

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 The LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to Israel. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots.”

⁷ So Joshua and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them, ⁸ and the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel. They defeated them and pursued them all the way to Greater Sidon, to Misrephoth Maim, and to the Valley of Mizpah on the east, until no survivors were left. ⁹ Joshua did to them as the LORD had directed: He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots.

¹⁶ So Joshua took this entire land: the hill country, all the Negev, the whole region of Goshen, the western foothills, the Arabah and the mountains of Israel with their foothills, ¹⁷ from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, to Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon. He captured all their kings and put them to death. ¹⁸ Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. ¹⁹ Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. ²⁰ For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

²¹ At that time Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites from the hill country: from Hebron, Debir and Anab, from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua totally destroyed them and their towns. ²² No Anakites were left in Israelite territory; only in Gaza, Gath and Ashdod did any survive.

²³ So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.

Key Text

For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had 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)
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- 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	<i>Ash-dod</i>
Baal Gad	<i>Bay-ul Gad</i>
Gath	Gath (<i>a</i> as in <i>bath</i>)
Gibeon	<i>Gib-e-un</i> (<i>G</i> as in <i>get</i>)
Goshen	<i>Go-shen</i>
Halak	<i>Hay-lak</i>
Hazor	<i>Hay-zor</i>
Hermon	<i>Her-mun</i>
Hivites	<i>Hi-vites</i>
Jabin	<i>Jay-bin</i>
Misrephoth Maim	<i>Miz-re-foth Ma-im</i>
Mizpeh	<i>Miz-peh</i>
Negev	<i>Neg-ev</i>
Phoenician	<i>Fuh-nish-un</i>
Seir	<i>See-ir</i>
Sidon	<i>Sigh-dun</i>

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. The LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to 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 *do not be 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: "a large number of horses and chariots—a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (Joshua 11:4). Even so, the Lord promises swift military success; in less than twenty-four hours, he will *hand all* of 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. "You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots."

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 fitted with 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 Conquest of Canaan

-  Failed Attempt to Enter Canaan
 -  Desert Wandering
 -  Conquest of Canaan
- Some routes and locations are estimates.



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Lessons 3,4

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 “shrewd as snakes” in using our skills while we are “innocent 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 and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked 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 gave them into the hand of Israel. They defeated them and pursued them all the way to Greater Sidon, to Misrephoth Maim, and to the Valley of Mizpah on the east, until no survivors were left.

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 *Sidon* along the Mediterranean coastline about fifty miles north-northwest of the battlefield. Others flee to *Misrephoth Maim*, about twenty miles due west. Still others escape eastward to *the Val-*

ley 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 *no survivors* 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. Joshua did to them as the LORD had directed: He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots.

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 this entire land: the hill country, all the Negev, the whole region of Goshen, the western foothills, the Arabah and the mountains of Israel with their foothills,

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 hill country* near Galilee in the north to the southern regions of *the Negev*, including the valley, the plain, and the foothills of *the mountains 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. from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, to Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon.

More specifics are noted. *Mount Halak, which rises toward 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 *Baal Gad*, near the foothills of *Mount Hermon* in *Lebanon*. The described region is extensive.

17b–18. He captured all their kings and put them to death. Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time.

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. Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all 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 treaty of peace* ([9:15](#)). After discovering the Hivites’ deceit, the leaders of the Israelites agreed to uphold the treaty and vowed to protect the Hivites *living in 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 the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

We may wonder about the phrase *for it was the Lord himself who hardened 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 “complete” ([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. At that time Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites from the hill country: from Hebron, Debir and Anab, from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua totally destroyed them and their towns. No Anakites were left in Israelite territory; only in Gaza, Gath and Ashdod did any survive.

The Anakites, 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 Anakites instilled great fear ([Numbers 13:31–33](#); [Deuteronomy 1:28](#); [9:2](#)).

Although none of the Anakites remain in *Israelite territory*, 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 entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions.

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 entire land* of Canaan by relying on God (see [Joshua 10–11](#)). The phrase “the entire land” is meant to be understood as “the entire 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 *tribal divisions*.

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. Then the land had rest 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 Anakites. 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.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with **NIV Bible Student** (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the **NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition**).

Into the Lesson

Write the following sentences on the board for the whole class to see:

- 1—I could never worship a god who directed someone to kill without mercy.
- 2—God wants peace, not violence.
- 3—Since God is good, I don't believe he has ever wanted someone to suffer.
- 4—I understand most of the Bible and don't worry about the difficult parts.

Divide participants into small groups to discuss whether they agree or disagree with each sentence and their reasons for their responses. After a few minutes of discussion, reconvene the class and invite volunteers to share responses to the sentences.

Lead into Bible study by saying, "In today's study, we'll see how Joshua followed God's directives. Although we may be uncomfortable with some of the details we read, we'll examine why these particular directives were significant."

Into the Word

Distribute pens and handouts (you prepare) that include the statements below for small-group work. Have participants work together in study pairs or triads to (1) determine whether each statement is true or false, (2) jot a verse reference beside each statement to indicate where in the narrative the answer is found, and (3) write a few words that would make the false statements become true statements. (*Expected conclusions*: all statements are false.)

- 1—The Lord promised to deliver the enemies of the Israelites within a month.
- 2—The Lord encouraged Joshua to seize the enemy's chariots and horses for future battles.
- 3—After Joshua and the Israelites launched an attack at the Waters of Merom, the Israelites retreated.
- 4—Following the battle, Joshua rode the enemy's horses and took command of their chariots.
- 5—Joshua defeated the enemy armies and imprisoned their kings.
- 6—Most Canaanite cities established covenants of peace with the Israelites.

7—The Lord softened the hearts of the Canaanites, leading them to worship him.

8—Joshua eliminated the tribal divisions among the Israelites so that everyone could share in the land.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Questions, I’ve Got Questions” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Encourage learners to work in small groups to complete as indicated.

Ask the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—Why did the Lord command Joshua to disable the horses and burn the chariots? 2—Why did the Lord harden the hearts of the Canaanites? 3—What was the significance that the Lord directed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites completely? 4—Why was the land called an “inheritance”?

Into Life

Begin by saying, “Today’s Scripture text includes some of the most challenging passages we might encounter. When we read texts that include violence, we might want to ignore the violence or accept the violence without a critical perspective.”

Invite volunteers to share why today’s Scripture texts challenge modern readers. Write responses on the board. (*Possible responses may include warfare, the destruction of people, and God’s hardening of the hearts of Canaanites.*)

Invite participants to work with a partner to discuss how they respond to challenging passages of Scripture. To inspire discussion, write the following possible responses on the board:

1—I ignore the challenging texts.

2—I reject those sections of Scripture and concentrate on the teachings of Jesus.

3—I study commentary that helps me better understand Scripture.

4—I trust God for what I don’t understand and worship him for what I know about him.

Allow time for pairs to discuss and make a plan for how to approach difficult passages of Scripture.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(September 20—Joshua Fights for God\)](#)
