

Joshua Fights for God

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 108](#)

Background Scripture: [Deuteronomy 7](#); [Joshua 6](#); [8:1–29](#); [10:28–43](#); [11:1–23](#)

[Joshua 11:6–9, 16–23](#)

6 And the LORD said unto Joshua, Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel: thou shalt hough their horses, and burn their chariots with fire.

7 So Joshua came, and all the people of war with him, against them by the waters of Merom suddenly; and they fell upon them.

8 And the LORD delivered them into the hand of Israel, who smote them, and chased them unto great Zidon, and unto Misrephothmaim, and unto the valley of Mizpeh eastward; and they smote them, until they left them none remaining.

9 And Joshua did unto them as the LORD bade him: he houghed their horses, and burnt their chariots with fire.

16 So Joshua took all that land, the hills, and all the south country, and all the land of Goshen, and the valley, and the plain, and the mountain of Israel, and the valley of the same;

17 Even from the mount Halak, that goeth up to Seir, even unto Baalgad in the valley of Lebanon under mount Hermon: and all their kings he took, and smote them, and slew them.

18 Joshua made war a long time with all those kings.

19 There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all other they took in battle.

20 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.

21 And at that time came Joshua, and cut off the Anakims from the mountains, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the mountains of Judah, and from all the mountains of Israel: Joshua destroyed them utterly with their cities.

22 There was none of the Anakims left in the land of the children of Israel: only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod, there remained.

23 So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war.

Key Text

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.—Joshua 11:20

Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 1: From Nomadic Tribes to Settled People

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify challenging phrases and contexts in the text.
2. Explain how Joshua's actions made way for the receipt of the Lord's inheritance.
3. Discuss why this text presents challenges to modern readers.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Brazen Audacity

B. Lesson Context: Historical

C. Lesson Context: Literary

I. At the River (Joshua 11:6–9)

A. The Lord's Assurance (v. 6)

The Battle of Thermopylae

B. Joshua's Action (v. 7)

C. The Lord's Power (v. 8)

D. Joshua's Obedience (v. 9)

II. Through the Land (Joshua 11:16–23)

A. Waged War (vv. 16–19)

B. Hardened Hearts (v. 20)

C. Certain Conquest (vv. 21–22)

D. Integral Inheritance (v. 23)

Follow the Directions

Conclusion

A. Sobering Events of Salvation History

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ai Ay-eye

Anak Ay-nak

Anakims An-a-kims

Ashdod Ash-dod

Baalgad Bay-ul-gad

Gath Gath (a as in bath)

Gibeon Gib-e-un (G as in get)

Goshen Go-shen

Halak Hay-lak

Hazor Hay-zor

Hermon Her-mun

Hivites Hi-vites

Jabin Jay-bin

Misrephothmaim Miz-re-foth-ma-im

Mizpeh Miz-peh

Negev Neg-ev

Phoenician Fuh-nish-un

Seir See-ir
Zidon Zye-dun

Introduction

A. Brazen Audacity

One observer described the two-man action as “surreal.” Another called it an act of “brazen audacity.” But war often creates shortages, and wartime shortages lead people to take actions they wouldn’t otherwise contemplate.

Such was the case during the war in Ukraine in 2024. After a failed Russian attack, Ukrainian defenders came across an abandoned Russian T-72 tank on the battlefield. The Ukrainians needed a tank, so two soldiers went after it while under enemy fire in the darkness of night. They found the tank was in perfect working condition, aside from being immobilized by wire entangled in the treads. They removed the wire, started the engine, and the tank was theirs.

The wartime actions in today’s lesson are equally brazen, if not more so. At first glance, it might appear that the Israelites wasted valuable wartime resources. However, a different story emerges when we consider their source of power.

B. Lesson Context: Historical

After crossing the Jordan River (see [Lesson 2](#)), Joshua led the Israelites through the land of Canaan. This campaign included the victories at Jericho ([Joshua 6](#); see [Lesson 4](#)) and Ai ([8:1–29](#)). However, the Israelites were deceived by the Gibeonites, resulting in an inappropriate covenant with them ([Joshua 9](#)). In the cases of both Ai and the Gibeonites, Joshua’s decisions revealed a key spiritual weakness by his deciding courses of action without consulting the Lord first ([7:3–5](#); [8:1](#); [9:14–15](#)). Despite this shortcoming, Joshua and the Israelites defeated many kings and their armies in the southern parts of Canaan ([10:16–43](#)).

Having heard of the Israelites’ advances, rulers in the northern Canaan formed an alliance ([Joshua 11:1–5](#)). Although the leaders of this coalition were each designated as a “king,” their respective kingdoms were comparatively small and weak in power. By coming together, they thought they could present an effective, united front that could not be overcome—at least it seemed to be so.

C. Lesson Context: Literary

The book of Joshua is part of the section of the Old Testament designated as the Historical Books; there are twelve of these. The principle of writing a coherent historical account requires that the included elements come together to reveal a narrative regarding plot development and character development. The book of Joshua is no exception to this principle. Many accounts in this book emphasize the unity of the Israelites and their obedience to God, while other accounts pinpoint instances of the people's disobedience and resulting consequences (example: [Joshua 7](#)). Together, these accounts convey the central message of the book of Joshua: the Israelites' obedience to God results in their success in taking the land, thus solidifying a unified identity.

Additionally, modern readers might view the text of Joshua as a testimony to God and His people. This testimony reveals God's redemptive power despite human sin. At times, the narrative of Joshua delves into the depths of human depravity experienced by individuals before their rescue. The details, albeit negative, enhance the remarkable nature of God's actions—the greater the transformation from sin to righteousness, the more honor God receives.

What Do You Think?

What other literary genres can you identify in Scripture?

Digging Deeper

How do these genres shape the way we read and interpret Scripture?

I. At the River

([Joshua 11:6–9](#))

A. The Lord's Assurance (v. 6)

6a. And the LORD said unto Joshua, Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel.

In response to the threat of the kings in northern Canaan (see [Lesson Context](#)), *the Lord* speaks to *Joshua*. We don't know the exact place where this communication occurs. But it must be close to the waters of Merom because that is where the enemy is located ([Joshua 11:5](#)), and the Israelites will attack them there *tomorrow*. This communication seems to occur after a multi-day march of over sixty miles northward, from the area of

Jericho and Gilgal (10:43).

This instance is not the first time Joshua has heard God say *be not afraid*. Joshua heard the same command when he led the people into battle in southern Canaan (Joshua 8:1; 10:8, 25). As Joshua faces the Canaanite coalition from the north, he is again reminded that God's presence empowers him to rise above fear (compare 1:9).

Considering the armies Joshua faces (see Lesson Context), it is understandable why he might be fearful. The collective size of the enemy force is impressive, numbered "as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude, with horses and chariots very many" (Joshua 11:4). Even so, the Lord promises swift military success; in less than twenty-four hours, He will *deliver* the enemies of *Israel* over to them.

What Do You Think?

Can you recall a time when you sensed
God encouraging you to "be not afraid"?

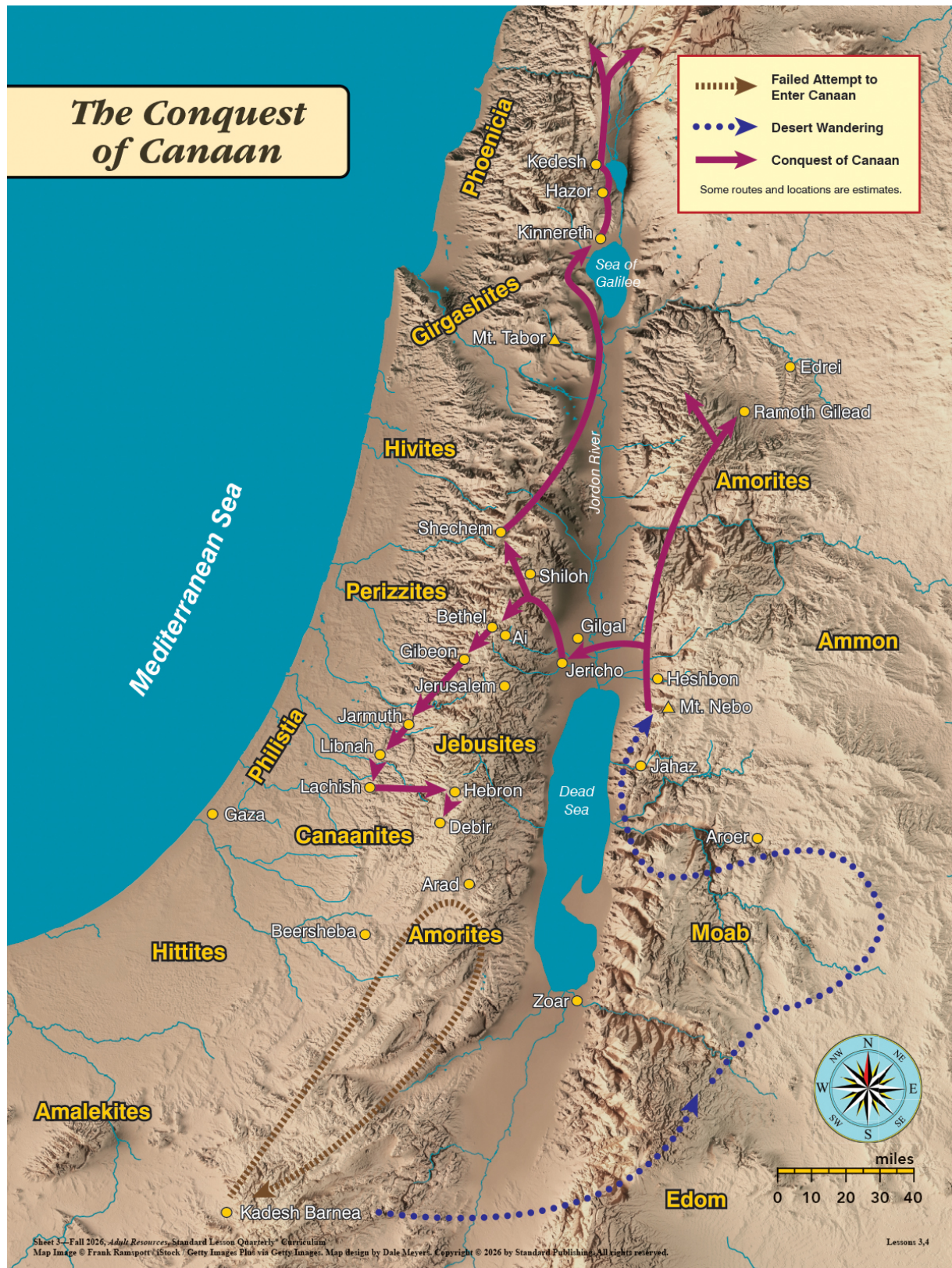
Digging Deeper

How does the promise of God's presence and provision give you strength when the future feels uncertain?

6b. Thou shalt hough their horses, and burn their chariots with fire.

Joshua and his army fought during the period when the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) was giving way to the Early Iron Age. People had already been aware of and used iron for hundreds of years (example: Genesis 4:22), but its application in weaponry did not predominate until about 1200 BC. The presence of "chariots of iron" among the Canaanites gave them a significant technological advantage (Joshua 17:16, 18; compare 1 Samuel 13:19–22).

The two commands in this half-verse may seem puzzling at first. If the Israelites end up capturing *horses* as well as *chariots*, wouldn't it be advantageous to keep them? However, God instructs the Israelites not to capture and keep them. This directive is likely intended to keep the Israelites focused on God as their source of strength, rather than relying on weapons and animals of war (contrast 1 Kings 4:26; 10:26). Thus, the chariots are to be burned and the horses hamstrung (the meaning of the older English word *hough*).



The Battle of Thermopylae

A significant battle of the Greco-Persian Wars (492–449 BC) is the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. Thermopylae was a strategic pass through the mountains near the Aegean Sea. In this location, a Greek force of about 7,000, led by 300 Spartan warriors, faced the Persian army, which numbered about 120,000 by modern estimates.

The Spartans had two key advantages: military skill and their position on the terrain. The mountain pass was a “choke point,” too narrow for Persian troops to advance as a large group. This advantage enabled the outnumbered Spartans to hold their ground against overwhelming odds. The Greeks eventually were outflanked when a traitor revealed an alternate route. But the defense at Thermopylae lasted long enough for Greek commanders to make further preparations elsewhere.

The first part of the battle is notable in demonstrating effective military strategy. In contrast, the Israelites’ success during the conquest of Canaan was directly tied to the Lord’s power and provision.

Thus, effective service would seem to rely on being “wise as serpents” in using our skills while we are “harmless as doves” in relying on God’s power ([Matthew 10:16](#)). Where are you in that dynamic?

—BC

B. Joshua’s Action (v. 7)

7. So Joshua came, and all the people of war with him, against them by the waters of Merom suddenly; and they fell upon them.

The word *suddenly* indicates an unexpected, surprise attack (compare [Joshua 10:9](#)). The enemy is the Canaanite coalition led by Jabin, king of Hazor ([11:1](#); see [Lesson Context](#)).

The exact location of *the waters of Merom* is unknown. This account is the only place in Scripture that mentions the site (compare [Joshua 11:5](#)). Commentators suggest that it points to some local springs of water a few miles west of the Sea of Galilee.

C. The Lord’s Power (v. 8)

8. And the LORD delivered them into the hand of Israel, who smote them, and chased them unto great Zidon, and unto Misrephothmaim, and unto the valley of Mizpeh eastward; and they smote them, until they left them none remaining.

The book of Joshua does not provide the specifics of this battle. The lack of details is yet another way the narrative de-emphasizes the Israelites' success in conjunction with their planning or military strength. Instead, their surprise attack against a much stronger military force succeeds because *the Lord* delivers the enemies into their *hand*.

The attack causes the coalition of Canaanites to fragment in several directions. The Phoenician city of *Zidon* (also known as Sidon; [Genesis 10:19](#)) along the Mediterranean coastline about fifty miles north-northwest of the battlefield. Others flee to *Misrephothmaim*, about twenty miles due west. Still others escape *eastward to the valley of Mizpeh*.

The text implies that Joshua divides his forces to pursue each element of the now-fractured Canaanite coalition as they retreat. This goes against the typical principles of warfare, since dividing forces introduces the risk that those forces will be more easily defeated. But Joshua's taking of this risk reveals his trust in the Lord. The result is that the enemy alliance is destroyed to the point that *none* remain. This status also applied to the kingdoms of southern Canaan ([Joshua 10:28–42](#)).

However, later accounts indicate that the Israelites were unable to entirely remove the Canaanites from the land ([Joshua 15:13–15](#); [Judges 1:19](#)). Therefore, we may interpret this phrase—and others that follow ([Joshua 11:20–21](#), below)—as examples of intentionally hyperbolic language frequently found in ancient Near Eastern war narratives.

Despite the hyperbolic language, the Israelites' conquest is effective. It removes the Canaanites' collective identity, characterized by violence and immorality, from the land (see [Leviticus 18:24–30](#); [Deuteronomy 9:4–5](#)). This removal ensures that the region would be purified from sin, allowing God's holiness to be manifest in and through the Israelites and the land.

What Do You Think?

How might you respond to someone who sees this verse as evidence that God is violent or unloving?

Digging Deeper

How will your response balance human sin with God's holiness?

D. Joshua's Obedience (v. 9)

9. And Joshua did unto them as the LORD bade him: he houghed their horses, and burnt their chariots with fire.

Joshua obeys the Lord's command regarding the *horses* and *chariots* of the enemy (see commentary on [Joshua 11:6](#), above).

II. Through the Land

(Joshua 11:16–23)

In the intervening verses not part of today's lesson text, attention is paid to Joshua's destruction of the city of Hazor and the execution of its king, since it was he who had initiated the coalition. Joshua is depicted as obeying the commands that the Lord initially gave to Moses (see [Numbers 33:50–52](#); [Deuteronomy 7:2](#)). Resources are plundered, livestock taken, and inhabitants killed.

A. Waged War (vv. 16–19)

16. So Joshua took all that land, the hills, and all the south country, and all the land of Goshen, and the valley, and the plain, and the mountain of Israel, and the valley of the same.

This verse and the next offer a parallel to what is stated in [Joshua 10:40–41](#): what Joshua did to the kingdoms of the northern cities, he has also done to the kingdoms of the southern cities. While we may not know the exact location of some of these areas, they would have been familiar to the original audience.

The land spans from *the hills* near Galilee in the north to *the south country* of the Negev, including the valley, the plain, and the foothills of *the mountain of Israel* in *Goshen*. Of note, this “Goshen” is not the same location as the place in Egypt where Jacob settled ([Genesis 47:27](#)). Instead, it is a district in southern Palestine ([Joshua 10:41](#)) and a particular village ([15:51](#)). *Joshua* and the Israelites now control the northern and central parts of Canaan.

17a. Even from the mount Halak, that goeth up to Seir, even unto Baalgad in the valley of Lebanon under mount Hermon.

More specifics are noted. *Mount Halak, that goeth up to Seir*, marks the southernmost border of Israel. Seir is another name for Edom, the neighboring country located south

and east of the Dead Sea ([Genesis 32:3](#)). To the north, the conquered land extends to *Baalgad*, near the foothills of *mount Hermon* in *Lebanon*. The described region is extensive.

17b–18. And all their kings he took, and smote them, and slew them. Joshua made war a long time with all those kings.

The summary continues. The conquest of Canaan began with an advance into the central region of the land, starting with the destruction of the cities of Jericho and Ai ([Joshua 5:13–6:24](#); [8:1–29](#)). From there, the Israelites shifted their focus to the southern area of Canaan, where they defeated the kings of that region ([10:28–42](#)). Subsequently, Joshua and the Israelites focused on removing the coalition of northern kings and their cities. [Joshua 12](#) features a complete list of the kings and cities defeated. The last verse of that chapter says that there were thirty-one such kings.

19. There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all other they took in battle.

The people and events in this verse refer to the events mentioned in [Joshua 9](#). Hivite messengers deceived the Israelites ([Joshua 9:3–6](#)). Through this deception, *the Hivites* negotiated a *peace* treaty with Joshua ([9:15](#)). After discovering the Hivites' deceit, the leaders of the Israelites agreed to uphold the treaty and vowed to protect *the inhabitants of Gibeon*. This decision was in direct disobedience to earlier commands (see [Deuteronomy 7:1–2](#); [20:16–17](#)).

B. Hardened Hearts (v. 20)

20. 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.

We may wonder about the phrase *for it was of the Lord to harden their hearts*. Does this mean that it was not of the Canaanites' own free will that they resisted? Not at all. The Canaanites had rejected the true God; their sins had become "full" ([Genesis 15:16](#)). With hardened hearts, they fought in allegiance to their fictitious gods.

The spies Joshua sent to Jericho reported that the people were filled with fear ([Joshua 2:11, 24](#)). Instead of this fear driving the Canaanites toward God, it positions them against Him. The heart-hardening from the Lord may be interpreted as the Lord giving

the Canaanites the courage of their convictions. The concept is similar to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Egypt ([Exodus 4:21](#); [9:12](#); [10:1](#), [20](#), [27](#); [11:10](#); [14:4](#), [8](#), [17](#); compare [Romans 9:18](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are ways we can guard against developing hardened hearts toward God?

Digging Deeper

How can regular prayer, repentance, Bible study, and community help keep your heart open and responsive to God?

C. Certain Conquest (vv. [21–22](#))

[21–22](#). And at that time came Joshua, and cut off the Anakims from the mountains, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the mountains of Judah, and from all the mountains of Israel: Joshua destroyed them utterly with their cities. There was none of the Anakims left in the land of the children of Israel: only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod, there remained.

The Anakims, descendants of Anak ([Numbers 13:22](#), [28](#), [32–33](#)), reside near *Hebron*. That city lies about twenty miles south of the town later known as Jerusalem. Hebron and nearby *Debir* and *Anab* are located in Canaan's hill country west of the Dead Sea. When the twelve Israelite spies investigated the land, the presence of the Anakims instilled great fear ([Numbers 13:31–33](#); [Deuteronomy 1:28](#); [9:2](#)).

Although none of the Anakims remain in *the land of the children of Israel*, the victory is not total since some manage to escape to *Gaza*, *Gath*, and *Ashdod*.

D. Integral Inheritance (v. [23](#))

[23a](#). So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes.

This verse serves as the halfway point for the book of Joshua; it repeats the main themes and events of the book thus far. The promises made by Moses regarding the land have come to fruition (see [Exodus 23:27–31](#); [34:11](#)). The Lord keeps His promises, and Joshua takes *the whole land* of Canaan by relying on God (see [Joshua 10–11](#)). The phrase “the whole land” is meant to be understood as “the whole land as described thus far.”

[Joshua 13:1–7](#) makes clear that there’s more work to do. The second half of the book will recount how Joshua divided the land and its cities among various *divisions* and *tribes*.

Follow the Directions

My family often teases me about my struggles with the GPS navigation app on my smartphone. More times than I would like to admit, I miss the app’s cues for turns at intersections and exits on the interstate. On occasion, I doubt the app’s directions and, instead, rely on my intuition. However, no matter how much I trust my instincts, they can’t compare to the guidance provided by the app (as long as the map software is up to date).

Joshua heard and obeyed God’s directions for conquering the land. He followed God’s instructions, no matter how challenging they seemed. The result was victory and a renewed collective identification as God’s people.

What must happen for you to rely less on your intuition and knowledge and more on the wisdom and power of God?

—LMW

23b. And the land rested from war.

Parts of the land have yet to be conquered (see [Joshua 13:1–6](#)), but widespread conflict stops. In something of a footnote, [Joshua 14:6–15](#) discusses further the conflict with the Anakims. That section also concludes with the phrase *and the land had rest from war* (compare [Deuteronomy 12:10](#); [25:19](#); [Joshua 1:13, 15](#)).

Conclusion

A. Sobering Events of Salvation History

Scripture’s accounts of the conquest of Canaan raise questions and concerns for modern readers. The themes of extreme violence, scorched-earth warfare, and the merciless destruction of cities and people challenge our sensibilities. We wonder why God would not only allow but also command such things.

However, as we read these accounts, it’s essential to consider the context in which they were written. These warfare texts should not be read as glorifying senseless destruction and violence. Instead, they were written for the Israelites at a particular

time to remind them of the necessity for spiritual purity in the land.

The sin of the Canaanites had stained the land, and if they remained in the land, their pagan practices could lead others into sin ([Numbers 33:55–56](#)). Thus, their corrupting influence needed to be removed to provide God with a specific location where His holy purpose and presence might be established—a purpose and presence focused on bringing the Messiah into the world. Is that how you view the sometimes-sobering events of salvation history?

What Do You Think?

What aspects of today's lesson might feel challenging or unsettling to modern readers of Joshua?

Digging Deeper

How has this study shaped how you will approach the book of Joshua in the future?

B. Prayer

Lord God, grant us wisdom when we study challenging passages of Scripture. Help us be better attentive to the leading of the Spirit to comprehend how You have worked through Your people in history. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Scripture reveals God's work in history.