

The Book of Joshua

LESSON
TWO

VICTORIOUS CONQUEST



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The Book of Joshua

Lesson Two

Victorious Conquest

INTRODUCTION

If there's one portion of the Old Testament that troubles most modern Christians more than any other, it has to be the chapters of the book of Joshua that describe Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. We wonder how the loving, merciful God we know in Christ could have tolerated Israel's attempt to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan. But, contrary to our modern inclinations, the book of Joshua actually honors God, not for tolerating, but for commanding, leading and empowering Israel's conquest. And as Christ's followers, we are called to embrace this outlook as well.

This is the second lesson in our series on *The Book of Joshua*. And we've entitled it, Israel's "Victorious Conquest." In this lesson, we'll deal with the first major division of the book, Joshua 1–12.

In our preceding lesson, we summarized the original meaning of the book of Joshua in this way:

The book of Joshua was written about Israel's victorious conquest, tribal inheritances and covenant loyalty in Joshua's day to address similar challenges facing later generations.

As we've learned, Joshua was originally written for Israelites who lived either in the period of the judges, during the monarchy, or as late as the Babylonian exile. And the book was designed to guide these Old Testament Israelites as they continued to face the challenges of pursuing their victorious conquest, securing their tribal inheritances and renewing their covenant loyalty.

The first major division, in chapters 1–12, addresses the original audience's challenges associated with warfare. It does this by drawing attention to Israel's extensive victorious conquest over the land of Canaan. These chapters divide into three main sections: Israel's preparations for victory in chapter 1; Israel's initial victories over two cities in chapters 2–8; and Israel's later victories over two alliances in chapters 9–12.

Our lesson on Israel's victorious conquest will look at each of these three sections. Then we'll close with some comments on Christian application. Let's look first at Israel's preparations for victory.

PREPARATIONS FOR VICTORY

Time will only permit us to look briefly at two aspects of Israel's preparations for victory: first the structure and content of this portion of our book, and then some aspects of its original meaning. Let's begin with an overview of its structure and content.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The book of Joshua opens with Israel on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, an area often called Transjordan, meaning “across the Jordan.” These territories were so bountiful that, according to Numbers 32, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh asked for, and received, Moses’ permission to settle there. But in the opening of our book, God commanded Joshua to prepare to lead Israel westward into victory over the land of Canaan. This area is sometimes called Cisjordan, meaning “beside the Jordan.”

This section on Israel’s preparations for victory divides into three steps that introduce the appropriate chain of command for every upcoming battle in our book.

God’s Commands

We first read God’s commands to Joshua in 1:1-9. In verse 2, God told Joshua, “Arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people.” He then told Joshua three times in verses 6, 7 and 9, “Be strong and courageous.”

Joshua’s Commands

Next, our author introduced Joshua’s commands in response to God’s directives. In 1:10-15, Joshua commanded Israel to prepare themselves. In verse 11, he ordered his officers to tell the Israelites, “Prepare your provisions.” And in verse 14, he specifically commanded the tribes of Transjordan, “All the men of valor ... shall pass over.”

Israel’s Obedience

Lastly, our author reported Israel’s obedience to Joshua in 1:16-18. In verse 16, the tribes unanimously committed themselves to loyal service, saying to Joshua, “Wherever you send us we will go.”

Keeping in mind the threefold structure and content of Israel’s preparations for victory, we should comment on the original meaning. Why did our author begin his book in this way?

ORIGINAL MEANING

It isn’t difficult to see that the book of Joshua opens with a very positive portrait of Israel’s preparations for the conquest of Canaan. God’s command was direct and reassuring. Joshua called all the tribes to comply. And there’s no hint of hesitation from a single Israelite regarding the call to move forward into battle. Clearly, as Joshua’s

original audience faced various foes standing against them, they were to emulate this ideal account of how Joshua and Israel responded to God's command.

Divine Authority

When we look more closely at this chapter, we find that our author's positive portrait introduced five themes that appear time and again throughout his book. In the first place, in his account of preparations for victory in chapter 1, he stressed the divine authority behind Israel's preparations. The opening scene of God's commands begins in verse 1 with the words, "the Lord said to Joshua." This phrase established that God was the authority behind Joshua's commands. Along these same lines, God himself authorized Joshua as Moses' successor when he said in verse 5, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you." We also see this theme highlighted in Israel's obedience when the people of Israel responded in verse 17, "Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you." The original audience was to take Israel's preparations for victory to heart because God and Joshua, Moses' divinely ordained successor, had directed these events.

God's Covenant

In the second place, Joshua's preparations for victory also highlighted the importance of God's covenant. In the opening scene of God's commands, God told Joshua, in verse 6, "You shall cause this people to inherit the land I swore to their fathers to give them." This passage alludes to God's covenant with Israel in two ways. First, Israel was not simply to receive Canaan, but to "inherit" it — from the Hebrew verb *nachal* (נָחַל). The land of Canaan is described as Israel's enduring "inheritance" nearly thirty times in the book of Deuteronomy, and more than forty times in the book of Joshua. And second, in this same verse we read that God "swore to their fathers" to give them the land. This refers to Genesis 15 where God made a covenant with Abraham — or "Abram" at that time — to give Canaan to his descendants. God's covenant with Israel's ancestors established that Canaan belonged, by divine covenant, not only to Israel in Joshua's day, but also to the original Israelite audience of our book. And for this reason, they could move forward in their day with strength and courage, just as God had commanded Joshua.

Standard of Moses' Law

In the third place, the author made it clear that observing the standard of Moses' law was necessary for every generation of Israel to have victory in warfare and to possess the Promised Land. In verse 7 of the opening scene, God commanded Joshua: "[Be] careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you... that you may have good success." As the story of Joshua's conquest illustrates time and again, the

original audience of our book had to grasp a crucial perspective on the conflicts they faced: obedience to Moses' law would lead to victory; disobedience would lead to defeat.

God's Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, Joshua's preparations for victory point out that God's supernatural power made the conquest of Canaan possible. The opening scene of God's commands highlights this point of view when God told Joshua in verse 5: "I will be with you." And this theme is repeated in verse 9 where God told Joshua, "The Lord your God is with you wherever you go." As passages like 2 Chronicles 20:17 indicate, to speak of God being "with" his people in the context of battle meant that God would fight *alongside* and *for* them with supernatural power. And in a similar way, in the scene of Israel's obedience in Joshua 1:17, the tribes of Israel responded enthusiastically to Joshua, "May the Lord your God be with you, as he was with Moses!" In effect, Israel's conquest was no mere human affair. No generation of Israel was to enter into battle in its own strength. It was only if God fought alongside and for Israel that they could hope to succeed.

In Joshua 1:5, God promises through Joshua that he would be with Israel as they went in to conquer the land. And, of course, the obvious thing is God's presence is meaningful no matter in what form or manner; it's always a good thing to have God with you. But there's more going on there because this is the language of holy war and the divine warrior. I'm one of those Old Testament scholars who understands Exodus 3 and Exodus 6 to be teaching that the name "Yahweh" is actually a shorthand for "Yahweh who is the Lord of Hosts." So, this very name Yahweh, this Old Testament name for God, connotes his character as the God who fights for his people. And so, "Emmanuel" is picking up on that motif, I think, that God is not just present to help them or encourage them, but God is present with them as the God who will lead the armies of heaven, so that all Joshua and Israel will need to do is to follow in God's lead, and he will fight for them, which is a prominent theme, again, throughout the book of Joshua. So, in essence, it's a promise, not just that God will be with them, but that God will fight for them.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

All Israel

In the fifth place, the opening chapter of Joshua introduces the importance of the participation of all Israel. As we've mentioned before, Joshua's commands directly addressed the tribes of Transjordan in verse 14, telling them, "All the men of valor ... shall pass over." And the participation of all Israel in the conquest reappears in the scene

of Israel's obedience. In verse 18, the Israelites replied to Joshua, "Whoever rebels against your commandment . . . shall be put to death." As we'll see, throughout his book, the author presented his original audience with the ideal that, if they hoped to have full success in the conflicts they faced in their day, all of Israel must stand as one people.

After introducing the victorious conquest of Joshua's day with an ideal presentation of Israel's preparations for victory, the author of our book then turned to Israel's initial victories over two cities, the cities of Jericho and Ai.

VICTORIES OVER TWO CITIES

At this point, our book describes the first phase of Joshua's conquest of Canaan. Joshua led the twelve tribes of Israel across the Jordan where they encamped at Gilgal. From Gilgal, Joshua led Israel to the city of Jericho. And after defeating Jericho, they pressed on to the city of Ai. After conquering Ai, the tribes of Israel proceeded into the very heart of the Promised Land, to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where they celebrated these initial successes by renewing their covenant with God.

We'll look at this record of Israel's victories over two cities in two steps. First, we'll sketch its structure and content and then we'll summarize its original meaning. Let's begin with the structure and content.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

On the whole, the well-known accounts of the battles for Jericho and Ai are a lesson in contrasts. And this lesson was so important to our author that it takes up over a quarter of his book. As we'll see, Joshua led Israel to victory over both cities, but the paths to victory were very different. Every aspect of the battle for Jericho was ideal and wonderfully blessed by God. But victory over Ai was accomplished only after Israel had repented of serious disloyalty to God.

City of Jericho

The account of Israel's victories over two cities, in chapters 2–8, divides into three parts: the city of Jericho in 2:1–6:27, the city of Ai in 7:1–8:29, and a closing covenant renewal in 8:30–35. Let's look first at the account of Israel's victory at Jericho.

Joshua's Spies & Rahab. The story of Jericho consists of four major episodes. It begins in 2:1–24 with Joshua's spies and Rahab. In this episode Joshua sent spies to investigate the city. They encountered Rahab who turned to Israel's God, protected the spies and received a solemn promise of safety. Then the spies returned to Joshua with confidence that God was going to give Israel victory.

Balancing with this beginning, the fourth and final episode closes the story of Jericho. In 6:22-27, the narrative returns to Joshua's spies and Rahab. In this episode, Joshua ordered the spies to honor their oath of protection for Rahab, and she and her family were adopted into Israel. By starting and ending with Rahab and the spies, our author portrayed everything that occurred in chapters 2–6 as part of the battle for Jericho.

Now, Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 remind us that we should celebrate how Rahab's faith, expressed in her obedience, delivered her from God's judgment. But, when we set this episode in its larger context, we can see that our author emphasized other matters as well for his original audience.

Miraculous Crossing of the Jordan. Two episodes of astonishingly miraculous events appear between these bookends. On the one side, we find Israel's miraculous crossing of the Jordan River in 3:1–5:12. These chapters begin with Israel's ceremonial preparations on the eastern shore, highlighting their devotion to God and God's approval. Then the priests, carrying the ark of the covenant, stepped into the river, and the Jordan parted. Halfway across, twelve men piled twelve stones next to the priests, and the people passed by. As the crossing ended, they moved the stones to the western shore, the river closed, and the twelve stones were erected as a memorial at Gilgal.

In balance with the ceremonial beginnings of this episode, our author reported how Joshua then consecrated the Israelites through circumcision. And four days later, Israel observed Passover and ate the produce of Canaan, instead of Manna, for the first time.

Miraculous Fall of Jericho. This brings us to the third episode: the miraculous fall of Jericho in 5:13–6:21. To introduce this battle, our author began with a mysterious vignette that explained Joshua's extraordinary upcoming victory. As Joshua approached Jericho, he met an angelic figure and, in 5:13, Joshua asked him a crucial question: "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" In verse 14, the angel answered, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." When Joshua humbled himself, the angel called for Joshua to remove his sandals because he stood on holy ground. And with this act, the angel assured him of the support of heaven's army.

Following this vignette, God gave instructions for the attack on Jericho — an attack that depended entirely on the support of heaven's army. The Israelites were to march once around the city for six consecutive days, with the priests in front carrying the ark of the covenant. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times. The priests were to blow their trumpets, calling the angelic armies to battle. And the people were to shout and move in only after the miraculous fall of the city walls. Israel obeyed all of God's directives.

It's important to mention a feature of this story that appears time and again in Joshua's conquest. According to 6:17, Joshua ordered that "the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction." The expression "to be devoted" translates the Hebrew verb *charam* (חָרַם). As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, this term, along with the corresponding noun *cherem* (חֵרֶם), has connotations of an act of worship. Outside the context of war, in places like Leviticus 27:28, this same terminology is used to refer to the permanent dedication of people, animals, or land to services of worship.

But in the context of war, such as in Joshua, it refers to killing animals and people and devoting select precious metals and the like to the Tabernacle.

To understand how these were acts of worship, we need to remember that ordinarily armies — including the armies of Israel — enriched themselves with the plunder and slaves they acquired in battle. But in passages like Deuteronomy 20:16, God ordered that, with rare exceptions like Rahab, the inhabitants of Canaan were to be devoted to him as an act of worship. By doing so, Israel gratefully acknowledged that the victory was actually God’s victory.

City of Ai

After the victory at Jericho, our author turned to Israel’s victory at the city of Ai in 7:1–8:29.

Israel’s Defeat. The episode of Ai unfolds in three steps. First, we find a brief description of Israel’s defeat at Ai in 7:1-5. In this story, spies wrongly advised Joshua that Ai would be an easy victory. So, he only sent some of his army to attack. We also learn that a man named Achan had secretly kept some plunder from Jericho, rather than devoting it to God. So, under God’s judgment, some thirty-six Israelites were killed at Ai and the rest were routed.

Israel’s Repentance. In the second step, in 7:6-26, we read of Israel’s repentance. Joshua lamented to God, and God revealed the reason for Israel’s defeat. According to 7:11, Achan’s sin was so egregious that God announced, “Israel has ... transgressed my covenant.” God gave instructions for finding Achan. And when Achan confessed his sin, he, his family and all that he had were “devoted to destruction,” just as God had commanded. The same destruction that was ordered for the Canaanites because of their terrible sins was also carried out on this Israelite family.

Achan’s sin was very devastating, and the reason why is because God had called the children of Israel, when they defeated Jericho, conquered Jericho, to devote everything to the Lord... And so, what he did is he took what not only didn’t belong to him, but what belonged to God, and it was just a terrible thing that he did. Now, it’s so tragic, also, because the covenant that God makes is not an individual covenant with Israel... We’re so individualistic in our thinking. It’s hard for us to understand that we are all responsible for one another. But when Achan sins, it is not just his sin, but it’s a sin that affects the whole nation because he is a part of that community of faith. And I think this is not just an Old Testament thing, but something that’s New Testament, when we understand that we are all connected together, and what one person does affects the whole body. And that is certainly what happened with Achan, with his sin.

— Dr. T. J. Betts

Israel's Victory. The third step, in 8:1-29, shows the result of Israel's repentance: Israel's victory over Ai. We find a familiar pattern. God instructed Joshua to set up an ambush. Joshua commanded the people accordingly. The people obeyed. And as the battle ensued, God gave Israel victory through supernatural intervention.

Covenant Renewal

After the successes at Jericho and Ai, the account of Israel's victories over two cities closes with covenant renewal in 8:30-35. In obedience to Moses' command in Deuteronomy 11:29, Israel celebrated the completion of the first segment of the conquest by travelling to the heart of the Promised Land, to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. All of Moses' law was read, and the entire nation renewed their commitment to obey God's covenant.

With the structure and content of Israel's victories over two cities in mind, we're in a position to comment on the original meaning of these chapters.

ORIGINAL MEANING

Although the original audience faced different circumstances than those Joshua faced, the author of Joshua held Jericho up as an ideal that they were to imitate in ways that were appropriate for their day. He also presented Ai as a lesson on what to do when they failed in battle because they'd violated the commands of God. And the grand celebration of covenant renewal confirmed that God's mercies in battle should move the original audience to celebrate their successes in battle by renewing their commitments to God's covenant.

Divine Authority

To impact his audience in these ways, our author, once again, highlighted the five main themes in his account of Israel's victories over two cities. In the first place, he emphasized the divine authority behind these events. In the account of crossing the Jordan, we read these words in 3:7: "the Lord said to Joshua." Just as before, this phrase established God's authority over everything Joshua commanded the people to do. And in the miraculous fall of Jericho, in 6:2, we again find the phrase, "the Lord said to Joshua."

To stress divine authority, our author also pointed out that Joshua was Moses' successor. In the miraculous crossing of the Jordan, in 4:14, Israel stood in awe of Joshua, "just as they had stood in awe of Moses." In 4:23, we read that "God dried up the waters of the Jordan ... [just as] God did to the Red Sea." And in the miraculous fall of Jericho, in 5:15, the angel commanded Joshua to, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy" — much like God commanded Moses in Exodus 3:5.

Now, in the account of the city of Ai, Israel initially failed to serve God faithfully. But with Israel's repentance, we read in 7:10, "the Lord said to Joshua." The phrase "the Lord said to Joshua" also appears in Israel's victory over Ai in 8:1, 18. Once again, our author stressed that these events were to guide his audience because they were directed by God himself, and by Joshua, Moses' successor.

God's Covenant

In the second place, the account of Israel's victories over two cities also reinforced that God's covenant established Canaan as Israel's homeland. In the ceremonial celebration after crossing the Jordan, in 5:6, Canaan is referred to as, "the land that the Lord had sworn to their fathers to give to [them]." And along these lines, in the story of Joshua's spies, Rahab confessed, in 2:9, "The Lord has given you the land." The spies also returned to Joshua in 2:24 with confidence, saying, "Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands." Along these same lines, in 6:16, in the fall of Jericho, Joshua commanded the army of Israel, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city." These references to God's covenant were designed to assure the original audience of their divine right to the Promised Land, despite the circumstances they faced.

Standard of Moses' Law

In the third place, Israel's victories over two cities also highlighted that obedience to the standard of Moses' law was necessary for Israel to have victory in battle. The account of crossing the Jordan, in 4:10 tells us that the priests led Israel "according to all that Moses had commanded." Joshua 4:12 reports that the tribes also arranged themselves "as Moses had told them." In 5:2, Joshua circumcised the Israelites in accordance with Moses' law. In 5:10, Israel kept Passover on the day that Moses had ordained. Along these same lines, in the closing account of Joshua's spies and Rahab, in 6:22, Joshua ordered the spies to treat Rahab "as you swore to her" — a standard established by Moses' law. And in 6:24, the author pointed out that Israel "burned the city [of Jericho] with fire, and everything in it," as Moses had commanded in Deuteronomy.

Similarly, disobedience to Moses' law explained the defeat at Ai. In 7:1, we learn that "the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things," directly defying Moses' law. And in 7:15, Joshua led Israel's repentance by insisting that Achan had "transgressed the covenant of the Lord." God himself declared the result of this disobedience in 7:13 when he said that Israel could not stand against its enemies until Achan's sin was rectified. This point is so important that the author returned to it in 22:20. He explained that God's wrath came on the entire nation of Israel because, "Achan ... [broke] faith in the matter of the devoted things." Of course, as soon as Israel dealt with Achan's violation, defeat turned to victory.

This outlook is emphasized again in Israel's covenant renewal after Israel's victories. In 8:31, Israel prepared "just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded," and they built an altar "as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses."

In 8:32, Joshua wrote a copy of Moses' law on stones. And according to 8:33, they arranged the people "just as Moses ... had commanded at the first." This focus on the law of Moses vividly demonstrated that victories and defeats for the original audience would result from obedience and disobedience to Moses' law.

The whole book of Joshua has a really strong teaching about obeying the law of God, or the law of Moses. From beginning to end, the whole book is a call to obedience, and it shows what comes from obeying God. That's why, from its very foundation in 1:8, we see that ... "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success."

— Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

God's Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, Israel's victories over two cities also highlighted God's supernatural power. This theme appears repeatedly in the chapters leading up to the fall of Jericho. In the first episode involving Joshua's spies and Rahab, Rahab acknowledged in 2:9 that, "The fear of [Israel] has fallen upon us." And in 2:24, the spies confirmed that, "all the inhabitants of the land melt away [in fear] because of us." Passages such as Deuteronomy 11:22-25 indicate that God often displayed supernatural power against Israel's enemies by striking fear into their hearts.

Beyond this, when crossing the Jordan, God declared to Joshua, in 3:7, "I will be with you." As we mentioned earlier, this expression indicated that God was fighting with supernatural power for Israel. In 3:10, Joshua declared God's words to the Israelites, saying again, "The living God is among" — or with — "you." And in 5:1, we see God at work when the Canaanites' hearts melted in fear.

Nearly every dimension of the fall of Jericho illustrates this theme. It's especially evident in 6:20 when "the wall [of Jericho] fell down flat" by God's supernatural power. And it's no wonder that our author closed his account of Joshua's spies and Rahab in 6:27 by saying, "So the Lord was with Joshua."

As we might expect, supernatural power isn't seen in the early stage of Israel's defeat at Ai. Rather, in 7:5, we read that "the hearts of the [Israelites]" — rather than the Canaanites — "melted" in fear. And when God called for Israel's repentance in 7:12, God told Joshua, "I will be with you no more" until they rectified Achan's sin. But after the Israelites dealt with Achan, God displayed his supernatural power once again in the victory at Ai. In 8:18, God commanded Joshua, "Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai," and the battle was won.

Throughout these chapters, our author used Joshua's initial victories over two cities to point out that his original audience could not win their battles in human strength. Victory came only through the supernatural power of God.

All Israel

In the fifth place, Israel's victories over two cities emphasized the importance of the participation of all Israel in the conquest. In the episode of Israel's crossing the Jordan, 3:1, 17 tell us that *all the Israelites* crossed with Joshua. In 4:14, "The Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel." And of course, the "twelve men" in 4:4 and the "twelve stones" in 4:8, 9 and 20 represented the twelve tribes of Israel. Beyond this, according to 5:8 the "whole nation" of Israel was circumcised at Gilgal. And at the fall of Jericho, God commanded, in 6:3, that Joshua march with "all the men of war" around the city.

Once again, we see a striking contrast in Israel's defeat at Ai. In 7:3, the spies told Joshua "Do not have all the people go up." It was not until Israel repented that the author mentioned the participation of "all the people of Israel," in 7:23. And in 7:24, 25, "all Israel" participated together in the judgment against Achan.

As we should expect by now, in the covenant renewal, in 8:33, "all Israel" stood before God. Our author drew attention to the participation of all Israel in this part of his book to leave no doubt that every generation of Israel's tribes must be ready to engage in battle together.

Having seen how the account of Israel's victorious conquest begins with preparations for victory and moves to Israel's victories over two cities, we now come to Israel's later victories over two alliances.

VICTORIES OVER TWO ALLIANCES

The author of Joshua could have outlined the rest of Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land in many different ways. But he chose instead to concentrate on how Joshua's conquest extended from two cities to two regions, the southern and northern regions of the Promised Land. As we'll see, this portion of his book was particularly relevant to the needs of his original audience because it displayed that Joshua's conquest reached the full extent of the land God had promised to Israel.

Prior to this point in our book, Israel's conquest had taken them from Transjordan, to Jericho, to Ai, and to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. But in this section, our author introduced the idea that alliances formed against Joshua from all over Canaan, first in the south and then in the north.

As we survey Israel's victories over two alliances, we'll once again briefly look at this section's structure and content and then at its original meaning. Let's start with an overview of the structure and content.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Israel's victories over two alliances, in chapters 9–12, can be confusing because these chapters contain a lot of diverse material. But it helps if we realize that this section divides into four main parts.

Overview of Alliances

The first part, in 9:1, 2, gives a short overview of the alliances that stood against Israel. This briefly introduces what happens in the next chapters. As these verses tell us, “all the kings who were beyond the Jordan ... gathered together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel.”

Overview of Victories

The fourth and final part of the account of alliances, in 11:16–12:24, balances with this opening introduction by giving a twofold overview of Israel’s victories. To start, 11:16, 23 calls attention to the full range of victories in southern and northern Cisjordan. This report stresses that Joshua destroyed all that God had commanded him to destroy. And it concludes in verse 23 with these words: “And the land had rest from war.” Following this, in 12:1-24, our author ended this division of the book with a list of kings and lands that Israel had acquired through victories, both in Transjordan and Cisjordan.

Victories over Southern Alliance

Between these bookends, we find two main sections. The first is in 9:3–10:43 where our author reported Israel’s victories over a southern alliance. These chapters begin with the problematic Gibeonite treaty in 9:3-27. The Gibeonites, who lived in the heart of Canaan, deceived Israel into making a peace treaty with them by claiming that they had come from outside of Canaan. And this treaty prompted a large-scale conflict in the southern region of the Promised Land.

This large-scale conflict, in 10:1-15, led to an initial southern victory for Israel. In these verses, the king of Jerusalem formed an alliance of five southern kings and attacked the Gibeonites, who then appealed to Joshua for help. Because of their treaty, Israel was obligated to help the Gibeonites. And God gave Joshua a miraculous victory in this initial southern battle. And then, in Joshua 10:16-43, the author added a brief record of Joshua’s widespread southern victories, his victories in various places over the entire southern alliance. As our author noted in 10:40, “Joshua struck the whole land.”

Victories over Northern Alliance

The next main section in this part of the book is in 11:1-15. Here, our author turned to Israel’s victories over a northern alliance. This section has a similar pattern to Joshua’s victories in the south, but the record is much shorter. In verses 1-11, the king of Hazor formed an alliance against Israel. We read in 11:4 that this alliance consisted of “a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore.” But God gave Israel victory over this northern alliance as well. So, in 11:12-15 we find a summary of Joshua’s decisive victory throughout the northern region.

With the structure and content of Israel's victories over two alliances in mind, we should reflect for a moment on the original meaning of these chapters.

ORIGINAL MEANING

As we've seen, Israel's battles against the cities of Jericho and Ai had much to teach the original audience. But our author knew that his audience living in later generations could easily dismiss these examples. These were only single cities with relatively small numbers of enemies, and his audience faced enemies who represented strong alliances with sizable armies. So, to encourage his original audience in these circumstances, our author also drew attention to the large-scale victories Joshua had against alliances in his day.

The account of Israel's victories over two alliances highlighted four of the five themes we've seen in earlier chapters.

Divine Authority

First, we see the divine authority undergirding these events. For example, in the initial victory in the south, we read in 10:8 that, "The Lord said to Joshua . . . 'I have given them into your hands.'" As just one other example, 11:9 tells us, during his victories in the north, Joshua carried out all of these actions "as the Lord said to him." Time and again, these chapters stress Joshua's divinely-authorized leadership of Israel. This was so that the original audience would understand how Joshua's great victories over alliances offered them guidance as they faced conflicts in their own day.

Standard of Moses' Law

Second, Israel's victories over two alliances also emphasized the standard of Moses' law. For example, in the story of the Gibeonite treaty we read, in 9:14, that the Israelites were deceived because they "did not ask counsel from the Lord." They demonstrated disloyalty to God by not seeking guidance from the priests as Moses had directed in passages like Deuteronomy 17:9. But, in Joshua 9:20, Joshua followed Moses' law by upholding "the oath that we swore to [the Gibeonites]."

Additionally, in the summary of Joshua's widespread southern victories, we read in 10:40 that Joshua obeyed Moses' commands when he devoted to destruction all that breathed, "just as the Lord God of Israel commanded." In a similar way, during his victories in the north, in 11:12, Joshua "[devoted] them to destruction, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded." In 11:15, Joshua "left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses." And in the concluding overview of Joshua's victories in Canaan, in 11:20, Joshua did "just as the Lord commanded Moses."

This theme is highlighted because Israelites in every generation needed to be reminded that victories would be theirs only when they were faithful to the law of Moses.

Obedience to the Law was the key to victory in their day, as it had been in the days of Joshua.

God's Supernatural Power

Third, we learn again that Israel's victories over two alliances resulted from God's supernatural power. In the initial southern victory, 10:10 points out that God himself "threw [the alliance] into a panic before Israel." In verse 11, "The Lord threw down large stones from heaven on them." And in verse 13, "The sun stood still" so that Israel could win the battle. These supernatural interventions led the author to comment with amazement in verse 14, "The Lord fought for Israel." And as Israel's widespread victories in the south continued, according to 10:21, God's power spread so much fear that, "Not a man moved his tongue against any of the people of Israel." Joshua boldly predicted in 10:25, "thus the Lord will do to all your enemies." And the author closed his summary in 10:42, saying, "The Lord God of Israel fought for Israel."

The theme of God's supernatural power also appears in Israel's northern victories. For instance, God assured Joshua in 11:6, "I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel." Then, in the final overview of the victories against alliances, we read in 11:20 that "It was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts" so that Israel's enemies would be defeated.

Our author's repetition of this theme was designed to confirm over and over that his original audience should never rely on their own power in conflict. Their hope for victory against their foes was that God would intervene on their behalf with supernatural power.

The Lord achieved victory for Joshua and Israel by his authority and supernatural power. The expression that the Lord has "given the land," or "handed the land," is the same verb in Hebrew, and is repeated several times in the book of Joshua. The Lord is the one who has given the enemies into Joshua's hand. He is the one who has given the land to Israel. This is repeated to assert that the Lord is almighty, the one who defeats the enemies... When the kings of the Amorites gathered against the men of Gibeon, and the men of Gibeon asked for Joshua's help in facing these kings, we read in Joshua 10:11:

As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the ascent of Beth-horon, the Lord threw down large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died. There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword (Joshua 10:11).

The emphasis presented here is on the Lord's authority. He revealed his authority through this event — he threw stones, hailstones, on the enemies, and more of them died due to the Lord's direct interference than those who were killed by Israel's swords... So, the victory here is

absolutely a supernatural victory due to the direct interference of the Lord in the events. This teaches us a marvelous thing about our Almighty God who has the absolute power and authority over everything and all circumstances.

— Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

All Israel

Throughout his account of Israel's victories over two alliances, our author also stressed a fourth theme: the participation of all Israel. In the initial southern victory near Gibeon, in 10:7, Joshua moved forward with "all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valor." And in 10:15, we learn that "all Israel" returned from battle with Joshua. In the record of widespread southern victories, 10:21 mentions that "all the people" were with Joshua. And in 10:24, Joshua summoned "all the men of Israel." We also see the importance of this theme in 10:29-38. There, our author repeated five times, "Then Joshua and all Israel ..." did this and that. And this entire section closes with "all Israel" returning with Joshua in 10:43. Finally, in Israel's northern victories, our author noted in 11:7 that "Joshua and all his warriors" were together.

The author of Joshua knew that the tribes of Israel often failed to stand as one people. So, he stressed the blessings that came to Israel in Joshua's day when they were united. This called the original audience of his book to stand together as they faced the enemies of their day.

Having seen how the account of Israel's victorious conquest includes their preparations for victory, victories over two cities and victories over two alliances, let's turn to our last consideration in this lesson, the Christian application of this record of Israel's conquest.

CHRISTIAN APPLICATION

Throughout history, well-meaning followers of Christ have often gone to extremes as they've approached this portion of Joshua. Some have simply rejected it as a part of Old Testament faith that has nothing to do with us. Others have used it to justify taking up arms in the cause of Christ. But when we keep in view what the New Testament teaches about Jesus' fulfillment of Israel's conquest, we find a proper orientation toward Christian application of this portion of Joshua.

We'll walk through this orientation toward Christian application by building on what we learned in the last lesson: Christ fulfilled Israel's conquest in the inauguration of his kingdom. He is fulfilling it in the continuation of his kingdom. And he will fulfill it completely in the consummation of his kingdom. Let's look first at what this means for the inauguration of Christ's kingdom.

INAUGURATION

On the whole, Israel's conquest in Joshua's day represented a significant advancement in God's ongoing conflict against Satan and those who followed him. But with Jesus' first advent, he and his first century apostles and prophets accomplished even more in the inauguration of the kingdom. The Gospels and the book of Acts teach that Jesus and his apostles directly confronted and overcame Satan and evil spirits. As Jesus exclaimed, in Luke 10:18, when his disciples returned from casting out demons, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." And more than this, passages like Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14, 15 and Ephesians 4:8 teach that Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension defeated Satan and evil spirits. Jesus also went further than Joshua by opening the way for his apostles to pursue the battle against Satan in the lands of Gentiles as well.

But, unlike Joshua, when Jesus came to this earth it was not God's time for him to take up arms against sinful *human beings*. In fact, in John 18:11, Jesus rebuked Peter for his physical aggression. Instead, Jesus extended God's victory over Satan and those who followed him by preaching two sides of his gospel or "good news" of the kingdom. He strongly warned of God's coming judgment, and he offered mercy to all who were willing to surrender to God. The first century apostles and prophets did much the same as they extended this initial phase of Christ's worldwide conquest. They never called for physical attacks on people. Instead, like Jesus, they spread the gospel message of judgment and salvation.

Now, the New Testament frequently warns unbelievers outside the church of God's coming judgment. But, it also warns of God's judgment against "false brothers," or unbelievers *within the church*. Passages like 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Galatians 1:8, warn of curses — *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα) in Greek — on false brothers in the church. These curses remind us of the judgment against the Israelite Achan who was "devoted to destruction." And this connection is strengthened by the fact that, in the Septuagint version of Joshua — the ancient Greek translation — forms of the word *anathema* translate the Hebrew words *charam* (חָרַם) and *cherem* (חֵרֶם), meaning, "devoted to destruction". But even as the apostles and prophets delivered warnings of God's judgment on those inside and outside the church, they also called everyone to repentance so that they could escape God's coming wrath.

In the book of Joshua, people are accursed. They are put under the ban, and they are totally wiped out for not honoring God as God, and for not embracing God's commandments, for not walking as God has commanded them to walk. And from the perspective of the biblical authors, that is a good and just and righteous thing because it upholds God's righteous character, it upholds God's promises to his people, and it shows us that God himself is actually trustworthy... And what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Galatians 1:8, on the one hand, if you don't love the Lord, on the other hand if you don't preach this gospel, well, God's justice is on you. And what Paul is doing is he's agreeing with the goodness of God's justice when he says, "Let them be accursed." And that's anticipating this final coming of the Lord Jesus when he will put all his enemies under the ban, and he

will bring God’s righteousness to bear, and he will uphold the truth of God’s promises. And people that love the Lord, they want to see God’s justice magnified and glorified, and they want to see God show forth the truthfulness of his word.

— Dr. James M. Hamilton

When we keep these basic ideas in mind, we have ample opportunities to see how the five main themes of this division of Joshua were fulfilled in the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom. As Joshua’s conquest was led by divine authority, the victories of Jesus and his apostles and prophets were led by divine authority as well. As the conquest of Israel in Joshua’s day was rooted in God’s covenant, the victories of Jesus and his apostles were rooted in the new covenant. As obedience to the standard of Moses’ law was the key to Joshua’s successes, the successes of Jesus and his apostles were dependent on their obedience to Moses and God’s fuller revelation after Moses. As Joshua and Israel depended on God’s supernatural power, the victories of Jesus and his apostles were dependent on the supernatural power of God. And as Joshua’s conquest was to include all Israel, Jesus called people throughout Israel to join with him. On the Day of Pentecost, Jews from all over the world joined with him in his battle against evil. And Jesus’ apostles and prophets added large numbers of Gentiles to the ranks of the early church as well.

Having mentioned how Christian application of Israel’s victorious conquest was fulfilled in the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom, we should turn next to its ongoing fulfillment in Christ during the continuation of his kingdom.

CONTINUATION

According to 1 Corinthians 15:25 Jesus will reign in heaven “until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” And over the last two thousand years he has successfully advanced his worldwide conquest through the ministry of his church to nearly every nation on earth. But, at the same time, the church has also experienced countless setbacks when it has neglected repentance, covenant renewal and the means of grace. So, the New Testament calls on us to advance the cause of Christ in the power of his Spirit day by day.

On the one side, we are to continue in spiritual warfare by fully engaging Satan and evil spirits, much like Jesus and his apostles and prophets did. According to Ephesians 6:13-18, we are to “take up the whole armor of God ... the belt of truth ... the breastplate of righteousness ... the gospel of peace... the shield of faith ... the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit ... praying at all times in the Spirit.” We must rightly prepare for spiritual warfare much like Israel had to prepare properly for the conquest of Canaan.

On the other side, we are to continue to engage human beings as Jesus and his apostles did. We oppose those who resist the ways of Christ, but not with physical attacks. Instead, we proclaim the judgment and mercy of the Christian gospel. We warn of God’s judgment that is coming to the unbelieving world. And we warn false brothers

in the church of God's coming judgment, much like Joshua forewarned the Israelite Achan when he violated God's covenant. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul spoke of his own ministry as destroying "every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God." But we also proclaim the hope of salvation to all who repent and surrender to Christ.

This orientation toward the continuation of Christ's kingdom opens the way for us to apply the record of Joshua's conquest to our daily lives. As Israel was led by divine authority, you and I are to be led by divine authority as we advance Christ's kingdom. As Israel's confidence for victory was based on God's covenant, we can have even more confidence because of the new covenant in Christ. As Israel's success in battle depended on their submission to the standard of Moses' law, success in our Christian battles depends on our submission to the standard of *all* of Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments. As Israel's conquest was won by God's supernatural power, our victories today come only through the supernatural power of God's Spirit at work. And just as all Israel was to participate in the conquest in Joshua's day, we are to fight our battles today as one people from every tribe and language and nation.

Christian application of Israel's conquest not only entails awareness of what Christ did in the inauguration of his kingdom and of what he does now during the continuation of his kingdom. We also apply the record of Joshua as it strengthens our hopes for the day when Christ returns at the consummation of his kingdom.

CONSUMMATION

The New Testament tells us in no uncertain terms that when Jesus returns, he will come back as a victorious king. In John's vision in Revelation 19:11, he saw Jesus as the one who "judges and makes war." And on that day, Jesus' final victory will bring to fruition the ultimate hope of Christ's worldwide conquest. Jesus will supersede every act of destruction in Joshua's day. And he will supersede every positive benefit Joshua brought to the people of Israel in his day.

On the one side, when Christ returns, Satan will be utterly defeated. He'll have no power to deceive or harm us anymore. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." And on the other side, God's mercy toward rebellious humans will end. As Jesus himself said in Revelation 21:8, "their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur." And with those who serve Satan eliminated from the earth, every human being who has surrendered to Christ will enjoy the glorious victory of eternal salvation in the new heaven and new earth.

We live in the midst of great conflict and tension, suffering, persecution, and so it's a natural question for us to ask, how will that change? We want to affirm that Jesus' return will be different than his first coming, that his return brings closure, brings finality to the questions of justice, that everything will be put right. In part, we trust that, though we do not see that. We trust it because God is God, that he will, at the "end of time," so to speak, that is, at the end of creaturely experience of time in its corrupted state, God will bring perfect justice; God will execute judgment perfectly. He will not judge

harshly. He will judge in accordance with the standards of justice. So, all of death itself will be defeated. All of our own idolatries will be defeated. Everything will be put right. And there is no greater yearning in the human heart for that reality, and it is no mistake that we yearn for it because it shall come to pass as God so designs.

— Dr. Richard Lints

Just as divine authority directed Joshua's actions, God's authority will direct the great and terrible day of Jesus' return. As Joshua's victory was rooted in God's covenant with Israel, the final victory of Christ is certain because of God's solemn vow in the new covenant. As Israel's success depended on compliance with the standard of Moses' law, Jesus' final victory will succeed because he is without flaw. As Joshua's conquest resulted from God's supernatural power, Jesus' return will be the greatest display of God's supernatural power that the world has ever seen. And as Joshua's conquest held up the ideal of all Israel's participation, when Christ returns, the people of God from every tribe and nation on earth will be one in celebration of his great victory.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored how the first major division of the book of Joshua focuses on Israel's victorious conquest. We've seen how the author of Joshua presented Israel's preparations for victory, how he contrasted Israel's victories over the two cities of Jericho and Ai, and how he portrayed Israel's extensive victories over powerful alliances in both the southern and northern regions of the Promised Land. And we've touched on some of the ways we can discern Christian applications of this first major division of our book.

The book of Joshua provided crucial perspectives for the original audience as they faced the challenges of warfare in their day by reminding them of what happened in Israel's victorious conquest in the Promised Land. And this record also guides us as we participate in Christ's grand fulfillment of what Israel accomplished in Joshua's day. It calls on us to trust in what Christ has already accomplished. It calls on us to follow him into battle day by day. And it assures us that despite the challenges we face today, Christ will return and complete his victorious conquest over evil and its effects throughout creation.

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