

Joshua 11-12: Canaan's Last Stand

Joshua 11-12: Canaan's Last Stand

Joshua 10 ended with the Canaanites' southern confederacy (aligned against Israel) destroyed. It was amazing that Israel's smaller army could so completely rout the 5 nations of southern Canaan, but in Joshua 10:42 we find out why it was such an easy victory, "Joshua captured all these kings and their lands at one time because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel". God had promised Abraham over 600 years before to give the land to his descendants, and now God was following through on His promises. Repeatedly throughout the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua we are told that God would win the battles and give them the land, therefore it was a gift from God even though they had to be obedient by faith. Once again we see the delicate balance between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man. God willed that the land be given to Israel, and God helped them win all the battles. Nevertheless, Israel had to show up, cross the river and fight the larger tougher foes. Even harder to understand is the repeated participation of God in the Canaanites continued willingness to fight against Israel. We are told that God "hardened their heart" so they would not surrender or leave peacefully (Joshua 11:20). This was very much like God's treatment of Pharaoh in Exodus 9:12 and 14:17. Pharaoh had repeatedly disobeyed God, and hardened his own heart in rebellion against God so that in God's omniscience, He knew Pharaoh was irretrievable. Therefore when after the 6th plague Pharaoh yelled calf-ropes, it was too late. Just because Pharaoh relented did not mean God was going to stop the plagues. God had decided to do 10 miraculous plagues to fully reveal Himself to Israel and the world, so God hardened Pharaoh's heart. In the same way, in Joshua, the Canaanites had 600 years of rejecting God and indulging in pagan idolatry so horrible that they made infant sacrifices to their supposed gods. Now in the book of Joshua, God's patience was gone, and so it was God's sovereign will that their armies be destroyed. Still, both Israel and the Canaanites exercised their free will to either obey in Israel's case, or disobey in Canaan's.

The Massive Northern Coalition

Alarmed at the fall of southern Canaan, the King of Hazor in the north organized all the northern city-states to come together against Israel in Joshua 11:1-5. For Israel, this would be even a greater challenge against a massive coalition in the north. Their tactics would involve the element of surprise, and always attacking the enemy. Jabin, King of Hazor, sent out a desperate call to arms. There was no love lost among the rival Canaanite kings, but the greater threat of Israel caused them to unite in an alliance to fight Israel. This was the last major coalition to oppose Israel. How big was this combined Canaanite force? The text says they were "as numerous as the sand on the seashore", and the great Jewish historian Josephus said they had 300,000 infantry, 10,000 cavalry, and 20,000 chariots. Meanwhile, Israel had no cavalry or chariots. The point is that Israel was terribly outnumbered and out armed, but still Israel's victory was guaranteed because God would fight for Israel (Joshua 11:6). In Joshua 11:7-15, Joshua did not wait for them to attack him, but he marched north and "came upon the enemy suddenly and attacked them".

Joshua fought a two-phase battle. In v.7-9, he attacked, splitting the enemy, and chased them westward to the Med. Coast and then chased the rest of the enemy east to the valley of Mizpeh until all of their forces were wiped out. Amazingly, God commanded the Israelis to hamstring the enemy horses and destroy their chariots because God did not want them to be proud like the Canaanites and put their trust in warhorses and chariots, but only in God.

All the cities of the people that Joshua conquered were left in good shape—he did not burn or destroy them, except Hazor. This was the largest and most prominent city in northern Canaan. The ruins appear to be on about 200 acres—way bigger than the other cities. In Joshua 11:13-15, Israel killed all the people in all the cities but left the cities intact. They were allowed to take all the spoil, plunder, and livestock for themselves, but the capital of the area, Hazor ceased to exist. Joshua made a statement that since Hazor could not stand against Israel, no city in Canaan could stand. It is interesting to note that of all the cities and property that Israel captured, only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were destroyed. All the farms, buildings, livestock, fences, and improvements were now Israel's. God had brought them in and given them an improved cultivated land that was now theirs. Moses' prediction in Deuteronomy 6:10-11 had come true, "God will give you great and splendid cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you shall eat and be satisfied". In Joshua 11:15, we read that this decisive victory was all in obedience to God as He commanded Moses and then Joshua.

Summary of the Conquest, Joshua 11:16—12:24

The conquest and the major battles were over, so now before Joshua apportions the land to the tribes, the author summarizes the successful campaign. The battles fought ranged from the Negev Desert in the south, through the central hill country, then over to the Arabah, which is the long depression of the Jordan River Valley north and south to the Dead Sea. In 11:18, we find out it wasn't exactly the quick blitzkrieg we may have thought because it says in v.18 that "it took a long time". From Caleb's age in Joshua 14:7-10, we can estimate that it took 7 years to win these battles. Only the five cities of Gibeon tried to make peace, but the rest of the Canaanites wanted to fight. Why? You would think that after so many battles had been won by Israel, and the stories of the miracles that God did were told, the Canaanites would "Tap Out". The answer is given in v.20, "it was of the Lord to harden their hearts" to fight so that He could utterly destroy them. The one last threat to Israel was a race of large people that had terrified Israel over 45 years before—the dreaded Anakim from the hill country. Back in Numbers 13:31-33, the Israeli scouts came back to Kadesh Barnea with a report of giants who lived in the hill country. The people 45 years before said, "We are not able to go up against the people who are too strong for us...all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size...we saw the Anakim and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight". This was a big reason why the first generation of Jews from the Exodus refused to go into the Promise Land. But now, the man of faith, Joshua attacked the giant Anakim, and "utterly destroyed them". Even the opposition to God, which seemed invincible, was overcome because compared to God, giants become dwarfs. Now that all the battles have been fought and all the Canaanites wiped out, Israel had been completely obedient and taken all the land that God gave them, right? NOT SO FAST, we read in Joshua 13 that there is still very much land to be taken and very many Canaanites to be wiped out. Since Joshua 11:23 ends by saying "Joshua took all the land...Thus the land had rest from war", it appears there's a contradiction when we read in Joshua 13:1 that "very much of the land remains to be possessed". This is easily explained when we see the division of land by Joshua to all the tribes of Israel in Joshua 13-19. Joshua's method of operation was to divide up all the land and then direct each tribe to take responsibility for taking the remaining land in their allotment. It was each tribe's duty to wipe out the Canaanites in their own allotment, but would they execute God's will or get lazy and greedy? Here's a hint—it is human nature to be lazy and greedy, so it is something we all have to overcome! What is there in your life that you know God wants you to do, but remains undone?

Theological Issues in Joshua 11

What do we learn about the nature of God, and our relationship to God in Joshua 11?

First of all, we see the sovereignty of God guaranteeing and determining the victory for Israel as v. 6 says, "tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them slain to Israel". Secondly, we see the promises of God being fulfilled. About seven years before, Moses told the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:10-11 that God promised to give them the land of Canaan along with all the improvements in the land. Only three Canaanite cities were destroyed and the rest were captured intact. Therefore, God was giving them cities, roads, wells, cisterns, cultivated fields, and producing vineyards that they did not build or plant. God promised to give them a productive land and all the improvements with it. The promises of God are motivational and are basically "food for faith". Even with us now God has made many promises, the ultimate promise being the coming of Christ, our resurrection, and eternal life. Thirdly, we see the necessity of the obedience of the believer to God's promises. God promised the land, but Israel had to cross the river and show up to fight against a larger force, which had superior weapons. This required obedience and perseverance. We read in v.18 that "it took a long time", so it was not an easy deal—it was a long arduous process. Our own spiritual growth and sanctification is the same way—it is a long tough process, which we undertake by faith in God's promises. I understand the believer's responsibility to obey, but what about the insane rejection of the Canaanites who opposed God? Remember what the Canaanite woman Rahab had said, "We know that the Lord has given you the land...We have heard how the Lord dried up the Red Sea before you and what you did to the Amorite kings who opposed you whom you utterly destroyed". Since they knew that God had already determined to give Israel the land, and God was actually fighting the battles for Israel, why would they resist and fight against them? David explained this in Psalm 2:2, "The kings of the earth set themselves united together against the Lord and against His anointed one". Jesus also explained the rejection of the gospel message by quoting Isaiah in Matt.13:13, "while seeing they do not see, while hearing they do not hear nor do they understand, for the heart of this people is hard". So King Jabin of Hazor along with all the other Canaanite kings had heard of Israel's miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, and the destruction of Jericho and Ai, but instead of seeking mercy like the Gibeonites did, these sinners rushed madly to their destruction. Theologically, we see the reason for this in Joshua 11:20, "For it was the Lord's doing to harden the hearts that they should come against Israel in battle." I think it was just like Pharaoh in Exodus 9:12 where God hardened his heart so he would not let Israel go. Apparently, God knows people's hearts, and He knows when people have totally rejected Him so that they are irretrievable. Therefore God actually hardened Pharaoh so that God's will of doing all ten plagues would be carried out. If Pharaoh had "tapped out" there would have been no Passover, so God actually intervened to reveal Himself fully in all ten miracles.

Along with the rejection of the majority of the Canaanites, we see that God actually delivers opposition to Israel gaining the land. Have you noticed that wherever you go there are always antagonists? God will not relieve us of contending with our foes, just as He will not repent and believe for us. Instead God's strength is given to equip us to fight the good fight. Therefore, we see the sovereignty of God and the free will-- obedience of man working together.

CHARLIE TAYLOR