

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 9: The Northern Kings and the Land Subdued -- Joshua 11:1–12:24

Picture the sound of it first. Word has reached Jabin king of Hazor that the cities of the south have fallen, and now the runners go out across the northern hills. Messengers ride to Madon, to Shimron, to Achshaph, to the kings on the mountains and the kings in the plains, to the Canaanite by the sea and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Jebusite. They come pouring out, the text says, 'much people, even as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude, with horses and chariots very many.' Imagine standing on a ridge and watching that army gather at the waters of Merom, tent after tent, chariot after chariot, until the valley floor disappears under them. This is not one walled city. This is a whole confederacy of kings, the full military weight of the north, massed for a single purpose: to wipe Israel off the face of the land.

Now stand beside Joshua and feel the smallness of your own forces against that horizon of chariots. Israel had no cavalry, no iron chariots, nothing to match the wall of horses bearing down on them. By every honest count of soldiers and steel, this should be the day the conquest dies. And into that fear the Lord speaks one quiet sentence: 'Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel.' Tomorrow. About this time. Already as good as done. The God who had toppled Jericho's walls with a shout now promises to hand over the mightiest army Canaan can field, and He tells Joshua exactly what to do with their dreaded horses and chariots: hamstring the one, burn the other. Trust nothing in the strength of the world; trust everything in the word of God.

What follows is not a single thunderclap of victory but a long, grinding campaign. 'Joshua made war a long time with all those kings,' the text tells us, and the years pile up as city after city is taken. We tend to want our battles won in an afternoon, but God often works on a longer calendar than our patience prefers. Then comes a sentence that should give us pause, for it speaks of God hardening the hearts of these nations so that they came against Israel in battle and were destroyed. We must handle that sentence with great care, and we will, for it touches the justice of God Himself. But hold this much in front of you from the start: these were nations whose wickedness had grown full and ripe over centuries, against whom God's patience had long been extended, and whose judgment had finally come due.

And then, at last, the quiet. After the coalition is shattered, after Hazor is burned, after the long years of war, the book sets down one of the most beautiful clauses in all of Joshua: 'And the land rested from war.' The roll of conquered kings in chapter 12, thirty-one of them named one after another, is not a boast about Israel's sword; it is a monument to the faithfulness of God, who had promised this land to Abraham and now, generations later, kept His word down to the last detail. As we walk through these chapters, do not look away from the hard parts and do not lose the wonder of the rest that follows. Ask the Lord to teach you both who He is in His justice and who He is in His unfailing, promise-keeping grace.

Group Discussion: Faced with an army 'as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude, with horses and chariots very many' (Joshua 11:4), Israel had every reason to be terrified, yet God said, 'Be not afraid because of them' (11:6). Why do you think God so often lets His people see the full size of the threat before He delivers them, and how does that shape the way we are meant to face what overwhelms us?

Personal Reflection: Where in your life right now does the opposition look bigger than your resources, the chariots more numerous than your strength? What would it look like this week to take God at His word, 'Be not afraid,' before you see how the battle will end?

Read Joshua 11:1-12:24

Study Questions

1. When Jabin king of Hazor hears what has happened in the south, he gathers a vast northern coalition, kings, peoples, horses, and chariots 'very many,' to destroy Israel (Joshua 11:1-5). Into this God speaks: 'Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel' (11:6). What does God's command, given before a single sword is drawn, teach us about the ground of true courage and where Israel's confidence was meant to rest (compare Psalm 20:7)?
2. Israel's enemies came with the very things Israel lacked, horses and iron chariots, the most fearsome military technology of the age. Where are you most tempted to measure your situation by what the other side has and what you do not, rather than by what God has promised? What 'chariots' loom largest in your fears?
3. God told Joshua to hamstring the horses and burn the chariots (Joshua 11:6, 9), destroying the very things the nations trusted in and that Israel might have been tempted to keep for itself. Why would God have His people deliberately refuse to rely on the strength the world prizes, and what does this teach about where His people are forbidden to place their trust (Deuteronomy 17:16; Psalm 33:16-17)?

4. Joshua obeyed God's strange command exactly, leaving himself with no chariots to fall back on (Joshua 11:9). When God asks you to let go of a 'backup plan' or a source of security so that your trust rests on Him alone, how do you respond? What is one such security He may be asking you to release?
5. The text says plainly, 'Joshua made war a long time with all those kings' (Joshua 11:18). The conquest was not one swift afternoon but a long, grinding campaign of years. What does this teach us about the way God often accomplishes His purposes, and why does He so seldom give His people the quick, total victory we crave (compare Exodus 23:29-30)?
6. Think of an area of your own life where God seems to be working slowly, where the victory is real but partial, and the fight goes on far longer than you hoped. How do you keep trusting and obeying through the long campaign rather than the single battle? Where are you tempted to give up because it is taking so long?
7. Hazor had been 'the head of all those kingdoms' (Joshua 11:10), and Joshua burned it to the ground while leaving other cities standing on their mounds (11:11-13). The devotion to destruction, the herem, fell hardest on the center of organized resistance to God. What does it mean that this destruction was covenant judgment carried out by God's specific command at one moment in redemptive history, and why is it crucial that we do not turn it into a warrant for human violence today (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)?
8. When you read these chapters of conquest, what stirs in you, discomfort, questions, even resistance? Rather than pushing those reactions away, bring them honestly before God. What does wrestling with the hard parts of Scripture, instead of avoiding them, do to deepen your trust in His character?

9. Joshua 11:20 says, 'For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that he might destroy them, as the Lord commanded Moses.' Holding this beside Genesis 15:16, where God waited centuries because 'the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full,' and beside Ezekiel 18:20-23, how are we to understand this hardening as God's righteous judgment on nations long ripe in entrenched wickedness, rather than as the Calvinist idea that God arbitrarily damns people who never had a real chance to repent? How does this passage hold together God's perfect justice and His patient, genuine grace?
10. The chapters close with two restful summaries: 'the land rested from war' (Joshua 11:23), and a long roll of thirty-one conquered kings, the monument of a promise kept (Joshua 12). Looking back over the whole long, hard campaign, what is the Lord asking you to believe about His faithfulness to His promises, and what is He asking you to do as someone whose real warfare now is not against flesh and blood but spiritual (Ephesians 6:10-18)?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 15:16, God tells Abraham his descendants will return only after four generations because 'the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full,' showing centuries of divine patience before judgment fell; Deuteronomy 9:4-5, Israel is warned they receive the land not for their own righteousness but because of the wickedness of these nations, guarding against pride; Ezekiel 18:20-23, God declares the soul that sins shall die yet takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but desires that he turn and live, the key to reading the hardening rightly; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, the Christian's weapons are not carnal but mighty through God for pulling down strongholds, defining our warfare as spiritual; Ephesians 6:10-18, the believer's true battle is against spiritual forces, fought in the whole armor of God, not with sword and chariot.

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