

Does God choose sides?

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[0 : 00] Well, I think it's something every Christian has done at one time or another. And that is prayed for your sports team to win a game. Come on, be honest.

We've all done it, haven't we? I did it when the Springboks were playing the All Blacks in the Rugby World Cup semifinal. But sadly, on that day, it seemed like there were more New Zealanders praying for their team.

But it does lead us to ask an important question. And the question is, does God actually take sides in a sports event? Would he ever? We know that he cares.

He pays attention even to the minutest details of our world, of our life, even to sports. Because he's intimately involved in every part of our world. He knows even when a sparrow falls to the ground, Jesus tells us.

So he knows and he has a hand in the outcomes of even sporting events. But does he actually take a side? Think about it. The question could also be asked for war.

[0 : 57] Does God take sides in armed conflicts? Throughout the ages and still today, armies fighting conflicts have claimed that God is fighting on their side. You think, for example, in World War II, it seemed obvious that it was assumed God was on the side of the Allies, helping fight against the evil Nazi regime.

He must be because they were the good guy, so to speak. But then, if you think further, you've got to think, what about all the German Christians, of whom there were many in the German army and the Air Force and the Navy, who were basically just serving their country and just protecting their family.

And was God fighting against them? Think about it. Does God take sides? Well, of all the armed conflicts that this world has ever seen, if there's one army we can safely assume God was siding with, that would be the Israelite army here in Joshua, wouldn't it?

As they entered the Promised Land, not only had he commanded them to conquer the land, but he had helped them. He had performed a miracle, you'll remember, a few weeks ago, in crossing the Jordan in order to get there. So, surely, from all this, you would assume God's on their side.

Well, that's what the Israelites were assuming. But then, what we read at the end of chapter 5 comes as a bit of a surprise to us. Because have a look. From chapter 5, verse 13. Now, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand.

[2 : 18] Joshua went up to him and asked, Are you for us or for our enemies? Neither, he replied. That's an interesting answer, isn't it?

But as commander of the army of the Lord, I have now come. Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence. Now, here on the eve of the Canaanite campaign, this big seven-year conflict that's going to take place, God's message to Joshua here was crystal clear.

I'm not on your side, Joshua. I'm on no one's side, but my own. In other words, I'm not here to help you achieve your plans, Joshua, but you're here to carry out my plans.

You see the difference? And that's an important message Joshua needed to hear as they were entering into Canaan. But I think it's one we all need to hear, don't we?

This morning, as we read God's word, as we read this account, it's a message for us as well.

Because how often do we today assume that God is sitting up in heaven and he's there to help us to achieve our plans in life?

[3 : 24] Don't we? Isn't that the way we often consider God? We set the direction in our lives. We make our own career choices and we decide what we're going to focus on in our lives and then we pray for God to help us to do those things, don't we?

Please help me get a promotion. Please help me in my job. Please help me with this project that I'm focusing on. We try to get God to side with us, you see? And so just as much as the Israelites back then, we need this reminder today that God doesn't take sides like we might think, in that he's not here to help us achieve our plans.

Rather, we're here on earth, as Paul reminded us earlier, we're here to play a role in God's plans. See the difference? And we really got to get that mind shift right if we're going to be effective as a church on earth.

Because that's God's message to us this morning from this passage. And it's as we go on and we look at chapter 6 to the actual conquering of Jericho, it's then that we learn just why this is so important.

Why it's so important to get this mind shift, to get on God's side, to line up our lives with God's plans rather than try to get God to line up with our plans. It's so vital.

[4 : 35] And there's three reasons I want us to see why this morning. And the first reason is that God's plans are inescapable. So look at verse 2. Then the Lord said to Joshua, See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands along with its king and fighting men.

Now I don't know if it struck you when Penny was reading that or when Paul was reading that.

What's interesting is that Jericho hadn't been conquered yet when God said that.

But he says he's already delivered it into Joshua's hands. You notice that? It's past tense. So it's like it's a done thing already, even before it's happened. And the reason is that to God, it is a done thing, effectively.

That's what God wants. That's his plan. And because he's God, and because he's sovereign, nothing gets in the way of his plans. I mean, wouldn't that be great if we made a plan and we knew it was going to happen so much so that we could talk about it in the past tense?

Well, we can't because we're not sovereign. But God can. He can talk about his plans in future, in the past tense, because nothing can get in the way of them. So when God makes a plan, it's effectively already done, even before it is.

[5 : 49] Which highlights for us, I think, a truth about God in our world today, in every age. And that is that his plans are inescapable. We can't escape what God wants to do and what God wants to happen.

When he's decided something is going to happen, it's going to happen. Guaranteed. And our job is therefore not to try to change his plans or to try to get him on board with us and our plans, but to get on board with his plans and live in response to God's plans because they're going to happen.

They're going to be fulfilled. They're inescapable. Now, that's not to say that, you know, we're just all kind of automatons and everything's set already and so our actions mean nothing.

No. Time and again in Scripture, we see that God incorporates his people's actions into achieving his plans because he's God. He's so big and so amazing that he can do that.

He can have plans that he's already set in motion and he's already going to achieve and he's decided what's going to happen, but he actually incorporates what we do and what we pray and how we act on earth into those plans to achieve them.

[7 : 00] Just like he does here with the Israelites, for example. I mean, ask yourself, in this account of Israel conquering Jericho, was Jericho conquered here because of what God did or was Jericho conquered here because of what the Israelites did?

Which is it? God or the Israelites? Well, it's both, isn't it? God planned to conquer Jericho, but he used the actions of the Israelites to do it. They had to march seven times around and they had to carry the ark and they had to shout and they had to rush in and take the city.

Their actions were vital in God achieving his plan, but that didn't mean that them not doing that was going to stop God achieving his plan. It was inescapable, but he used the obedience of the Israelites to achieve his plan.

You see what I'm saying? You see the point here? And that's the same as God works today. God's plans will happen. We've got to get that right. And there's no changing that.

But they will happen because of things that we do. Just think about that. I know it's difficult to get our heads around that concept, but it's true and that's how the Bible presents it.

[8 : 08] It's similar to how a father deals with the son in life often. So, for example, just the other day I was making a fire in our fireplace and that was my plan.

My plan, as the sovereign father of our home, was to make a fire. That was going to happen. Nothing was going to stop that plan. But I gave Alex the responsibility of actually starting the fire, putting the logs on and setting it alight.

And I just sat back and supervised so he could be part of the process. And the fact is, the fire was going to be made whether or not he participated in it.

But because he was willing to get on board with my plan to make a fire and because he was willing to play a role in that plan, he had the privilege of carrying out that plan. And it's the same kind of with how God works, with his plans.

His plans for this world and for your life are inescapable. They will happen whether you want them to or not. And so you can either get on board with those plans and play a role in them or you can ignore them and chase after your own plans.

[9 : 12] But that's pointless given that God will achieve his plans. Either way. And so really the question we should all be asking this morning as we consider this account of Jericho is what are God's plans today?

And how do I get on board with them? I hope you are asking that question of yourself this morning. How do I get on board with God's plans?

Well, you see, the Bible is largely here to tell us what God's plans for this world are. And what we read from the beginning to the end is that God plans to build his kingdom.

And not just a limited geographical kingdom like in the time of Joshua which is just a foreshadowing of the kingdom to come but God's eternal kingdom where he rules everything and everything is renewed and everything is like it was meant to be originally and there's no sin and there's no death and there's no parting.

A kingdom that God is already today drawing people into as he comes to rule in their hearts and a kingdom which one day he will establish for good when he comes to judge and he comes to eradicate all sin once and for all and all the causes of sin.

[10 : 30] And that is God's plan in summary that we see throughout Scripture. And nothing will stop him. You know, Paul told the Athenians in Acts God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed and he has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

His plan is set. He's got a date in his calendar when he is going to come and judge this world and he's going to establish his kingdom once and for all.

And you can either get on board with that and be part of the process of kingdom building the priority of what we're doing on earth today. You can be part of that or you can ignore that and chase after your own little temporary kingdoms.

Like those who lived in Jericho did. They had their little kingdom in Jericho and they built that up and chased after it but look where that got them. Alright? Their kingdom didn't last and neither will any kingdom that is not God's kingdom.

And so, any work, any effort that you expend in this earth that is not chasing after God's kingdom, at the end of the day it's pretty much a waste of time because it's not going to last.

[11 : 40] And so, get involved in chasing after God's kingdom. Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of God. And you know, he gave a promise when he said that. He said, when you do that, when you seek first the kingdom of God, when you line up your life to God's plans and get on board with building his kingdom, he will provide you everything else you need that you would otherwise be chasing after.

Isn't that a great promise? Matthew 6. It's an amazing promise. You know, I can say from personal testimony, Jean and myself have built our lives on that promise and God has always delivered.

But how do we do that? How do we seek first God's kingdom? Well, firstly, it's by coming into the kingdom if you haven't already done that. That's the first step. You've got to come into this kingdom and being part of a kingdom means submitting to a king.

Okay, you can't be part of God's kingdom if you're not living your lives for the king and in obedience to the king. That is the first step. God's son, Jesus, the king who he sent and who he proved and who he showed on that mount of transfiguration.

He showed just a glimpse of his real glory to his disciples. That is the king of God's kingdom who we need to come and submit to. Because if we don't in this life, we will one day and it won't be pretty when he comes to judge.

[12:58] And so the sooner the better for each of us. But secondly, another main way we engage in the work of the kingdom is by praying. By engaging in prayer for God's kingdom.

Now, we might all say, well, I pray, you know, I pray, I try to pray every day. But what are you praying for? Ask yourself. Are you praying for God's plans or your own plans?

It's a good question to ask. You know, you might think that prayer doesn't work. You might say, well, I've prayed and I've never seen any results. Well, have you ever considered that you might be praying for the wrong things?

A kingdom prayer, you see, on the other hand, praying for God's plans, praying for God's rule in people's lives, praying for the gospel message to God, those are prayers that God delights to answer.

And he is just waiting for you to pray them so he can incorporate you into his plans. And you can have the privilege of being used and your prayers being answered for God's glory and for God's plans on earth.

[13:59] And that is one of the primary ways God involves his people in his work. So get involved. Pray. Pray. Like, take it seriously. Not just pray for your own life and your own concerns.

Pray for God's concerns. And what I suggest is that you find someone else in this church that you can pray with just to keep the discipline up. and it's so helpful to pray with someone else because when you're not feeling like it they can spur you on.

When they're not feeling like it you can spur them on. Imagine, just imagine for a second that every member of this church was regularly praying with someone else for God's plans. Imagine what God could do here if we would just take prayer seriously.

Are you going to? Because that's what being part of a church is. It's not just coming on Sunday and listening to a sermon. Being part of a church means signing up for kingdom work because you have a king and he's told us what to do and we need to obey him.

The second point worth noting from this passage regarding God's plans is that God's plans are beyond our understanding. So while Scripture reveals God's plans to us the way he carries out those plans on a day-to-day basis are often very confusing.

[15:18] You know what I mean? Why does he allow us to keep going through suffering even though we're pursuing his will? Why doesn't he save the person I've been praying for for years?

These kind of questions. Why God? Why? Well, if nothing else the story of the capture of Jericho shows us that we won't always understand why God is doing what he's doing.

I mean, consider how the Israelites were told to capture Jericho. This is not conventional military strategy. This is not something you learn in military academy. Look at from verse 3 again. March around the city once with all the armed men, then do this for six days, have seven priests carry trumpets of ram's 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 from the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout. I mean, this is bizarre if you think about it.

You know, you can imagine kind of on day three of the march, you can imagine one of the Israelite soldiers tapping his friend on the shoulder and going, why are we doing this again? You know?

[16:27] And God never explains to Joshua why he wants them to march seven times around and blow trumpets. He doesn't explain it. He just expects them to trust that he knows what he's doing and obey him even if they don't know what he's doing.

Well, it's exactly the same with God's people today. See, he doesn't explain everything to us. He doesn't explain why he does everything that he does but he expects his people to trust and to know that he knows what he's doing.

You know, if you read the book of Job, which I really recommend you do one day, Job was a godly man who experienced terrible suffering in his life and he wondered why God allowed this time and again.

He was just confused why God was allowing this and you read 42 chapters in the book of Job of Job questioning God and getting angry with God and you know, by the end of the book you still, God still hasn't told Job why he's allowed this but it's, what's interesting is by the end of the book Job doesn't want to know anymore and all he says is I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

He realized God's plans are far above his understanding and he's just got to trust that God knows what he's doing and that is faith. Really, that is what faith in the Bible means.

[17 : 53] It means trusting someone without having to know why they're doing what they're doing. It's the faith that my son had in me when he had an accident and we had to take him to hospital and he had to have an operation and he was still very little and I had to hold him down as they administered the sedative and he didn't know what was going on and he just looked at me and he trusted me.

He trusted that I knew what I was doing. That's the kind of trust that God calls us to have in him and that's the kind of trust that God called his people to have as they took Jericho.

You see, he wants us to trust in what he's doing even when we don't know why he's doing it. When you have a bad day and the car breaks down and everything's falling apart and the kids just won't listen, you've got to trust that God knows what he's doing and he's there and he's allowing this.

When your car gets broken into, you know, when your money gets stolen, when you fall sick in the worst possible time, it's then that you've got to trust that God knows what he's doing.

When you pray and you labor for God's kingdom and it seems that nothing's working, you know, like I'm sure that soldier marching around Jericho was wondering, you know, on day three of the third march, he was probably saying, you know, I don't think this is working.

[19 : 16] We must trust that God's plans are more often than not beyond our understanding and we must just keep doing what he's called us to do even if we don't see immediate results. Faithful obedience in the face of the unknown, that is what God calls his people to.

And then the third thing we learn about God's plans from this story are that God's plans are always right. Now there's an issue, a big issue, in this chapter of the Bible, this capture of Jericho.

It's an issue which is very tempting just to skip over and avoid altogether. And I bet if I did that, half of you wouldn't even notice that I skipped over it. But you may have picked it up in the reading.

And the issue that I'm talking about is in verse 21 where we discover the Israelites slaughtered all of the inhabitants of Jericho, including women and children.

They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it, men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys. Now how? How could this possibly be okay?

[20 : 21] How could this even be in the Bible? Well, it rightly should shock us. You know, when we think of the Israelites raising their swords and cutting down unarmed civilians in the streets of Jericho, but that's what happened.

Now, I was doing some research on this issue and what interests me is there's been many attempts by biblical scholars to explain it away, to kind of make excuses for God, to say, oh, no, no, that's not really what happened.

You see, Jericho was a military outpost and there were actually no non-combatants there. Or, the writer was just speaking hypothetically, so it didn't really happen. Or, God, you know, God didn't want them to kill civilians, but they just got carried away.

These are the kind of excuses that people make for God. But none of that actually holds water because the truth is God ordered the killing of an entire city. We can't escape that. And this is not the first time he did it and not the last.

God, which really, I think, challenges our sanitized view of God that we tend to have, the God that we'd like to think of. The God that we'd like to think of is often not the God of Scripture.

[21 : 31] And the truth of Scripture reveals to us that this God is much more scary than we're comfortable with. But now, this doesn't mean, just because this happened, doesn't mean that it was unjust.

In fact, it was completely just. If we understand the context. Firstly, because God had given the Canaanites ample warning before this and chances to turn from their sin and submit to Him which they didn't do.

In fact, we read in Genesis 15 that God delayed the conquering of Canaan for 400 years until their sins had reached the point of no return. And He kept His people, the Israelites, the slaves in Egypt for 400 years because He didn't want to go and judge the Canaanites yet.

He waited until it was so bad that their judgment was inevitable and their sins were bad. This was a culture, if you look into it, this was a culture who sacrificed babies to their God Molech by burning them alive amongst other things.

And so God rightly said enough is enough. And just like He brought His judgment in the flood before, He now brought His judgment in the form of the Israelite army. And His judgment was vicious and His judgment was violent but His judgment was just because our God is a scary God. [22 : 51] But secondly, you see, even if He hadn't given the Canaanites 400 years to repent, even if He had given them no chance at all, He would still have been totally just in wiping them out because God gave them their lives.

He has the right to take those lives away whenever and however He wants to. that's what we've got to understand. God has every right to take life when and how He sees for children included. And He does that every day if you think about it. In natural disasters, in infant deaths, in epidemics. You know, don't think that these things are outside of God's control, that He's frantically trying to stop them from happening.

No, He could stop these things in a moment if He wanted to. But He doesn't because Romans tells us there are signs of His judgment over a sinful world that is turned away from Him, man, woman, and child.

You know, we are far more sinful than we think. We are far more divided from God than we think, naturally. We are far more, as a human race, we are far more rebellious against God and separated from God than we think.

[24 : 00] And we are far more under God's judgment as humans than we like to think. And God doesn't owe anyone life. He doesn't owe you life. He doesn't owe me life.

And He never did. And He doesn't even have to give us a chance at life if He doesn't want to. That is the position we're in. And you know, that makes it even more amazing that God gives us life at all, that He keeps us living, that we wake up another day that He keeps our hearts beating, that He keeps crops growing from the ground that we can eat from, that He keeps rain falling on us. It's purely out of His mercy. He doesn't have to do that. He doesn't owe us that. And you know, what should stand out in this account is not the judgment of God in wiping the city out.

That should be expected. What should stand out is the mercy of God in saving Rahab and her family. This prostitute of Jericho who had most likely been involved in child sacrifice herself. Who should have been destroyed like everyone else but wasn't. And that, you see that, the fact that Rahab was spared, if we're thinking right about this, that's what's unjust here.

[25 : 16] Not the judgment but the mercy. That should upset us. But God saved Rahab and her family because she came on God's side when she helped the spies escape back in chapter 2, remember?

She left her previous life and she was devoted to the Lord. Devoted. It's interesting, the word used for destroying the people of Jericho here is devote them to the Lord.

Did you notice that? And so at the end of the day, everything in Jericho was devoted to the Lord, either by being destroyed if it had no place in God's new society like the people of Jericho or by being devoted to God in service and submission like Rahab and her family but either way, everything was devoted to the Lord.

Now, I want to say as seriously as I can that the same is true of God's plans today. What happened at Jericho is a foreshadowing of God's plans for all the world and that is one day when God returns to judge and do away with sin once and for all, the Bible tells us everything and everyone that is not fit for His eternal kingdom will be devoted to eternal destruction, will be cut off from God forever.

And so instead of complaining that God is not being very nice here, we should take this as a warning of what will rightfully happen to you and me if we are not fit for His kingdom. But we also want to take this as a reminder that God has been merciful to us like He was merciful to Rahab and her family in giving us a way to be fit for His kingdom because I don't think any of us would say we are fit for God's perfect kingdom.

[26 : 58] But God makes a way when He sent His son Jesus to die in the place of sinners and give us His righteousness. Jesus giving us His fitness for heaven to everybody who trusts in Him.

That is the gospel. That is grace. That is not us earning our way into heaven. It is Jesus having done it for us. Jesus our Savior. Jesus our King.

And what He calls us to do now is trust in that and submit to Him as our King. But make no mistake. This is the truth we've got to get right. In eternity everything and everyone who has ever lived will be devoted to the Lord.

Either devoted in submission to Jesus or devoted in terrible and violent destruction. Which side are you on? Don't assume God is going to be on your side that day.

If you are not on His side now living your life lining it up to His plans and seeking His will above all else.

[28 : 05] Are you doing that? Are you on God's side? Thank you Lord for your word of warning to us this morning as well as your word of mercy.