebellion. The impulses that drove Canaan away from God are present in every sinful human heart. We too pursue created things (money, power, sex, approval, pleasure, comfort, image) and ask them to give us what only God can provide. We therefore need a just Judge.

God gives Israel unusual instructions for Jericho. They are to march around the city with priests, trumpets, and the ark of the covenant. On the seventh day they are to circle the city seven times, the priests will blow the trumpets, the people will shout, and the walls will fall. This is intentionally not an impressive military strategy. Marching does not bring down fortified walls. Trumpets do not conquer cities. Shouting does not defeat armies. God does.

The presence of the ark reinforces the point: the Lord Himself is accomplishing His purposes. Israel does not get to claim the victory or imagine that its own strength made judgment possible. That is important because human beings make terrible final judges. Our judgments are clouded by self-interest, pride, limited knowledge, and our desire to justify ourselves. We can condemn one another over politics, parenting, education, money, neighborhoods, lifestyles, and countless other things simply because another person's choices differ from ours.

Yet our misuse of judgment does not mean that judgment itself is unnecessary. We live in a world where terrible evil is real. Murder, abuse, exploitation, oppression, and injustice cry out for someone who can truly distinguish good from evil and ultimately make what is wrong right. Joshua 6 declares that such a Judge exists.

But remarkably, this same God is also a merciful Judge. Rahab lives inside the city under judgment, yet she and her household will be rescued. She is not saved because she belongs to the right nation, possesses the right reputation, or has lived a sufficiently moral life. She has heard about Yahweh, believed, and entrusted herself to Him. Her rescue points us toward our own.

God does not simply pretend our sin never happened or sweep evil under the rug. If He did, He would cease to be just. Instead, the gospel tells us that God Himself provides the way for justice and mercy to meet. Jesus lives the righteous life we have failed to live. At the cross, He takes our sin upon Himself and bears the judgment we deserve. And through faith we receive His righteousness as our own. The guilty are forgiven and reconciled to the Father, not because God stopped caring about justice, but because Christ satisfied it on our behalf.

Joshua 6 therefore confronts us with both the seriousness of God's judgment and the wonder of His mercy. We should not look at Jericho and merely ask, "How could those people be judged?" We should also wonder: "How can sinners like us possibly be rescued?" And the gospel answers: because the Judge Himself has provided our salvation.

Reflection Questions

God Is a Just Judge

1. When you encounter passages about God's judgment, what is your instinctive reaction; discomfort, fear, defensiveness, gratitude, confusion, something else?
 - What might that response reveal about the way you understand God?
2. It can be easy to read Joshua 6 as though the Canaanites are simply "those sinful people over there."
 - Where do you recognize the same impulses toward idolatry, pleasure, control, approval, or self-rule in your own heart?
3. God's patience with Canaan reminds us that His patience should not be mistaken for indifference toward sin.
 - Are there areas of your own life where you have begun to presume upon God's patience rather than allowing His kindness to lead you toward repentance?

God Is the Judge We Need

4. Israel's strange instructions at Jericho made it impossible for them to take credit for the victory.
 - Where are you most tempted to believe that your strength, wisdom, planning, or competence is ultimately what holds your life together?
5. We often judge others in areas where Scripture gives us considerable freedom: politics, parenting decisions, schooling, money, lifestyle choices, and other preferences.
 - In what areas are you most tempted to turn your personal convictions or preferences into a standard for judging others?
6. Why does judging someone else sometimes make us feel better about ourselves?
 - What does that reveal about our need to justify ourselves?
7. There is an important difference between acknowledging that something is truly evil and assuming the position of the final Judge.
 - How can we faithfully call evil "evil" while still remembering that judgment ultimately belongs to God?

God Is a Merciful Judge

8. Rahab stands inside a city facing judgment, yet she receives mercy when she turns to God.

- What does her story teach us about who is beyond the reach of God's grace?

9. Rahab's story also destroys any idea that we are rescued because we are morally superior to others.

- Where are you tempted to compare your record with someone else's rather than seeing yourself as equally dependent upon Christ?

10. At the cross, God does not ignore evil; Christ bears judgment in the place of His people.

- How does the cross help you hold together God's justice and His mercy?

11. Which is harder for you personally to believe: that your sin genuinely deserves God's judgment, or that Christ's grace is genuinely sufficient to cover it?

- Why?

12. If your standing before God rests entirely on Christ's righteousness rather than your own record, how should that change the way you treat people whose lives, sins, or failures look very different from yours?

Closing Prayer Points

1. Worship God as the Just Judge

- Praise God that He is perfectly holy, good, and just.
- Thank Him that evil will not have the final word.
- Pray for greater trust in His wisdom when His judgments are difficult for us to understand.

2. Confess the Idols of Our Own Hearts

- Ask the Spirit to expose the places where you pursue money, approval, pleasure, power, comfort, sex, image, or control in place of God.
- Confess the ways you have minimized your own sin while noticing the sins of others.
- Ask God's kindness to lead you toward genuine repentance.

3. Repent of Our Judgment of Others

- Confess the ways you have used personal preferences or convictions to feel superior to others.
- Ask God for humility in political, cultural, family, and relational disagreements.
- Pray for wisdom to distinguish between faithfully naming evil and self-righteously condemning others.

4. Entrust Justice to God

- Bring before Him the evil and injustice in the world that grieves or angers you.
- Pray for those who have been harmed, exploited, or oppressed.
- Ask for faith to believe that God sees, knows, and will ultimately judge rightly.

5. Receive the Mercy of Christ

- Thank Jesus for bearing the judgment your sin deserved.
- Praise Him for giving you His righteousness rather than requiring you to establish your own.
- Bring lingering guilt and shame before Him and ask for deeper confidence in His finished work.

6. Extend Mercy to Others

- Pray for people you find particularly difficult to love.
- Ask God to remove any sense of moral superiority from your heart.
- Pray that remembering the mercy you have received would make you more patient, compassionate, and gracious toward others.

7. Hope in the God Who Will Make All Things Right

- Pray for faith when the world seems unjust or evil appears to prosper.
- Ask God to keep you from despair, cynicism, or vengeance.
- Thank Him that because of Christ, we can long for perfect justice without fearing condemnation ourselves.