

# No Unfinished Business

Joshua 11:12-15

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, September 10th 2023

## I. Introduction - faithfulness

Archibald Rutledge was a writer and educator out of South Carolina. He wrote over 50 books and a lot of poetry. But he was also an avid hunter. And he told a story about one of his hunting buddies. His friend came to him heartbroken over the loss of his dog. He was kicking himself and blaming himself for how his dog had died. He said that he had left his dog in a small clearing in the forest, commanding him to stay there and to watch his lunch bucket while he trekked into the forest. And while he was gone, a forest fire broke out and spread to the spot where the dog had been left. He wasn't able to get through to where the dog had been left, and he later discovered that the dog didn't move. He stayed right where he was in obedience to his master's command. After the forest fire passed, he found his dog's body right by his lunch bucket. Anyway, with tearful eyes he told Rutledge, "I always had to be careful what I told him to do, because I knew he would do it." But you know, it would be amazing if the church of Jesus Christ was as faithful as that dog in doing what *our* Master has called *us* to do - even unto death. No rationalizations; no excuses; just obedience no matter what the cost. And of course, God would never give commands that were not good in the first place. Unlike the master of that dog, God perfectly knows the future. We can trust Him.

But that's not par for the course in the church. It's certainly not par for the course in the America culture. Broken promises in politics almost seems to be *expected* nowadays. But we aren't the only generation that has failed to have faithfulness to our word. From 1778 to 1871, the United States signed 368 treaties with various Indian tribes. And it is disheartening to see how many of those treaties were broken. Now, granted, sometimes it was the *Indian* tribe who broke the treaty, but many of the treaties were broken because America wanted more land. It was inconvenient to *keep* the treaty. This has been a longstanding problem in America.

Well, this morning, we are going to be looking at a passage that illustrates that when Joshua was commissioned to do something, he did it; he did it completely; he did it no matter what the consequences; he left no unfinished business. And I think in this he stands as a wonderful model for us.

## II. The call to complete obedience kept (v. 12)

Verse 12 says,

So all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took and struck with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded.

### A. No city spared (v. 12a)

No royal city was spared. That would take time, effort, and a lot of inconvenience to do that. But it was also an *unpleasant* task to engage in herem warfare. We have seen in the past that herem warfare was not normal warfare. It was God's use of His people to execute *His* judgments by special prophetic revelation - judgments which spared no one. Every person was slaughtered. Yet Joshua followed through in complete obedience.

### B. No king spared (v. 12b)

Kings often negotiated their own safety when they lost battles, and a captive king could potentially be a feather in the cap for a prideful conqueror. You could kind of display him as a war trophy. Many kings of that era did that. One of the more grotesque examples is in Judges 1:7, where the Canaanite king, Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." So for one reason or another it was common to spare the lives of kings.

But in obedience to God's command, Joshua did not spare any of the kings that he conquered.

### C. Everything was done according to the law of God (v. 12c)

And verse 12 says that all of this was in obedience to God's commands given through Moses. Joshua was not a lawmaker; he was a law receiver and a law keeper. And at least on that point he stands as an example to us. When God gives us standing law through the Bible (and herem warfare was not standing law, but the principle is the same - when God gives us standing law in the Bible), there should be unquestioning obedience.

And several commentaries point out that in context of verses 19-20, this verse also teaches that though mercy is always held out to those who repent, God's judgments fall on those who persist in their rebellion. The fact that God is patient with America and with other nations does not do away with that principle. Those who resist God will eventually be placed under God's judgment. Apart from repentance, that is where America is headed.

## III. The mound cities (v. 13)

And that God deals in this manner with *every* city and and with *every* nation is hinted at in verse 13. This verse deals with the interesting situation of the mound cities. It says,

But as for the cities that stood on their mounds, Israel burned none of them, except Hazor only, which Joshua burned.

## A. Mounds implies previous judgments

The Hebrew for “mounds” is tel, and archaeologists have a lot to say about tells in ancient history. They are multiple layers of cities that are built on top of each other. What would happen is that a city would be conquered and destroyed, with the houses leveled. But because there were foundations of the houses, toppled pillars, stones, and other rubbish that would hinder the rebuilding of the city, the conquering country would just haul in dirt and bury the remains of the previous city in several feet of dirt and then build a new city on top of that mound or tel. So you have Jeremiah prophesying that Jerusalem would be destroyed and turned into a mound (that’s the Hebrew word tel in Jeremiah 49:2) and in another chapter Jeremiah also prophesies that after the exiles return from Babylon to Jerusalem “the city will be built on its own mound” (30:18) - again, the Hebrew word tel. There are more than 200 tells in Israel, many of which have multiple layers representing multiple civilizations that were previously conquered and buried. For example, Megiddo has twenty layers rising 60 meters above the surrounding terrain. Those layers include civilizations like the Hyksos, Egyptians, the Hittites, the Israelites, etc.

The question comes, why would the later generation bother to build on the mound of previous ruins? Why not build on a more convenient location that didn’t require hauling in dirt? And there are four reasons: 1) First, the place of the former city was usually a good source of water and ideal for the next city. Most of the tels tended to be in dry areas where there wasn’t much water. So they would want the water supply to be *within* the city so that an army that came against it wouldn’t be able to cut off the water. Well, in many cases that meant that you didn’t have a choice- you had to build the city where the previous city was. Archaeology has shown some pretty amazing water works in earlier cities that brought water to each house and took sewage out. So water was one reason. 2) Second, they were usually very defensible locations, and you want your city to be defensible. And actually, building on top of previous mounds made it higher and even more defensible. 3) Third, they were close to arable farmland, and they wouldn’t want to build on farmland and waste that farmland. The connection between city and farm was very tight. 4) And fourth, they were near good trade routes. So even though it took more effort, they preferred to build on top of the spot where the old cities used to be.

But this verse indicates that when Joshua arrived, these cities were *already* built on top of tells. That’s the technical Hebrew word. The mounds represented layer after layer of previous cities housing the remnants of previous civilizations. And to me this implies that this was not the first judgment God brought to these cities. The burning of Hazor represents layer thirteen. That’s 12 civilizations before Joshua even arrived on the scene. There had been multiple judgments prior to this judgment. Even when Israel was not involved, our God has *always* been a God of judgments. He can use pagans to judge worse pagans. When civilizations become too corrupt, God replaces them. America is no exception. And of course we saw last week that anytime a nation repents, God spares that nation from judgment. But the next section of this chapter will show that it is the *only* way of being spared. The point is that we should not think that judgments were only a reality during the time of Joshua’s conquest, or that nowadays God somehow turns a blind eye to evil. No. These mounds are a testimony to God’s previous judgments. Many times God will

patiently wait for a generation or two. But every generation needs to be reminded that our God is a God of judgment.

### B. Most mound cities remained intact and were inhabited

The next thing we see is that most of the mound cities remained intact and were able to be inhabited by the Israelites. They were not being destroyed. It says, “Israel burned none of them, except Hazor...” And this was in fulfillment of God’s promise in Deuteronomy 6:10-11, which says,

[I will] give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant...

So most of Israel’s warfare was *not* that destructive. They inherited the cities rather than tearing them down and adding another layer to the mound. But Deuteronomy 6 goes on to say that God will dispossess Israel just like He would dispossess the Canaanites if Israel forgot God and became corrupt. This is an enduring pattern of God’s providential dealings. No one is exempt - not the Canaanites and not Israel. Anyone who thinks that America is unlikely to come under judgment has simply not understood thousands of years of providential history. Modern nations that have thrown God off will not endure forever either. It’s easy to think that the status quo will continue indefinitely in America since it has continued for most of our lifetime. But that’s a false conclusion. When you have political leaders who actually believe there are hundreds of genders, you know we are spiraling downwards into demonic irrationality very fast.

### C. Hazor was the one mound city burned

But let me give you a little bit of detail on Hazor, since liberals love to attack the Bible’s integrity on this verse by comparing it to Judges chapter 4. This verse here mentions that Hazor alone was burned to the ground. A tourism website said, “Today when visiting the well-preserved ruins of King Jabin’s palace, the burn layer is clearly visible.”<sup>1</sup> And many books say the same. Wayne Stiles says, “Stratum XIII of the tell had a large burn layer that corresponds with Joshua’s destruction of Hazor around 1400 BC.” Jones says it’s 1444 BC. There are numerous evidences that every portion of the city was burned. It must have seemed like a waste to do so. Archaeology books point to massive supplies of stored grain that were destroyed in the fire. Why not eat that grain? But no, God said burn it, so they burned it. Various archaeologists show other evidences that the Israelites didn’t take any spoil from this city - they burned *everything*. The city as a *whole* was devoted to God as being under the ban just like Jericho was.

People sometimes wonder why God wanted it burned. There could be other reasons, but some have suggested that since it was known for hundreds of years as a famous military

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<sup>1</sup> <https://guidedtoursofisrael.org/2020/09/23/biblical-tel-hazor/>

site, God did not want them depending on pagan military fortifications. I guess that's possible. But they did inherit some other pretty magnificent fortifications.

So another suggestion is that the king of this city was the leader of the coalition, and as such, Joshua made an example of what happens to cities that do that.

A third suggestion was the gross evil of this city with its four massive temples. Apparently it was a leading religious center with Hathor and Ashera being gods so perverted that we are definitely not going to get into it this morning. I felt defiled just reading a little bit about it. One author said, "archaeological evidence shows the Israelites zealously defaced all the Canaanite statues of gods and kings found in Hazor and lopped off their hands."<sup>2</sup> Apparently they didn't want people resurrecting these idols and using them. So they disfigured their heads, knocked them over, and chopped off their hands before they burned everything. So to me the evidence seems to point in the direction of that city's wickedness, though the other two reasons may have factored in as well.

So if Hazor was burned, how could a king Jabin be the king of Hazor in Judges 4 (which on conservative chronology is more than 150 years later)? But liberals used to say, no, Joshua 11 and Judges 4 are two quite contradictory accounts of the same destruction of Hazor. They love to try to find contradictions if they can. What are we to make of that? Well, there is no contradiction whatsoever. Recent archaeology has actually been embarrassing (absolutely embarrassing) to those older liberal books. It's made them look foolish.

First of all, it has shown that the kings of Hazor used the name Jabin for almost 400 years. So the fact that there was a Jabin at the time of Deborah is consistent with the evidence - totally consistent. And by the way, it may have been a title like Pharaoh or Caesar. Calling him Jabin king of Hazor would be a similar expression as Exodus 6:11 uses when it speaks of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Second, recent archaeological digs have shown *two* destructions of Hazor that perfectly correspond to the two time periods of Joshua and Deborah.<sup>3</sup> It's the liberals who should be mocked, not the Bible. We don't go to archaeology to prove the Bible. The Bible is the highest authority and we trust the Bible to be true, and then confidently go to archaeology to decimate the liberal's own foundations.

Anyway, whatever the reason for the burning, Israel did not build on this site, and the Canaanites later rebuilt it and used it as a base of operations against the Israelites in the book of Judges a little over 150 years later (Judges 4:2ff). So from hindsight some people might have thought that burning this city and then not building on it was a missed opportunity. In one sense it would have taken faith to do so even though God had

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<sup>2</sup> Kathy DeGagne at <https://www.bridgesforpeace.com/letter/joshua-and-deborah-a-tale-of-two-heroes/>

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of some of the evidence, see <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/05/03/biblical-sites-three-discoveries-at-hazor/>

commanded it. From a human perspective, this would have been a wonderful city to inherit. All the archaeology books on this city that I have read say that it must have been a gorgeous city, covering 200 acres, with amazing buildings, and parks, and advanced iron forging equipment, and other technology, and a well laid out sewer system, well laid out streets, a strategic location for defense, stables for horses and plenty of room for chariots, and what one author calls “a magnificent water system that remains one of the marvels of ancient engineering.”<sup>4</sup> It was a very wealthy city that would have been fun to plunder and then to live in. Indeed, it was so famous for its wealth and trade that it is the only Canaanite city mentioned in the Mari texts of Mesopotamia.

But I’ve already alluded to the fact that there was an ugly side to the city as well - with four wicked temples causing this city to be a stumbling block to the whole of Canaan. God wanted it obliterated, with no plunder allowed. Some people think it was a cursed place, and that’s why it wasn’t rebuilt after Barak destroyed it. In any case, whether they understood it or not, they obeyed. Like the dog of Rutledge’s friend, they had unquestioning obedience.

#### IV. There were rewards to this herem war (v. 14)

##### A. God’s reward of booty (v. 14a)

But verse 14 mentions rewards from the *other* cities. In obedience to Deuteronomy 6, they were able to plunder the remaining royal cities. This says,

And all the spoil of these cities and the livestock, the children of Israel took as booty for themselves; but they struck every man with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they left none breathing.

It’s obviously wonderful to be able to receive the spoil. We see that as God’s favor. We love to be blessed with riches, and God loves to bless us. We could park on God’s material blessings and everyone would be happy. And if you think God is stingy, maybe you *should* park on the material blessings God gave to Israel. God loves to bless those who are faithful. But I’m not going to park on that this morning.

##### B. Though the herem war was tough (v. 14b)

I want to point out that it was tougher to do the other business - to leave no person alive - and virtually every commentary points out that “every man” refers to every person. And that is exactly what God commanded them to do to the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7:2-11 and Deuteronomy 20:16-18. It was a typology of God’s final judgment. But it certainly was also a test of their faithfulness. Faithfulness is not tested by our obedience to God’s commands to enjoy life or to have fun. Anybody can pass that test. Instead, faithfulness is tested by our obedience to God’s commands that are hard, that we do not fully understand,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/history/tel-hazor-journey-history/>

and even the commands that we wish we could disagree with. And you know what I am talking about when I say that you wish you didn't have to do what God commands, so you explain it away. Francis Nicol said,

But true fidelity to God aims at full compliance with His will. Personal wishes and desires may conflict with known duty, but the surrendered soul chooses the will of God no matter how crucifying the experience may be to natural inclinations.<sup>5</sup>

## V. The call to complete obedience kept (v. 15)

And that thought is made especially clear in our last verse - verse 15:

As the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses.

“He left *nothing* undone of *all* that the LORD had commanded Moses.” Oh, that this could be said of each one of us! Deuteronomy 12:32 says, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” Both of those commands are so important- don't add to God's law and don't take away from it.

Adding to God's law acts as if God lacked wisdom and foresight when He wrote the Bible and has somehow had a glaring hole in the Bible that we need to remedy. So many books on so-called Christian politics claim that we need natural law or we need some other source of law to supplement the Bible since the Bible is not sufficient. I'm writing a book on Biblical Civics to show the total sufficiency of Scripture for politics. But people bind others' consciences by adding laws you don't find in the Bible. And our country has multiplied laws by the hundreds of thousands. It's a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. We cannot add to God's law and bind our own conscience or the consciences of anyone else with anything but the Word of God. So legalism is wrong and destructive of liberty.

But so is antinomianism - which is ignoring God's law. Where God gives a command and I preach on it, it is not me that is binding your conscience. It is God Himself, and woe is me as a pastor if I leave anything out of my preaching that God calls me to preach. I've had pastors tell me that they wouldn't dare to preach on certain topics. But we are called to preach the whole counsel of God. I hope at the end of my life I will be able to say with the apostle Paul, “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you” (Acts 20:20). And may each of *you* be able to say at the end of *your* lives, “I have left nothing undone that God has asked me to do.” And you might think, “But there is a cost to doing God's will in my situation.” Yes, many times there is a cost. That's why we call it a test of faithfulness. Pray that God would enable all of us to be faithful to our promises and to be faithful to God's Word. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 233.