

The Book of Joshua, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Inheritance for the Tribes and the Cities of Refuge

Joshua 16:1–21:45

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal center of this lesson is the faithfulness of God to His promise, declared plainly in Joshua 21:43–45. Help the class see that the gift of the land was not a real estate transaction but the keeping of the oath God swore to Abraham generations before. Every boundary line and town list is evidence that God does what He says. Then lift their eyes higher. The earthly rest in Canaan was a shadow, not the substance. Hebrews 4 teaches that a better and eternal rest still remains for the people of God, a rest entered by faith in Christ. Guard the class firmly against premillennial and dispensational readings that look for a future earthly, political restoration of national Israel. The promises do not await a renewed national kingdom; they find their yes in Christ and His church, where all who belong to Him, Jew and Gentile alike, are Abraham's heirs (Galatians 3:16, 26–29). Keep the line clean: the kingdom is Christ's present reign, and the inheritance of God's people is spiritual and eternal in Him.

Give careful attention to the cities of refuge, for they are a tender window into the character of God and a beautiful foreshadowing of Christ. Show how the provision held justice and mercy together: the murderer was not shielded, but the one who killed unintentionally had a place to flee from the avenger of blood and receive a fair hearing. Then draw the line forward gently to the refuge we have in Christ, who is a safe place for the one who flees to Him (compare Hebrews 6:18, where we are pictured fleeing for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us). Draw this out without forcing every detail into an allegory. The point is the heart of God who makes a way of safety, fulfilled in the Savior to whom sinners run.

This lesson is also aimed at the spiritual formation of your students, especially the weary and the waiting. Many carry promises of God they fear have been forgotten. Press into their hearts the steadying truth that not one of God's good words has ever failed, and not one ever will. Let the Levites teach them where treasure is truly found, in God Himself as our portion. Let the bold askers, Achsah and the daughters of Zelophehad, stir them to step forward and lay hold of what God offers. The aim is not merely that they admire God's faithfulness in an old story, but that they rest in it, ask boldly because of it, and stake their lives on the God who keeps every word in Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

After the land is divided among the remaining tribes, the tabernacle is set up at Shiloh and the whole congregation gathers there (Joshua 18:1). Why does the writer pause the surveying to

record this, and what does it teach us that the center of Israel's life was meant to be the place where God dwelt among them and was worshipped?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In the middle of dividing the land, the whole congregation assembles at Shiloh and sets up the tabernacle there (Joshua 18:1). The writer deliberately interrupts the surveying to record this, signaling that the apportioning of territory is not the highest concern. The presence of God among His people is.

Shiloh becomes the central sanctuary for the next generations, the place where the tribes gather, where the lots are cast 'before the Lord' (Joshua 18:8, 10), and where Israel's life is meant to orbit around the dwelling of God. The land is gift, but God Himself is the giver and the center.

Notice the order. The land is being parceled out, but before the work is finished the tent of meeting is planted in the middle of it. This is a picture of how God means His people to live: not merely settled on the land but settled around Him, with worship at the heart of everything.

For the class, this guards against a subtle danger that runs through the whole lesson. It is possible to receive God's gifts and forget the Giver, to enjoy the land and neglect the Lord. Shiloh in the center says the gift was always meant to lead the heart back to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The presence of God among His people, not the possession of the land, is the true center of Israel's life (Joshua 18:1; Exodus 25:8).
- God's gifts are meant to draw His people to the Giver, with worship at the heart of all of life.
- The land was apportioned 'before the Lord,' under His eye and at His direction (Joshua 18:8–10).
- It is possible to enjoy God's blessings while drifting from God Himself; the tabernacle in the center guards against that drift.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think the writer pauses the surveying to record the setting up of the tabernacle at Shiloh?
- What does it teach us that worship was meant to be the center of Israel's national life?
- How can we guard against enjoying God's gifts while forgetting the God who gives them?

Question 2

Student Question:

These chapters are largely lists of towns and borders that can feel tedious to read. When you come to passages of Scripture that seem dry or merely procedural, how do you usually respond,

and what might it look like to slow down and listen for the faithfulness of God even in a list of names?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Much of Joshua 16 through 21 is lists, borders, and town names that can feel tedious to modern readers. Yet the Spirit saw fit to preserve them, and 'all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable' (2 Timothy 3:16).

This is a self-examination question about how we handle the parts of Scripture that do not immediately thrill us. Many readers skim or skip such passages, treating them as filler between the good stories. Press the class to examine that habit honestly.

Help them see that these lists are not filler at all. Each name is the fulfillment of a promise, a town actually given to a real family because God keeps His word. Read slowly, the tedium becomes testimony. The faithfulness of God is written in the place names.

Encourage a posture of patient, expectant reading. Even where Scripture seems merely procedural, God is at work, and the reader who slows down to listen is often rewarded with a fresh sight of His character. The reward is not in the names themselves but in the God they reveal.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All Scripture, even its lists and genealogies, is God-breathed and profitable (2 Timothy 3:16; Romans 15:4).
- Passages that seem dry often carry the quiet weight of God's faithfulness when we read them slowly.
- Skimming the hard parts can become a habit that starves us of what God has preserved for our good.
- Patient, expectant reading trains us to hear God's voice even where the text first seems merely procedural.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you usually respond when you reach a passage of Scripture that seems dry or merely procedural?
- What might you discover if you slowed down and read a list of names as a record of God's kept promises?
- What would help you bring patient, expectant attention to the harder parts of your Bible reading?

Question 3

Student Question:

God commands six cities of refuge, three on each side of the Jordan, where one who killed a person unintentionally could flee from the avenger of blood (Joshua 20:1–9). Look carefully at the conditions: it was for the one who killed ‘unawares and unwittingly,’ not the murderer. What does this provision reveal about how God holds together both justice and mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God commands six cities of refuge, three west of the Jordan and three east, so that the slayer ‘which killeth any person unawares and unwittingly’ might flee there and be safe from the avenger of blood (Joshua 20:2–3). The provision was carefully limited to the one who killed without hatred and without intent (Joshua 20:5; Numbers 35:9–34).

Look at how justice and mercy are held together. The avenger of blood, the near kinsman charged with answering for a death, was not simply set aside; bloodshed was a serious matter and was not treated lightly. Yet the unintentional slayer was not handed over to vengeance. He received a hearing before the congregation and a place of safety (Joshua 20:6).

The man was not declared innocent of all consequence; he had to remain in the city until the death of the high priest. But neither was he abandoned to the heat of revenge. God built into the very map of Israel a place where a fair hearing and protection could be found. Mercy had an address.

For the class, this reveals the heart of the God who gave the land. He is just; blood is not cheap to Him. And He is merciful; He makes a way of refuge for the one who flees. The same God who judges Jericho provides a road to safety for the one overtaken by tragedy. Keep both truths together, as the text does.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God holds justice and mercy together: bloodshed is taken seriously, yet the unintentional slayer is given refuge (Joshua 20:1–9; Numbers 35).
- The refuge was for the one who killed ‘unawares and unwittingly,’ not for the murderer; the distinction matters.
- The slayer received a fair hearing before the congregation, not mob vengeance (Joshua 20:4, 6).
- The provision reveals the character of God, who is both perfectly just and rich in mercy (Psalm 85:10).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference the text draws between the unintentional slayer and the murderer, and why does it matter?
- How do the cities of refuge hold together God’s justice and His mercy at the same time?
- What does this provision teach you about the character of the God who gave the land?

Question 4

Student Question:

The man who fled to a city of refuge had to leave his home, stay inside the city, and wait there until the death of the high priest before he could return in freedom (Joshua 20:6). When has finding safety or doing the right thing cost you something real, and how did you handle the waiting that came with it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The man who fled to a city of refuge paid a real cost. He had to leave his home, abide within the city, and wait there until the death of the high priest before he could return to his own possession in freedom (Joshua 20:6; Numbers 35:25–28). Safety came, but not without loss and not without waiting.

This is a transformational question inviting students to recall times when safety or obedience cost them something, and especially the waiting that often accompanies it. Doing the right thing and finding the right shelter is not always quick or painless.

Help the class sit honestly with the waiting. The slayer could not simply resume his old life on his own timetable; he had to remain until God's appointed moment. So often our deliverance is sure but slow, and the hardest part is the staying put while we wait.

Draw out that the waiting itself can be a place of trust rather than mere endurance. The man inside the city was safe even while he waited. Encourage students to see that God's protection holds during the long middle, and that patient waiting under His care is itself an act of faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Finding safety or doing right can carry real cost; the slayer left home and remained in the city (Joshua 20:6).
- God's deliverance is often sure but slow, requiring patient waiting on His timing.
- We are kept safe even in the waiting; the city sheltered the slayer until the appointed day.
- Patient waiting under God's care is itself an act of trust, not merely passive endurance (Psalm 27:14).

Discussion Prompts

- When has finding safety or doing the right thing cost you something real?
- How did you handle the waiting that came with it, and where was God in that stretch?
- What would it look like to trust God's protection during a long, uncertain wait right now?

Question 5

Student Question:

The Levites received no single territory of their own but forty-eight cities scattered through all the tribes (Joshua 21:1–42), because the Lord was their inheritance (Joshua 13:33). What does it mean that a whole tribe held God Himself as their portion rather than land, and how does that speak to where God's people are meant to find their true treasure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Levites received no single block of territory like the other tribes, but forty-eight cities scattered through all the inheritances, with their surrounding pasture lands (Joshua 21:1–42). The reason is stated plainly elsewhere: 'the Lord God of Israel was their inheritance' (Joshua 13:33).

Consider the wonder of it. A whole tribe held no land of its own because they held God Himself as their portion. Where every other tribe could point to a region, the Levite could point only to the Lord. Their poverty in land was meant to display a deeper wealth.

This was not a deprivation but a calling. By scattering the Levites among all the tribes, God ensured that the teaching of His word and the ministry of worship would be near to every Israelite, no matter where they lived. The arrangement preached that God meant to be near to all His people.

For the class, the Levites raise the searching question of where God's people find their true treasure. It is good to receive God's gifts, but the Levite reminds us that the highest gift is God Himself. Help students see that the Lord as our portion is not a consolation prize but the very thing all the other gifts were pointing toward (Psalm 16:5–6; Psalm 73:25–26).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Levites held no territory because the Lord Himself was their inheritance (Joshua 13:33; 21:1–42).
- God Himself, not His gifts, is the true treasure of His people (Psalm 16:5–6; Psalm 73:25–26).
- Scattering the Levites kept the word and worship of God near to every tribe.
- Holding God as our portion is not a lesser blessing but the very thing all other blessings point toward.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that a whole tribe held God Himself as their inheritance rather than land?
- How does the example of the Levites speak to where God's people are meant to find their treasure?
- What would change in your life if you truly counted the Lord Himself as your portion?

Question 6

Student Question:

Like the Levites among the tribes, God often scatters His people through ordinary places so that the worship and word of the Lord are near to everyone. Where has God planted you, and how might He intend to use your presence there to keep Him near to the people around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Just as the Levites were scattered among the tribes so that God would be near to everyone, God still places His people in ordinary towns and workplaces and families for a purpose. They are sprinkled through the land like salt through bread (compare Matthew 5:13–16).

This is a personal question moving from the Levites to the student's own place. Ask them to name honestly where God has planted them, the neighborhood, the job, the family, the relationships, and to consider why He might have set them precisely there.

Help the class see that location is not accidental. The Levite in his scattered town was a constant reminder of the Lord to his neighbors. In the same way, the believer's ordinary presence can keep God near to the people around them, through word and worship and a life that points beyond itself.

Encourage one concrete step. Like the Levite, the student is not called merely to occupy a place but to make God known in it. Press them to consider one way their presence this week could keep the Lord near to someone who needs Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God places His people in ordinary settings for a purpose, like salt scattered through bread (Matthew 5:13–16).
- Where we live and work is not accidental; God positions His people to keep Himself near to others.
- Like the Levites, believers are called not merely to occupy a place but to make God known in it.
- Faithful presence in an ordinary place is a real form of ministry.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has God planted you, and why do you think He has placed you precisely there?
- How might your presence keep the Lord near to the people around you?
- What is one concrete way you could make God known in your place this week?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Caleb's daughter Achsah, given a field, asks her father for springs of water and receives both the upper and the lower springs (Joshua 15:18–19); and the tribe of Joseph complains they need more room while leaving the harder land unconquered (Joshua 17:14–18). Setting these side by side, what do they teach us about asking God boldly for His blessing while also taking responsibility to lay hold of what He has given?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Two scenes sit near each other in these chapters. Achsah, given a field by her father Caleb, presses further and asks for springs of water, and Caleb grants her both the upper and the lower springs (Joshua 15:18–19). She asks boldly for a fuller blessing and receives it.

By contrast, the children of Joseph complain that their portion is too small, yet they hesitate to drive out the Canaanites in the wooded hill country and the valley (Joshua 17:14–18). They want more room but are slow to lay hold of the land already within their reach. Joshua tells them plainly to go up and possess it.

Set side by side, these scenes teach a double lesson. On one hand, God invites bold asking; Achsah was not rebuked for seeking more but was given the springs. On the other hand, God will not do for us what He calls us to do in dependence on Him; Joseph had to take responsibility and possess what was given.

For the class, hold both truths together without playing them against each other. We are to ask God boldly for His blessing, like Achsah, and we are to step out and take hold of what He has given, like Joseph was called to do. Bold asking and faithful effort are partners, not rivals (compare James 4:2; Philippians 2:12–13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God welcomes bold asking for His blessing; Achsah sought the springs and received them (Joshua 15:18–19).
- God calls His people to take responsibility and lay hold of what He has given; Joseph had to possess the land (Joshua 17:14–18).
- Bold asking and faithful effort belong together, not in competition (James 4:2; Philippians 2:12–13).
- Complaining about our portion while neglecting the work before us is a temptation God's people must resist.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Achsah's bold request and Caleb's generous answer teach us about asking God for blessing?
- What does the hesitation of Joseph's children warn us about regarding our own responsibility?
- How do we hold together bold asking and faithful effort in the life of faith?

Question 8

Student Question:

The daughters of Zelophehad came and claimed the inheritance the Lord had promised them, and it was granted (Joshua 17:3–6). Is there a good thing God has clearly offered His people that you have been slow to step forward and receive? What holds you back from laying hold of it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The daughters of Zelophehad came forward and claimed the inheritance the Lord had promised them through Moses, and Joshua granted it among their father's brethren (Joshua 17:3–6). They did not assume the promise would simply land in their laps; they stepped forward and laid hold of it.

This is a self-examination question. Many of God's people are slow to receive what He has clearly offered, hanging back out of fear, unworthiness, or simple inertia. The daughters of Zelophehad model the opposite: they believed the promise and acted on it.

Help the class identify a specific good thing God has offered His people that they have been slow to step forward and receive. It might be forgiveness held at arm's length, a peace they will not rest in, a calling they keep declining, a place at the table they doubt is theirs.

Press gently on what holds them back. Often it is not that God has withheld the gift but that we have not come forward to receive it. Encourage them, like Zelophehad's daughters, to take God at His word and step up to claim what He has freely promised.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The daughters of Zelophehad believed God's promise and stepped forward to claim it (Joshua 17:3–6).
- God's people are often slow to receive what He has clearly offered, hanging back out of fear or doubt.
- What holds us back is frequently not God's withholding but our own failure to come forward.
- Faith takes God at His word and acts to lay hold of what He has promised.

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a good thing God has clearly offered that you have been slow to step forward and receive?
- What is it that holds you back from laying hold of it?
- What would it look like this week to take God at His word and claim what He has promised?

Question 9

Student Question:

The lesson reaches its summit in Joshua 21:43–45: ‘There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.’ Trace this together with Hebrews 4:1–11 and Galatians 3:16, 26–29. How was the gift of the land the faithful keeping of God’s promise to Abraham, how does it point forward to a better and eternal rest in Christ, and why must we not read it as a promise of some future earthly, political restoration of national Israel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson. After all the lots are cast and the cities given, the writer lays down one of the great sentences of the Old Testament: ‘There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass’ (Joshua 21:45). The land was the faithful keeping of the oath God swore to Abraham generations before (Genesis 12:7; 15:18–21). Not one word fell to the ground.

Yet the land was a shadow, not the final substance. Hebrews 4:1–11 teaches that the rest Israel found in Canaan was a picture of a better and eternal rest that still remains for the people of God, a rest entered not by crossing a river but by believing faith in Christ. ‘There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God’ (Hebrews 4:9). The earthly inheritance points beyond itself to a heavenly one.

The promise to Abraham finds its yes in Christ. Paul is explicit: the promise was made to Abraham ‘and to his seed,’ and ‘he saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ’ (Galatians 3:16). And all who belong to Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, ‘are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ (Galatians 3:26–29). The inheritance is fulfilled not in dirt and borders but in Christ and His church.

This is where we must guard the line carefully. The fulfillment of the land promise does not await a future earthly, political restoration of national Israel. Premillennial and dispensational readings look for a renewed national kingdom and a rebuilt earthly inheritance, but Scripture points us instead to Christ’s present reign and the spiritual, eternal inheritance of His people (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13). The kingdom is here in Christ; the rest is found in Him; the heirs are all who are His by faith.

Draw the cities of refuge into this summit as well. They beautifully foreshadow the refuge we have in Christ, who is a safe place for the one who flees to Him. Hebrews pictures the believer as one who has ‘fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us’ (Hebrews 6:18). Without forcing every detail, lift the class to see that the same God who built roads to safety in Canaan has provided in Christ a sure refuge for every sinner who runs to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God kept every good promise; not one word failed (Joshua 21:43–45; 23:14), proving His unbreakable faithfulness.
- The gift of the land was the faithful fulfillment of God's oath to Abraham (Genesis 12:7; 15:18–21).
- The earthly rest in Canaan was a shadow of the better, eternal rest that remains in Christ (Hebrews 4:1–11).
- The promise to Abraham finds its yes in Christ, and all who are His are Abraham's heirs (Galatians 3:16, 26–29).
- Guard against premillennial and dispensational readings; there is no future earthly, political restoration of national Israel in view.
- The kingdom is Christ's present reign and the inheritance is spiritual and eternal in Him (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13).
- The cities of refuge foreshadow refuge in Christ, to whom the sinner flees and lays hold of hope (Hebrews 6:18).

Discussion Prompts

- How was the gift of the land the faithful keeping of God's promise to Abraham?
- How do Hebrews 4 and Galatians 3 show that the land points forward to a better rest and a greater inheritance in Christ?
- Why must we not read the land promise as a future earthly, political restoration of national Israel?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole sweep of these chapters, from the measuring cords to the cities of refuge to that final, unbroken word of God's faithfulness. Name one specific way the Lord is using this passage to deepen your trust in Him. What is He asking you to believe about His promises, and what is He asking you to do this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone. Invite the class to look back across the whole sweep of these chapters, from the measuring cords stretched over the hills, to the cities of refuge with their open gates, to the Levites scattered like salt, to that final unbroken word of God's faithfulness in Joshua 21:45.

The thread that holds it all together is the trustworthiness of God. He keeps His promises down to the last town and border. He makes a way of refuge for the one in trouble. He gives Himself as the portion of His people. Help students name the specific place where the Spirit is pressing this story into their own lives.

For some it will be the steadying assurance that not one of God's good words will fail, a balm for a weary, waiting faith. For others it will be the call to ask boldly like Achsah, to step forward like the daughters of Zelophehad, or to find their treasure in God Himself like the Levites. For still others it will be the sweetness of fleeing to Christ as their refuge.

Close by pointing them to Christ. Every promise of God finds its yes and amen in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20). The rest Israel tasted in Canaan is ours in fuller measure in Jesus, and He is the refuge to whom we run. Ask each student to name one truth about God's faithfulness to believe more deeply and one specific action to take in response this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's faithfulness is the thread that binds these chapters together; He keeps every word He speaks.
- Christ is the goal of the story; every promise of God is yes and amen in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20).
- The land's rest and refuge are fulfilled and surpassed in Christ, our better rest and sure refuge (Hebrews 4:9; 6:18).
- Spiritual formation moves from admiring God's faithfulness to resting our lives upon it; name one thing to believe and one to do.

Discussion Prompts

- As you look back over these chapters, what one truth about God's faithfulness is the Lord asking you to believe more deeply?
- What one specific action is He asking you to take in response this week?
- How does seeing the land's rest and refuge fulfilled in Christ change the way you trust Him today?