

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-6 The Longest Night

In military colleges around the world, soldiers still study the tactics of Joshua, the leader of the Israelite armies. The conquest period of Israel's story lasted about five years. God's command was to subdue Canaan's population. To do this, Joshua used a strategy of "divide and conquer."

First he attacked key towns in the center of Canaan. This divided the country in two, north to south. He also made an ill-advised treaty with the Gibeonites. They tricked Joshua by pretending to be messengers from a distant land. Joshua didn't know they were from nearby towns. Here was a big mistake: Joshua failed to ask the Lord for guidance. This was one of the few mistakes Joshua made during the conquest period.

So, by conquest and treaty, the Israelites controlled the center of Canaan. But a new threat arose. Several powerful kings of cities to the west and south got together against Israel. One king put out a call to arms, "Come up and help me attack Gibeon, because it has made peace with the Israelites."

They combined their fighters, moved north, and attacked the town of Gibeon. The Gibeonites sent word to Joshua at Gilgal, "Don't abandon us. Come up quickly and save us! Help us! The Amorite kings from the hill country to the south have joined forces against us!"

This time, Joshua prayed first. Yahweh assured him, "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you." With this encouragement, Joshua made a plan (Josh 10:4-8).

The Israelite camp at Gilgal was in the Jordan River valley. Gibeon was several thousand feet higher than the camp, with a valley leading up to the highlands. Joshua decided to make a surprise attack by night, so he and his best fighters made an all-night march up toward Gibeon. They attacked under cover of darkness and took the enemy by surprise. The Lord threw the enemy into confusion; they were being attacked while it was still too dark to see.

Not only was it dark, but a rainstorm began to thunder. Hailstones fell on the enemy fighters as they ran from the Israelites. Down the west side of the mountains they ran. Israelite fighters ran after them and killed as many as they could.

The sun had not yet come up, and the clouds were dark with rain. Also, Israel was chasing them on the western slopes which were shaded from the rising sun, if there had been any sun that morning. As long as the sky remained relatively dark, the battle advantage was with the Israelite fighters. It was as if the sun were standing still. (A solar eclipse visible in Canaan in the fall of 1131 BC may help to explain this darkness. In an eclipse, the sun is darkened by the shadow of the moon.) The attacking Israelites had the advantage of prolonged darkness. The hailstones—as well as Israeli swords—killed the enemy fighters.

Joshua asked Yahweh to prolong the darkness that day. Yahweh did so, as he fought for his people, Israel. Joshua remembered this later in a poem. "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you,

moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.” The sun didn’t shine, and the moon was covered with clouds, so Israel had the advantage of darkness for this victory (Josh 10:9-15).

After this victory, Joshua pressed the attack to the west and south. His soldiers caught the five kings hiding in a cave. Joshua sealed the opening of the cave with rocks, and set guards over it. “Don’t stop,” he told his fighters, “keep chasing your enemies. Don’t let them reach the safety of their cities. Yahweh has given them into your hand.”

After the battle was over, the fighters came back to the cave. Joshua said, “Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me.” So they brought them out. Then he summoned the fighters and commanders to him. “Come here,” he said, “and put your feet on the necks of these kings.” So they came forward, one by one, and did so.

Joshua then encouraged them all, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what Yahweh will do to all the enemies you are going to fight.” Then he killed the five kings.

This was the beginning of a long southern campaign of conquest. Joshua knew that the campaign would be dangerous and exhausting, so he wanted to encourage his army. He strengthened them by assuring them that the God of Israel was fighting for them.

Over the next months, Joshua and the Israelite army attacked city after city in the south. They were victorious in every battle. They didn’t attack every town, but they chose their targets wisely. They attacked key cities which controlled waterways and valleys. Joshua aimed to control key locations and roads in the southern and central parts of Canaan. After months of fighting, they all returned to their camp at Gilgal (Josh 10:16-43).

A couple of years later Joshua began a northern campaign. The large city of Hazor—northwest of the Sea of Galilee—put out a call to neighboring cities to come and fight the Israelites. This was Israel’s biggest test, because of the large number of fighters and the presence of chariots. A chariot was a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by two or three horses. A driver and a fighter rode in each chariot. Israel had no chariots, only foot-soldiers. These northern enemies had a military advantage over Israelite infantry.

But Yahweh was with Israel! Again he encouraged Joshua, who sought him in prayer. “Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, dead, over to Israel. Hamstring their horses and burn their chariots.”

Joshua and the army attacked them suddenly in a narrow, forested valley. Their chariots couldn’t attack well in that terrain. Israel routed the enemy armies. They fled north and west. Hazor was left undefended, and Israel destroyed Hazor, the largest city in Canaan. As God had commanded, Israel destroyed the horses and burned the chariots (Josh 11:1-9).

Over a five-year period, Israel fought many battles in the central, southern, and finally, northern parts of Canaan. Joshua subdued and destroyed key cities, but not every town. Areas along the Mediterranean coast were still controlled by the Philistines.

Yahweh told Joshua years later when he was old, “There are still very large areas of land to be taken over.” The land was then apportioned out to the twelve tribes. They were supposed to complete the settlement of the Promised Land.

This story is **important** because it shows us that God keeps his promises. He had promised this land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel was now finding a homeland. The people soon learned, however, that gaining a homeland was a lot of work. The conquest of Canaan was possible, however, because of God’s help and because Joshua was a good and godly leader.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God gave Joshua and the Israelite army victory after victory as long as they sought his guidance and obeyed his commands.

To **review** this lesson, answer these questions:

1. What was Joshua’s plan to conquer Canaan? [Pause]
A. If you said, “Joshua first attacked the central part, then the southern part, and finally the northern part of Canaan,” you are correct.
2. What does this poem mean—“Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon?” [Pause]
A. If you answered, “The Israelites asked God for more darkness, not more daylight. The shade of the mountains and a dark rainstorm and hailstorm prolonged the darkness,” you answered correctly.
3. Why was Israel able to defeat opponents who were superior in numbers and weapons? [Pause]
A. If you said, “God guided Joshua to attack at night and in locations favorable to ambush,” you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to the story at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell the story in your own words as you remember it. You may need to have someone check that you are telling the story correctly.

Ask a friend who has never heard this story to listen to it. God assured Joshua that he would never leave him. Likewise, Jesus assured his disciples, saying, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). We can be certain that Jesus will be with us, his brothers and sisters, and guide us to make wise decisions.

Memorize the words of Jesus from Matthew 28:20: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”