

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 11

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 11 records the northern campaign that completes Israel's conquest of Canaan. Following the southern victories of chapters 9–10, a massive coalition of northern kings assembles at the waters of Merom under the command of Jabin king of Hazor — the largest military force yet arrayed against Israel, described as numerous as the sand on the seashore with horses and chariots. The LORD speaks to Joshua before the battle, delivering the same word He has spoken throughout the conquest: "Do not be afraid; I will hand all of them over to you." Joshua obeys immediately, striking the coalition at Merom, hamstringing their horses, and burning their chariots. He then systematically subdues the entire north — from Hazor to the hill country to the lowlands, from the valley of Mizpah to Kadesh-barnea — leaving no survivors among the royal cities. The chapter concludes with a theological summary: Joshua took the whole land, the land had rest from war, and in all of this, not one city made peace with Israel except the Hivites of Gibeon — for it was the LORD who hardened their hearts to come against Israel in battle, so that Israel might devote them to destruction with no mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses. The long campaign from Kadesh-barnea to the Lebanon range is thus brought to its completion, and the land is apportioned as God had promised.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to demonstrate through this chapter that His word is the sole sufficient ground for confidence in the face of overwhelming opposition — and that obedience to that word, however impossible the odds appear, is always vindicated. The chapter is not primarily a military history; it is a theological proof of God's faithfulness. The repeated phrase "as the LORD commanded Moses / as the LORD commanded Joshua" is the interpretive key: everything that happened happened because the word was given, received, and obeyed. God's intent for the reader is to produce a settled trust — not optimism, not strategic confidence, not religious sentiment, but a trust anchored in the proven reliability of God's word. When God speaks, no coalition can override it.

Subject Sentence: The LORD fulfills every word spoken to Moses — the whole land falls exactly as promised.

Primary Claim: God’s word cannot be defeated by any human coalition, however overwhelming — and the proof is that every single thing God promised came to pass, leaving Israel with a land that rested from war.

Interpretive Evaluation

The hardening of the hearts of the Canaanite kings (v. 20)

The most significant interpretive tension in Joshua 11 is the statement in verse 20: “For it was the LORD’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction.” This verse directly parallels the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus and raises the same theological question: Is God’s sovereignty in hardening compatible with genuine human culpability?

Arminian/Wesleyan readers typically qualify this as God’s permissive hardening — He withdrew restraining grace, leaving the kings to pursue what their hearts already desired. This reading preserves a strong account of human freedom and culpability. The text, however, does not say God permitted their hardening — it says He hardened them. The passive-permission reading requires importing a distinction the text does not make.

Dispensational readings sometimes emphasize this as a special act of divine judgment unique to the conquest period — a “ban” (ḥerem) applicable only to Israel’s unique theocratic situation, not a model for general theological reasoning about sovereignty and hardening. This observation is correct as far as the ḥerem itself is concerned (the conquest’s annihilation commands are not directly normative for later contexts) but does not resolve the theological question about hardening.

The Reformed reading recognizes this as genuine, active divine hardening — God sovereign over the kings’ wills — without removing their culpability, because their hearts were already oriented toward hostility to God and His people. God’s hardening confirmed and directed what was already present. This is the same structure as Pharaoh’s hardening in Exodus 4–14, the hardening of Israel in Isaiah 6, and the theological exposition in Romans 9. The kings came against Israel because their hearts were hard; their hearts were hard because God hardened them; God hardened them because their cup of iniquity was full (cf. Genesis 15:16) and because His purposes for Israel’s inheritance required their removal. The text holds all three without resolving the tension philosophically — and the preacher should do the same.

A genuine contribution from the Arminian tradition worth retaining: the text does not use hardening language to remove the sense of genuine hostility from the kings. They came against Israel; they made real choices. The sovereignty of God in verse 20 does not flatten human action into mechanism — it frames it within a larger purpose the kings could not see and could not resist.

The absence of peace treaties

Verse 19 notes that no city made peace with Israel except the Hivites of Gibeon. The text presents this as theologically significant — the lack of negotiations was not strategic failure on Israel's part but divine arrangement, so that the herem could be executed fully. Some readers find this troubling: Is God engineering the destruction of populations He could have allowed to survive? The Reformed reading holds that the Canaanites had four centuries of warning (Genesis 15:16; the land "vomited out" its inhabitants for their iniquity per Leviticus 18:25) and that the herem is not arbitrary violence but judicial execution of covenant-breaking peoples who had filled up their iniquity. The Gibeonite exception (Joshua 9) demonstrates that the door was not entirely closed — those who sought terms received them. The theological point of verse 19 is not that God prevented mercy but that He superintended the completion of His just purposes.

No significant divergence on the main claim. There is no meaningful interpretive controversy over the chapter's central affirmation that the LORD gave the land to Israel as He promised. The interpretive work is concentrated in the sovereignty/hardening question above.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:13–21** — The LORD's covenant with Abram: He named the specific peoples of Canaan and promised their land to Abram's descendants, noting that the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete. Joshua 11 is the fulfillment of what Genesis 15 promised — the same peoples, now dispossessed, exactly as God had sworn.
- **Deuteronomy 7:1–6; 20:16–18** — Moses received and transmitted the herem command and the prohibition against treaties. Joshua 11's repeated "as the LORD commanded Moses" is a direct callback to this Deuteronomic foundation. The conquest is not Joshua's initiative — it is Moses' word, which was God's word, being fully executed.
- **Exodus 4–14 (esp. Exodus 9:12; 10:1)** — The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the canonical paradigm for Joshua 11:20. God hardens the heart of the enemy of His people to accomplish His redemptive purposes and demonstrate His glory. Joshua 11 is the conquest-era repetition of this Exodus pattern: God is not surprised by the coalition; He arranged its destruction.
- **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul's exposition of divine hardening (using Pharaoh as the exhibit) provides the New Testament theological framework for reading Joshua 11:20. God hardens whom He wills; this is not injustice; His purpose is to display mercy and power. The preacher who wrestles with Joshua 11 must walk through Romans 9 to understand what is being claimed.

- **Revelation 19:11–21** — The final conquest: the rider on the white horse who wages war in righteousness, defeating the assembled kings of the earth. Joshua 11 is a type of the final eschatological campaign in which every opposing coalition is shattered by the word of God and the Lord’s armies. The land that rests from war in Joshua anticipates the new creation that rests from war in Revelation 21.

Aim: To demonstrate from Joshua 11 that the tested reliability of God’s word is the only sufficient ground for courage in the face of overwhelming opposition — and to call the reader to build their confidence there and nowhere else.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Jabin king of Hazor hears of Israel’s victories and initiates the northern coalition	Hazor is the dominant city-state of the north; Jabin’s leadership signals the scale of the threat
2–3	The coalition is listed: kings from the hill country, the lowlands, Naphoth-dor, the east and west, the Canaanites, the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites in the hill country, and Hivites under Hermon	A comprehensive enumeration of opposition — every major northern group; readers are meant to feel the weight of the assembly
4	The coalition assembles at the waters of Merom: “as numerous as the sand on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots”	“Sand of the seashore” is the language of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 22:17) — now turned against Abraham’s descendants
5	The kings encamp together at the waters of Merom to fight Israel	The military threat is now fully assembled and named
6	The LORD speaks to Joshua: “Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel” — and commands hamstringing of	The divine word precedes the battle; God gives the timeline, the command, and the outcome before a blow is struck

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	horses and burning of chariots	
7	Joshua and all his warriors come against them suddenly at the waters of Merom	Immediate obedience: “suddenly” — Joshua does not delay or deliberate after the divine word is given
8	The LORD gives them into the hand of Israel; they strike them and pursue to Great Sidon, Misrephoth-maim, and the valley of Mizpah — until no survivors remain	Exact fulfillment of the promise of verse 6; the pursuit is exhaustive
9	Joshua hamstring horses and burns chariots, as the LORD commanded	Explicit obedience to the specific command of verse 6; these commands are humanly counterintuitive — they eliminate future military assets
10	Joshua turns back and takes Hazor; he strikes Jabin king of Hazor with the sword	Hazor is singled out as the head of all those kingdoms; its destruction is the crown of the northern campaign
11	Everything in Hazor is devoted to destruction — no one is left alive; Hazor itself is burned	Full execution of the ḥerem as commanded
12–13	Joshua takes all the cities of those kings and their kings; he strikes them with the edge of the sword, devoting them to destruction as Moses commanded — but Israel does not burn the cities that stood on their mounds, only Hazor	The distinction between Hazor (burned) and other royal cities (preserved) reflects the practicality of inheriting a functioning land; only the city that led the coalition is consumed by fire
14	The people of Israel take for themselves the spoil of the cities and the livestock, but strike every person with the edge of the sword until they have destroyed them	Consistent with Deuteronomy’s ḥerem provision: livestock and goods may be kept; persons under the ban are not

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15	“Just 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.”	The theological climax of the campaign narrative: total obedience, total completion of the divine commission
16–17	Summary of territory taken: the whole land — hill country, the Negeb, all Goshen, the lowland, the Arabah, the hill country of Israel and its lowland, from Mount Halak to Baal-gad under Mount Hermon	Geographic comprehensiveness: from the far south to the far north, the whole land is now under Israel’s possession
18	“Joshua made war for a long time with all those kings”	A brief but important note: the conquest took a long time — God’s promises are not always immediately and instantaneously completed; sustained faithfulness is required
19	“There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. They took them all in battle.”	The absence of peace negotiations was not Israeli failure — it was divinely arranged (explained in v. 20)
20	“For it was the LORD’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the LORD commanded Moses.”	The theological explanation of verse 19; divine sovereignty governs the entire campaign, including the absence of alternatives
21–22	Joshua destroys the Anakim from the hill country — from Hebron, Debir, Anab — leaving no Anakim in the land; some survive only in	The Anakim were the warriors whose size had caused the first generation to despair (Numbers 13:33); their defeat is the symbolic

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
23	Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod “So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.”	closure of forty years of fear The closing verse functions as the theological summary of the entire conquest narrative: word spoken → faithfully executed → land at rest

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Coalition Assembles: The Threat Defined
2	6–9	The Word Spoken and Obeyed: The Battle at Merom
3	10–15	The Campaign Completed: Systematic Obedience Throughout the North
4	16–20	Theological Summary: The Whole Land, the LORD’s Hardening, and No Exception
5	21–23	The Anakim Removed and the Land at Rest: Promise Fully Kept

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD fulfills every word spoken to Moses — the whole land falls exactly as promised.

Primary Claim: God’s word cannot be defeated by any human coalition, however overwhelming — and the proof is that every single thing God promised came to pass, leaving Israel with a land that rested from war.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe the size of the opposition by the reliability of the word. (Mind/belief) Joshua faced the largest military coalition of the entire conquest — chariots, horses, armies like sand — and he moved against them *suddenly* (v. 7), without recorded hesitation, because the LORD had spoken the night before. The size of the opposition was not irrelevant to Joshua, but it was not load-bearing for his decision. What was load-bearing was the word. When the opposition you face seems decisive — the diagnosis, the financial collapse, the institutional opposition, the relational impasse — the question is not whether it is large. It obviously is. The question is whether you have a word from God that addresses it. If you do, reframe the size of the opposition against the reliability of that word, not the other way around.

2. Recognize that God's promises are fulfilled through sustained, long-term obedience — not a single dramatic moment. (Mind/belief) Verse 18 is a punctuation mark most readers skip: “Joshua made war for a long time with all those kings.” The conquest was not a weekend. God's promises were real and certain, but their fulfillment required years of sustained faithfulness. The Christian life, the building of a marriage, the formation of character, the planting of a church, the recovery from addiction, the slow sanctification of a particular sin — these are long campaigns, not single battles. The temptation is to conclude that the promise has failed when the timeline extends. Joshua 11 says: the long time was always part of it. Sustained obedience over years is itself the posture of faith.

3. Let the proven track record of God's fulfilled promises be the fuel for your present worship. (Affections/worship) Verse 23 is one of the most understated doxologies in the Old Testament: “the land had rest from war.” Behind those six words is the entire weight of the Abrahamic covenant — four hundred years of waiting, forty years of wandering, seven years of fighting — and now rest. The reader is meant to feel that rest, not just note it. Where has God's word proven reliable in your own history? Where have you received what was promised after a long wait? The discipline of the Christian is to cultivate grateful awareness of God's fulfilled promises — not to treat them as data, but as fuel for worship and ongoing trust. Rest does not produce complacency; it produces praise.

4. Obey the specific word God gives, even when it seems strategically counterintuitive. (Will/behavior) The hamstringing of horses and burning of chariots (vv. 6, 9) was not standard military logic. You do not destroy military assets you have just captured — you use them. But the LORD commanded it specifically, and Joshua obeyed specifically. The application is not abstract: there is almost certainly a specific obedience God is calling you to that makes no sense by the logic of the world — a financial generosity that looks impractical, a forgiveness that looks strategically weak, a vocation decision that forfeits leverage. The test of whether you trust the word is not whether you obey when it's convenient. It is whether you obey when the command itself seems to cost you something you would rather keep.

5. Do not domesticate the sovereignty of God in Joshua 11:20 — and do not despair under it. (Affections/worship) The hardening of the hearts of the Canaanite kings is not a comfortable verse. God hardened them so that no mercy would be shown. This is the same God who hardened Pharaoh, who appoints kings and removes them, who works all things after the counsel of His will. The temptation is either to soften this (making God reactive rather than sovereign) or to collapse under it in fatalism. The text does neither. God's sovereignty over the kings' hearts did not remove their culpability — they came against Israel; their iniquity was full. And God's sovereignty is not a threat to the believer — it is the ground of their security. The same God who arranged the destruction of every coalition against His people has promised that nothing shall separate His people from His love. You are not outside His purposes; you are carried within them.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 11 teaches that God's word is not merely predictive but executive — when God speaks, reality reorganizes itself around that speech. The repeated refrain “as the LORD commanded Moses / as the LORD commanded Joshua” frames the entire conquest as the unfolding of a divine word already spoken, not a human achievement. This passage also makes a serious claim about divine sovereignty in the hardening of the enemy's hearts: God is not passive in the history of the nations, adjusting His plans to human decisions. He governs the wills of kings to accomplish purposes that extend beyond any single king's horizon. The theological importance of this for the reader is substantial: the God they trust is the God who controls outcomes, not merely the God who responds to them. The land “at rest from war” is not luck, not military genius, not the outcome of favorable circumstances — it is the promised consequence of a word that could not fail.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Joshua 11 is a conquest-era display of the sovereign grace that undergirds the entire Reformed understanding of salvation and history. The herem and the hardening of the Canaanite kings demonstrate that God accomplishes His redemptive purposes not by cooperating with human initiative but by governing it — even the hostility of His enemies serves His ends. The Gibeonite exception (chapter 9) underscores that mercy was available, but the taking of it required approaching Israel on Israel's terms — a pattern that foreshadows the gospel's own logic: grace is offered, but it must be received on God's terms, not the sinner's. The phrase “the land had rest from war” carries a redemptive-historical freight that points forward to the final Sabbath rest of Hebrews 4 — Joshua's conquest gives a true but incomplete rest; the greater Joshua (Jesus) gives the rest that no enemies can threaten and no future campaign can undo. Reformed

exposition of this passage should press that typological connection without flattening the historical reality of what God accomplished for Israel in its own right.

Main Takeaway

The word God speaks cannot be defeated by any coalition the world assembles against it — not then, and not now. Every city, every king, every hardened heart in Joshua 11 fell exactly where and when God said they would, and the land rested. The same word that brought Hazor down and silenced the north holds every promise He has made to you. Stop measuring the opposition and start banking on the word.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Joshua 11 to a motivational story about courage under pressure.** The chapter is not fundamentally about Joshua's bravery — it is about the LORD's faithfulness to His word. Joshua acts courageously, but the text's own emphasis is theological, not biographical. Preaching that centers on Joshua's leadership qualities or military acumen ("be like Joshua — face your giants boldly!") has missed the chapter's own claim. The subject is what God does, not what Joshua is like.
- **Skipping the theology of verse 20 because it is uncomfortable.** The hardening of the Canaanite kings' hearts is the passage's most theologically dense statement and the one most commonly avoided in exposition. Skipping it produces a sanitized reading that fails the congregation. They live in a world where they need to know that God governs even the hardened hostility of those who oppose His purposes. Preach it carefully, connect it to Exodus and Romans 9, and let it be difficult — but do not cut it.
- **Treating the *herem* as an embarrassment to be explained away.** The total destruction commanded in Joshua 11 is one of the most challenging features of the Old Testament for contemporary readers, and the temptation is to rush past it or relativize it apologetically. The better approach is to set it in its canonical context: the Genesis 15:16 clock of iniquity, the Leviticus 18 "vomiting" of the land, the Gibeonite exception as evidence that the door was not entirely closed. The *herem* is judicial, not arbitrary — but the preacher must do the work to show that, not assume it.
- **Missing the typological connection to the greater Joshua.** Jesus is not merely "like Joshua" in a surface illustration — He is the fulfillment of what Joshua's conquest pointed toward. The land at rest from war is the incomplete type; the new creation at rest from all opposition is the antitype. Hebrews 4:8–9 explicitly names

this connection. An exposition of Joshua 11 that ends without pointing forward to Christ and the final rest He secures has given the congregation a great history lesson but not the whole gospel.

- **Ignoring verse 18 and preaching as if God's faithfulness means instant resolution.** "Joshua made war for a long time" is pastoral gold for congregations that are exhausted by the length of their struggles. The promise was real, the outcome was certain — and it still took years. Preaching that implies God's faithfulness should produce quick resolution of hard circumstances will leave people in shame when the war is long. Name verse 18 explicitly and give the congregation permission to be in a long campaign without concluding that God has abandoned the field.
- **Applying the military commands of the herem directly to present conflicts.** The conquest commands are specific to Israel's unique theocratic situation in a defined historical moment. They are not normative for the church's engagement with the world, opponents, or enemies of any kind. The preacher must clearly locate the herem within redemptive history, extract its theological principles (God's justice, the completeness of His purposes, the seriousness of iniquity), and apply those — not the military commands themselves.