

“Jericho . . . and Other Impossibilities”

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:19).

Joshua 6:1-20 ¹

One of the more sobering conversations in the Bible starts like this: And God said to Joshua, “**Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them. . . . I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. . . . As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them**” (Joshua 1:2-6).

“Moses my servant is dead. Now then . . .” How would you have liked to be on the receiving end of those instructions?

And it was, of course, just a few weeks later that God miraculously parted the Jordan River—at flood stage—so that Israel could march across into the Promised Land for the first time. After that crossing,² which paralleled the earlier crossing of the Red Sea, the miraculous manna Israel had eaten for forty years suddenly ceased to appear; and they found themselves facing the famous and formidable walled city of Jericho.

Jericho is the oldest known walled city in the world, having been continuously inhabited for about 9,000 years. At the time of the Israelite Conquest, Jericho was not a large city, having only about eight acres within the walls. It was a fortress that protected one of the largest freshwater springs in the land, a spring that supplies modern Jericho to this very day.

The Bible tells us that “*the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.*” Even so, God told Joshua, “*I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men*” (Joshua 6:1-2).

Now that was all well and good, but the prescribed strategy didn’t look like much. God told Joshua to march the army around the city once a day for six days, and then seven times on the seventh day, with the priests blowing trumpets all the while. When the command was given, the army was to give a great shout, and the walls would collapse. Yeah, right. How would you have liked to give such instructions to an army?

Nevertheless, though the task seemed both silly and impossible, Joshua followed those instructions, and “the walls came a-tumbling down.” Archaeologists have noted that the ancient walls of Jericho appear to have collapsed outward in a way known to be caused by earthquakes, and the Jordan Valley does in fact sit on an earthquake fault line.

It may be that the miracle of Jericho was not that the walls were destroyed by an unknown force, but that they were destroyed by a known force *at the precise moment* that God said they would be destroyed. This miracle, as is the case with many miracles, was probably not so much a matter of method as of *timing*. With Jericho, as with the parting of the Red Sea and of the Jordan River, **God made a Way . . . where there had been No Way.**

You may know the Gospel song, “God will make a Way,” by Don Moen. We sing parts of it from time to time,³ and we’ll sing it later in this service. Here’s Don’s story of how that song came to be:⁴

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 24, 2019. The first sermon after my surgery for colon cancer.

² And after all the males born in the wilderness had been circumcised!

³ Don Moen, *God will make a Way*, Capitol Christian Music Group, 1990.

⁴ <https://www.staugustine.com/living/religion/2015-08-06/story-behind-song-god-will-make-way>

“My wife’s sister, Susan Phelps, and her husband, Craig, were involved in a tragic car accident during a ski trip they were taking from their home in Oklahoma to a resort in Colorado. Way out in the Texas panhandle, an 18-wheeler hit a rear panel of their van with such force that all four of their children were thrown out.

“It was late at night, and the children had just left their seats, where they had been securely buckled in, to lie down for a nap on a ‘bed’ positioned in the rear of the van. In the darkness, only the crying of their severely injured children made it possible for Craig and Susan to find them - all except one. They finally located Jeremy, lying by a nearby fence. His neck had been broken, and he was already dead.

“Craig, a medical doctor, tried to revive his son, but God said to him, ‘Craig, Jeremy is with me. You need to care for those who are injured.’ And so they sat out in the dark wilderness for 45 minutes, waiting for an ambulance.

Don continued, “They asked me to sing at Jeremy’s funeral, so I boarded a plane and headed for Oklahoma. As I sat on the plane, wondering what I should say to them, I began to read from the book of Isaiah. My eyes were drawn to Isaiah 43, verse 19, ‘*I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*’

As soon as I read those words, the Lord gave me a song to sing to my loved ones. I sketched it out on a legal pad, intending to sing it at the funeral. When I arrived, though, they had already planned for me to sing something else, so I sang their request instead.

“After the funeral, I was sitting with these dear ones, holding them in my arms. I cried with them, and through my tears I said, ‘The Lord gave me a song for you.’ And I began singing, ‘**God will make a way, where there seems to be no way**’

“I taped a copy of the song for Susan. I knew that when all of the people who had come for Jeremy’s service had returned home, after everything was said and done, there would be many days when she needed to remember that God was at work in ways that she couldn’t see.

“Susan later told me how she had made a quick decision between the time she got out of the van and the time they found Jeremy’s body. She made a choice between becoming bitter and angry or trusting God to help them through what had just happened. And she confirmed that God really did make a way for them during their dark tragedy: ‘*I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*’”

**God will make a way for me
Where there seems to be no way.
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me.**

I’m reminded of a famous quote by Jim Wallis, who noted that “**Faith is believing God in spite of the evidence . . . and watching the evidence change.**”⁵ That’s what happened to Joshua at Jericho.

That’s also what happened to the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt when God told them they would be miraculously given their freedom (Exodus 4:29-30). They had been enslaved for 400 years, and now this Moses-dude shows up out of the wilderness to say that God’s deliverance was at hand. Ten awful plagues followed, and **God made a Way, where there had been No Way.**

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/149380-hope-is-believing-in-spite-of-the-evidence-and-then>

That's what happened when God told Moses to have the people camp next to the Red Sea, where there would be no route for escape as Pharaoh's army careened down the mountain pass toward them (Exodus 14:1-5). Moses told the terrified people, "*Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. . . . The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still*" (Exodus 14:13-14). And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea became dry land. **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That's what happened when God told Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, a mighty army whose "*camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore*" (Judges 7:12). Gideon gathered an army of 30,000 men, but God said, "That's too many." Gideon sent 22,000 home, but God still said, "You still have too many men." God reduced Gideon's army by 99%, from 30,000 to 300, and then God said, "That's enough." **And then God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That's what happened when God sent Elijah to a widow woman in the village of Zarephath during a terrible, years-long, drought. Elijah found the woman and asked her for some water and a bit of bread, to which she responded, "*As surely as the LORD your God lives, I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die*" (1 Kings 17:12).

Elijah told her to go and make him some bread, nonetheless, promising that "*The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain upon the land,*" and it was so (1 Kings 17:13-16). **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That's what happened when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced Nebuchadnezzar and his fiery furnace. They bravely said, "*King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*"

And so they were thrown into the furnace, into a fire so hot that it killed the soldiers who pushed them in. And suddenly, "*as he was watching, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisors, 'Didn't we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?'*"

"*Yes,*" they said, "*we did indeed, Your Majesty.*"

"*Look!*" Nebuchadnezzar shouted, "*I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods!*" (Daniel 3:16-18, 24-25). **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That's what happened when a man named Jairus begged Jesus to come to his house, because his twelve-year-old daughter was dying. As Jesus was on His way, He was detained by someone else who needed help, and the message came to Jairus, "*Your daughter is dead. Don't bother the teacher anymore*" (Luke 8:49).

But Jesus told the distraught father, "*Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed,*" and it was so. **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That's what happened when Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, died. When Jesus arrived in the village, Lazarus' sister, Martha, met Him. "*Lord,*" she said, "*if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

Jesus told her, “*Your brother will rise again. . . . I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?*”

“*Yes, Lord,*” she replied. “*I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world*” (John 11:21-27).

Jesus went to the tomb, had the huge stone rolled away, prayed to His Father, and called in a loud voice, “*Lazarus, Come Out!*” and he did. **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

That’s what happened after more than 300 years of slavery in the New World, as African slaves in these United States never gave up their resistance to being treated as disposable property and never gave up hope for their deliverance. They didn’t give up in the cotton fields. They didn’t give up during the Civil War. They didn’t give up during Jim Crow. They didn’t give up when they faced the Red Lines and the New Jim Crow. They didn’t give up when they faced barbarity after barbarity during the Civil Rights Movement. And, through the leadership of and martyrdom of Dr. King, and through the courageous actions of many of you in this room, **God made a Way where there had been No Way.**

Examples such as those I’ve mentioned could be multiplied almost without number, but we also know that things don’t always turn out as we want them to turn out. The most powerful example of this is that of our Lord Himself as He faced the Cross: “*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your Name!!!*” (John 12:27-28a).

My friends, because Jesus was obedient, even unto death, God has made a Way, where there had been NO WAY. Sometimes we die—no, we ALWAYS die—but God has transformed death, and God has MADE A WAY HOME.

Some of us in this room can tell wonderful stories of God’s deliverance . . . but some of us can also tell stories of when, for reasons known only to God, such deliverance did not come. It was so even with our Lord Jesus, as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “*My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. . . . but if this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done*” (Matthew 26:39, 42).

What you and I must always keep in mind is that our lives on earth are not the Main Story. What happens here, both of joy and sorrow, is real enough, of course; but our lives here are, in the deepest sense, a proving ground for the Life that is to come. Our purpose in this life is that we allow God to so shape our character that we are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him, and that we bring as many others with us as we can.

It’s been said that our lives are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out; but in the Darkness, their beauty is seen only if there is a Light within.⁶ Sometimes, God may allow us who follow Him to experience great Darkness so that His Light may shine more brightly out of our lives into a hurting world.

As my good friend, Dr. Al Weir, a renowned oncologist, wrote to his patients, “I don’t know what God plans on this earth and what he doesn’t plan. It seems that sometimes when we suffer God withholds the hand that could stop the suffering. **But I know we can trust the hand.** It’s the same hand God withheld when Jesus was on the Cross. Jesus suffered so that you and I could be redeemed from death.

⁶ Unknown, *Leadership*, vol. 1, no. 2.

“If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, and if God really loves us,” Al wrote, “then I am convinced that *we do not suffer in this world unless God has planned for us, in and through our suffering, a purpose that is greater than our pain.* Sometimes we discover that purpose even before we get to heaven. And I know that whatever God allows in our lives grows out of His love for me, and for you.”⁷

My friends, when life tumbles in and we are tempted to wonder whether or not God really loves us, what we need to do is to keep our eyes on the Cross. **The Cross of Jesus is, always and forever, God’s answer to whether or not we are loved.**

So long as our journey continues here on this Earth, we follow Jesus mostly by faith, and very seldom by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). When our journey takes us through Darkness and through the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23:4), we move forward by His power, under His mercy, and with His companionship: “*As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous!*”

My friends, we live our lives, not “somehow,” but TRIUMPHANTLY, moving toward the fulfillment of this promise: “*Dear friends, we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that **we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is***” (1 John 3:2).

God will make a Way where there seems to be No Way.

Let your hearts be glad!

⁷ Al Weir, *When Your Doctor Has Bad News: Simple Steps to Strength, Healing & Hope* (Zondervan, 2003), pp. 79, 177.