

The Book of Joshua

Lesson 11: Inheritance for the Tribes and the Cities of Refuge -- Joshua 16:1-21:45

Imagine the surveyor's cords stretched out across the hills of Canaan, lot after lot, border after border, name after name. To us these chapters can read like an old deed of property, a long list of towns we cannot pronounce and boundary lines we cannot trace. But slow down and listen for the heartbeat underneath. Every river named, every ridge marked, every village handed to a family is the keeping of a promise God made centuries earlier to an old man under a starry sky. Abraham never owned more of this land than a burial cave. Now his children are walking the very fields the Lord swore to give, and a clerk with a measuring line is writing down the faithfulness of God.

Set in the middle of all this measuring is a tender provision that tells you something about the heart of the God who gave the land. Six cities are set apart, scattered north and south, east and west of the Jordan, so that a man who killed his neighbor by accident, with no hatred and no plan, would have somewhere to run. Picture him: an axe head flies off the handle, a friend lies dead, and the dead man's brother is already coming with vengeance in his eyes. Where does he go? God has thought of him. There is a road, and a gate, and elders waiting to give him a fair hearing and a place of safety. Justice and mercy meet at the gate of a city of refuge.

And then there are the Levites, the tribe with no territory of its own. While their brothers received whole regions, the priestly tribe received forty-eight scattered towns, sprinkled through every other inheritance like salt through bread. They held no block of land to call their own because the Lord Himself was their portion. So God settled them in among the people, near to every tribe, that worship and the word of the Lord would never be far from anyone in Israel. Even the way God housed His ministers preached a sermon about His nearness.

All of it gathers to one of the most quietly thunderous sentences in the Old Testament. When the lots are cast and the borders drawn and the cities given, the writer lays down his pen and says, 'There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.' Not one promise dropped. Not one word fell to the ground. As we walk these chapters, do not skim the names. Hear in them the steady voice of a God who keeps every word He speaks, and let your own weary, waiting faith take heart.

Group Discussion: When the writer says, 'There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken; all came to pass' (Joshua 21:45), he is summing up a long history of waiting. Why do you think God gives us this kind of plain summary of His faithfulness, and how does looking back over a kept promise strengthen us to trust Him with the promises still unkept?

Personal Reflection: Is there a promise of God you are tempted to think He has forgotten or let slip? What would change in your week if you truly believed that, in Christ, not one of His good words to you will fail?

Read Joshua 16:1–21:45

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 4:1–11, the rest Israel found in Canaan was a shadow of the better, eternal rest that remains for the people of God in Christ; Galatians 3:16, 26–29, the promise to Abraham finds its yes in Christ, and all who belong to Him are Abraham's heirs; Numbers 35:9–34, the original law of the cities of refuge, holding together the avenging of blood and the mercy shown to the unintentional slayer; Hebrews 6:18, we have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us; Joshua 23:14, Joshua's later witness that not one good thing the Lord promised has failed.

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