

Notes on Joshua 13–24

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Chapters 13–19

Apportioning of the land was to be done while Joshua was alive, to complete what the covenant head, Moses, had begun. Even though the land was not yet completely subdued, it could be allotted because the Lord would drive out the remaining enemies.

Trans Jordan had been apportioned by Moses to two and a half of the tribes, although some native inhabitants were still present when the book Joshua was written (13:13). Later, we are told the same was true on East Jordan where Joshua had led (15:63).

The tribe of Levi did not need land to fulfil its vocation or as a means of livelihood: Levites were able to eat parts of animals offered as sacrifices and received gifts from the offerings of the other tribes. So, the sacrifices were their inheritance, or, the Lord himself (13:14, 33). Here, in Levi, is a suggestion of the true nature of inheritance (Rev. 21:1–7). It is not something in itself but a participation in God and his goodness, and this was true of each citizen of Israel (Ps. 16:5–6).

However, they were given possession of certain towns to live in together with their surrounding pastures (for example: 14:3–4).

God had prepared all Israel to receive their inheritance. They, with Joshua, had been bold and very courageous. But Caleb had been this when he and Joshua were the only two who were ready to take the land. Now, at 85 years of age, Caleb still had the same spirit and asked to be given as an inheritance the very area that had made the hearts of Israel melt before: the region where the giants of Anakim were. So, he drove out the three mighty sons of Anak. He wanted a son in law of like spirit and promised his daughter to the captor of another city. She was good spirited too and petitioned her father for an improved part of their family inheritance.

Some of the people devoted to destruction resisted attack. These exceptions are noted in the apportioning of the inheritance given to Judah (15:63), Ephraim (16:9–10) and Manasseh (17:12–13). These latter tribes felt the need for more territory for their many people, but, argued Joshua, their many people would be able to clear difficult land and drive out difficult enemies!

The land was basically subdued and Israel met before God at Shiloh where the tabernacle had been located. Seven tribes still showed some reticence to conquer further territory, so Joshua called for it to be surveyed and allotted in readiness for

their possessing it. This was all done, and Joshua also received his personal inheritance.

Prayer

Father, the earth is yours and all its peoples. Your Son has promised that the meek shall inherit the earth. You have cast down the enemy Satan and told us to occupy the ends of the earth through preaching your word and bringing together all the children of God. Already we know our territory. We have little strength, but you are able to give us this inheritance so that there may be great joy at the last day. Grant now that we may not look to our own strength but at the joy of occupying what Christ has won, for the sake of his glory. Amen.

Chapters 20–21

All through this book, mention is made that everything was done according to the Lord's instruction through Moses. He was still present in this way, as covenant head, to ensure the people of God received their inheritance. The inheritance would remain even though internal violence would threaten it. Safe cities would protect accidental killers until they received a fair trial. They could return home after the death of the High Priest. The same provisions applied to strangers living in Israel even though they had no inheritance there.

Perhaps the death of the high priest suggested that even accidental death mattered to God, not because the killer was guilty but because someone did not live to enjoy their inheritance. A proverb says: 'Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention' (Prov. 15:18). The word used to calm is the same word 'rest', often used for rest from enemies in this book. What would be the value of peacetime if the people self-destructed.

The cities and lands apportioned to Levites, though they remained the inheritance of the other tribes, were devoted for the use of Levites, each city for its respective families. It is notable that all the cities of refuge are appointed to Levites.

So God's promise was fulfilled. He had given Israel their land. They possessed their inheritance. They had rest from their enemies. Why, then, did David ignore this and later say that Israel should heed God's word so as to possess their inheritance (Ps. 95:7; Heb. 4:8). He and the writer of Hebrews knew that possessing inheritance was not just a matter of territory but of being in the whole purpose of God. The promised land was Israel's inheritance, but as a testimony to all that God would do for the world. Those who presumed on their inheritance did not truly possess it. The inheritance is given to those who acknowledge it as the work of God's hands and possess it with a view to being a blessing to the world, as did Abraham.

Prayer

Lord, you give to us more in your giving than ever we could have in our grasping. Teach us this day to live by your promise, to live with respect to the inheritance you have for others, and especially, to live by every word from your mouth. We thank you for the gospel by which we can learn to live in your finished work of your Son Jesus Christ. Through him, we pray that the whole world may hear and know that you are God. Amen.

Chapter 22

With the whole land subdued, the two and a half tribes with land East of Jordan could now return home. They had obeyed Moses and Joshua and the Lord and in this they had not forsaken their brothers (cf. I John 5:2). Love has not been mentioned in this book until now, but it has been the basis of all the action. God had been loving his people and holding them in his hand (Duet. 7:7–8; 33:3). He had been teaching them to love him with all their heart. So now, love for God was urged upon the departing tribes.

The remaining tribes were deeply shocked when the East Jordan tribes built a large altar on their bank of the Jordan. It appeared to them as preparation for a rival worship that would place all of Israel back under God's judgment. They were full of zeal, and representatives went to see if they could win their brothers back to loyalty to God (cf. Matthew 18:15). They reasoned that East Jordan tribes may think their land was still unclean, with a river separating them from 'the land of the possession of the Lord, where the Lord's tabernacle stands' (v. 19). They were ready to share this land rather than endure false worship among them.

While God had begun to subdue Israel's enemies in the East, and had given clear instruction that the two and a half tribes were to settle there, the dramatic River crossing and fall of Jericho, and the position of the tabernacle in the East, had made the West tribes wonder whether, in the future, the East would accept them as true members of Israel. Hence their altar of witness. Faithfulness rather than rebellion had been in their minds. When the Western leaders heard this testimony, they were not only satisfied but also grateful that God was still among them. The Eastern Tribes had evidence that the West wanted them as much as they wanted to remain true to God. When the Western leaders returned to the gathered army and to the people, all were satisfied that the whole nation was fervent in love for God, and they could rely on him to maintain the inheritance that had come to them.

Prayer

Father, our inheritance in your kingdom is sure. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, has been among us and, through him, you have defeated all the enemies of true worship. May we always love you and be faithful to you as we do this day. May your whole church be kept in faithfulness. When the actions of some seem to threaten the purity of the whole, may there be a true zeal to deal with these things, yet true discernment also to understand what is happening. Lord, make us eager for the unity of your church, and willing to freely share what you have given to us. May love abound more and more. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapters 23–24

Israel now had rest. Joshua had led them, not only into the land but into true worship. Now he called them to acknowledge that all they had was theirs because God had been fighting their battles. (If the Christian asks why he or she lives in the blessing of God, it is because God has defeated their enemies so as to give them this inheritance.) However, Israel's inheritance included nations not yet conquered, together with those that were, so they needed to remain resolute to receive all that God had promised. The point of issue between God and the nations was all their evil, but especially their idolatry. Therefore, Israel was to remain distinct, not become familiar with their idols or require the serving of them. They should think again of the

Notes on Joshua 13–24

victories they have had and set their hearts to love God. If they played with these idols, they would have trouble with them forever and even lose their inheritance. God would just as truly fulfil his threats as his promises if they turned from him to idols.

Joshua summoned Israel to present themselves to the Lord. This was at Shechem where Abraham had first built an altar to God (Gen. 12:6–7), and where the bones of Joseph would soon be buried in the grave of Jacob (Josh. 24:32). They needed the story of their fathers to fully appreciate what it meant that they stood in God's presence now. God had saved Abraham from a family of idolaters. He gave him family, and to them, liberty, land and victory. Even a prophet hired to curse Israel could only bless them. So now, they enjoyed fields and cities and fruits over which they had spent no labour.

Idolatry had not quickly disappeared among Abraham's descendants. Jacob's family retained some idols (Gen. 35:1–4). There were still idols among Israel in Egypt, and at the end of their conquest (24:23). But surely, with such a demonstration of God being their God, how could they serve them any longer? Joshua called on them to choose among other gods if they must. Israel protested that they would be faithful. Joshua said they could not endure a jealous God who wanted such fidelity. Still they affirmed they would be faithful.

So, the covenant first made with Abraham, then with all Israel at Sinai, was renewed and a stone set up as a memorial of the occasion. So the tribes of Israel returned to their inheritance, and Joshua died, having led Israel in true worship during his whole leadership.

Prayer

Father, you have done all that could be done to show us that you are our God and that we are your people. Our Leader and Saviour, Christ, by your grace, has brought us out of darkness into your light. Through him, you have given to us all that pertain to life and godliness. Still he leads us and fights for us lest the enemy discourage, disarm or defeat us. Therefore Father, we love you, and forsake all worship that is false that we may be your people always and live in the inheritance you have preserved for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.