

“When the Odds Aren’t Even”

Joshua 11

April 6, 2003

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READ Joshua 11:1-23

“When Jabin king of Hazor heard of this (the defeat of the southern kings), he sent word to Jobab king of Madon, to the kings of Shimron and Acshaph, ² and to the northern kings who were in the mountains, in the Arabah south of Kinnereth, in the western foothills and in Naphtoth Dor on the west; ³ to the Canaanites in the east and west; to the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites and Jebusites in the hill country; and to the Hivites below Hermon in the region of Mizpah. ⁴ They came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots--a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. ⁵ All these kings joined forces and made camp together at the Waters of Merom, to fight against Israel.

^{JOS 11:6} The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them over to Israel, slain. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots."

^{JOS 11:7} 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.

^{JOS 11:10} At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hazor and put its king to the sword. (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms.) ¹¹ Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anything that breathed, and he burned up Hazor itself.

^{JOS 11:12} Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. ¹³ Yet Israel did not burn any of the cities built on their mounds--except Hazor, which Joshua burned. ¹⁴ The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed. ¹⁵ As

the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.

^{JOS 11:16} 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 struck them down, putting 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.

^{JOS 11:21} 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.

Can God be trusted?

Do you trust him?

I am not asking if you trust or believe that God exists.

I am not asking if you have trusted Jesus to forgive your sins and make you his child.

I'm asking if you trust him in your daily experience, even when the odds are against you.

Let me ask it this way:

What would it take for you to abandon your faith in God?

Under what circumstances would you throw in the towel and become agnostic?

When would you be most tempted to give up on God?

If I remember correctly, author and activist Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, could not reconcile a belief in God with the horrors of the holocaust. He gave up on God.

When were you most tempted to give up on God?

When your parents divorced?

When you mother or father or child died?

Paul, a friend of mine watched his preschool child die a slow and painful. Paul gave up on God.

Would you give up when your plans for the future were destroyed?

About 10 years ago tennis great Monica Seles was stabbed by the countryman of an opponent. Monica never regained her dominance of the sport.

If you've gone through a time when you seriously doubted whether God could be trusted, what precipitated that doubt?

Any time I study a portion of Scripture, particularly when studying a section of the Bible that is written in narrative, I ask myself why the author included that particular story?

What are he and the Holy Spirit intending to communicate through the story?

And to understand how the story is intended to impact us, who read it years after the event, I must consider how it impacted those who were actually there.

I think God allowed the people of Israel to experience the events of Joshua 11 and he caused it to be recorded as sacred Scripture to re-emphasize one great truth:

No matter how long it takes or how great the odds are against us, God can be trusted to accomplish his good purposes in history and in our lives.

Think with me about those two conditions:

First of all: God can be trusted no matter how long it takes.

When I read the last verse of the chapter I can't help but think of the history leading up to this event.

The defeat of the northern Canaanite coalition of kings brings to fulfillment a promise that had been made by God to his people over 500 years earlier.

Verse 23 of our text, in a somewhat anticlimactic way, summarizes what had been anticipated for generations:

Joshua 11:23 "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."

Don't let the significance of that day escape you.

Go back with me to 500 years earlier:

Genesis 12:6-7 "Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. (This is the same Shechem of Joshua 8) At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Genesis 15:13-21 "Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions... On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—(note the people groups that will be displaced): the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

That promise was reconfirmed to Isaac and Jacob and then 400 years later to Moses:

Exodus 3:7-8 "The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites."

And at the beginning of the book of Joshua we find that promise confirmed again:

Joshua 1:1-9 "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them--to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates--all the Hittite country--to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

And then as we have seen in the book of Joshua after weeks, if not months, of praying, waiting, strategizing, battling and even deaths, God's people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people of Israel, are securely in the Promised Land.

Joshua 11:23 "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."

Can we imagine what the collective sigh of relief will be in Iraq and in America and her allies when the current war is finally over?

Can we imagine what it must have felt like for the Allies when first Germany and then Japan finally surrendered in WWII?

No wonder the streets of many U.S. cities were filled with shouts of joy!

And that after only 4-8 years of anticipation.

Imagine what it must have been like for the people of Israel after 500 years of anticipation!

- Joshua had been in Egypt.
- He had crossed the Red Sea with Moses.
- He had heard the fear and unfaithfulness of the people when 40 years earlier they had refused to trust God.
- He had waited in the desert those 40 years while every adult except him and Caleb died.
- With that younger generation he fought the battles of Jericho, Ai, the southern campaign and now the northern campaign.

And now the war was over, the 500-year-old promise fulfilled!

It must have been tremendous to be part of that crowd that day.

How exciting to be the ones who actually got to be there when the fighting was over and the day of victory came.

But that isn't the point.

You see, we like the part of life when the victory is finally won,

- when we get into the school we wanted,
- when the one who was sick is healed,
- when the prodigal son comes home,
- when a job is finally secured,
- or a marriage is restored.

But can God be trusted only if we get to see the results on our preferred schedule?

As one of Joshua's great, great-grandchildren read the story a hundred years later or we read it today, what do we see as even more important?

God can be trusted even it takes hundreds of years.

Between the promise to Abraham and the fulfillment of the promise in Joshua's day were 500 years and thousands of God's people.

What were those people supposed to think?

- They didn't personally hear the promise.
- They didn't see the waters part and walk across on dry land.
- They didn't engage the enemy and see him defeated with hail.
- They lived, worked and died still waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

But they were called on to trust God as surely as those who saw the fulfillment of the promise.

Rome was not built in a day nor are God's promises always fulfilled even in a millenium.

But Joshua 11 proves they will be fulfilled – God will not fail.

Listen to some of his promises to you and me:

Matthew 28:19-20 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Philippians 1:6 "...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

2 Peter 3:9-10,13 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come... In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

We are tempted to say, "I'd trust God too if I saw the sun stand still as in Joshua 10, or if I saw a huge army defeated, or if I saw the dead raised.

We want God to perform like a genie, NOW!

And if he performs as we think he should and WHEN we think he should, then we will trust him.

But it is not trust or faith **after the fact.**

It doesn't take faith if it has already happened.

Henry Drummond wrote, "Faith is never opposed to reason but to sight." (Henry Drummond in Classic Sermons on Faith and Doubt edited by Warren Wiersbe.)

Faith says "I have reason to trust God I just can't **see** the end result yet.

Helmuth Thielicke wrote that after performing miracles Jesus might have said,

"These people basically want to watch, not to believe. They want to hear the evidence, but they don't want the adventure of a trust that would make them surrender themselves to me for good or ill. If I perform a miracle, I can win entrance to their nervous systems, but I can in no way reach their hearts. And that's the only thing I'm concerned about – the heart!"

After Jesus would do a miracle he would sometimes tell people not to say anything because "he didn't want (people) to fall under the suggestion of a general miracle hysteria to the extent that they would equate a certain feverish mentality...with 'faith'. Jesus intended that (people) become healthy and renewed through an encounter with his own person... That they recognize the presence of the Father in him and come from restlessness to peace..." How To Believe Again p66

- God calls us to trust in **him**, not in the miracles.
- God calls us to trust in him **before** we see the end result.
- God calls us to believe him because he **is working** all things together for good for those who love him.

He has proven himself through the centuries!

Will we trust him?

The power of Joshua 11 is that God demonstrated for the generations to come that he can be trusted **no matter how long it takes.**

Time feels like our enemy; if it doesn't happen on our schedule then we feel God has failed.

But God controls every second of history and the future; he can be trusted.

I told you earlier that I think God allowed the people of Israel to experience the events of Joshua 11 and he caused it to be recorded as sacred Scripture to re-emphasize one great truth:

No matter how long it takes or how great the odds are against us, God can be trusted to accomplish his good purposes in history and in our lives.

I said I wanted you to think with me about those two conditions:

First of all: God can be trusted no matter how long it takes.

Now **secondly, God can be trusted no matter how great the odds against us.**

The first thing that caught my attention when I began studying Joshua 11 was the length to which the author went to emphasize the hopelessness of Israel's situation, humanly speaking.

Yes, Israel had defeated Jericho and Ai and yes, Israel had defeated the kings of the south in chapter 10 when God caused the hail to fall and the sun to stand still.

But this is different:

The author mentions the leading city and king in this new coalition against Israel.

It is Hazor.

This isn't like going up against Baghdad in 2003 but more like going up against Moscow in 1962.

The city was 25 times larger than Jericho. (Campbell 160)

The author notes the extent of the coalition – (see Map) from west to east and north to south.

This was everyone else against Israel.

And it wasn't as if Israel could fight them one at a time.

The author notes that they formed an alliance against Israel – they joined forces and were prepared to launch a concerted attack.

The author also notes they had horses and chariots – those were the A-1 tanks of their day.

And the author summarizes the overwhelming size of the army with these words:

Joshua 11:4 “They came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots--a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.” – three times in this verse Hebrew for many/much is used.

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the 1st century, speculated that the army of the north had 300,000 infantry, 10,000 cavalry and 20,000 chariots.

Israel was hopelessly outnumbered and “out-gunned”. Huge numerical and technological advantage lay with the enemy.

Why the lengthy description of the coalition against Israel?

To communicate the impossibility of the situation!

God wanted his people, in the generations to come, to know they could trust him even when the odds were overwhelmingly against them.

Will we still trust God when our dreams are shattered?

Will we still trust God when our health breaks and we are incapable of caring for ourselves?

- What will we do when the person, who is dearest to us in the whole world, dies?
- What will we do when friends betray or abandon us?
- What will we do when we face death itself?
- What will we do when the situation not only appears impossible but **is** impossible?

God wants us to trust him when there is **no evidence in the situation to do so**, when in fact everything except his raw word suggests another course of action.

How is that possible?

How can we trust when the odds are so overwhelmingly against us?

Os Guinness wrote, “The known facts may all be against (faith in) God. But knowing God, we know that the **known** facts are not all the facts.”

(In Two Minds p299)

The situation was hopeless but see what the text says:

Joshua 11:7-8 “So Joshua and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them, and **the LORD** gave them into the hand of Israel.

Richard Halverson, a past chaplain of the U.S. Senate, wrote, “There is no such thing as a hopeless situation for one who trusts in God...But the fact is that most of us turn to God only when we think the situation **is** hopeless. As long as we can find something in our circumstances on which to pin our hope we trust **that** possibility rather than God. Until we have used up all our options – see no shred of hope in our circumstances...**Then** as a last resort we may turn to God. Someone put it this way, ‘As long as we have reason for hope, we hope in reason.’ As long as we can think up possible answers we depend upon human ingenuity or luck or coincidence. Then when alternatives are exhausted and there is nowhere else to turn...We give God his chance. How much better to trust God no matter what.”

(Perspective Sept 28, 1977)

That’s what God wanted Israel and us to learn.

You might say, I want to trust him in those situations but sometimes I doubt God.

Yes, I do to and especially when there is no end in sight and the odds are not even.

But remember, there is a huge difference between doubt and unbelief:

“Unbelief is ‘won’t believe, doubt is ‘can’t believe’;

“Unbelief is obstinacy; doubt is honesty.

“Unbelief is **content** with darkness; doubt is looking for light.”

(Henry Drummond “Dealing with Doubt” in Classic Sermons on Faith and Doubt edited by Warren Wiersbe.)

Again Thielicke says it well:

In crisis “There’s simply no time to think about it. That may be put very crudely, but that’s how it is nevertheless! At that moment (we) disciples do not live from the fact that God is in (our) thoughts, because he is not, but (we) live because Jesus is thinking of (us)...Our faith’s grip on the Father may loosen. But he in whom we believe holds us fast in his grasp.” (Thielicke, 68)

I cry out within, “I don’t know if I can hang on.”

And God calls out to me, “You don’t have to; I’m hanging on to you!”

I can trust him no matter how long it takes or how great the odds are against me because he is God.