

Promise Land

Joshua 15-19

The settling of the Promise Land contains specific outcomes of the Lord's promises to Abram made over four centuries earlier: "To your descendants I will give this land.' And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him" (Gen. 12:7). Disguised as mundane details, this real estate is proof of outlandish grace and an example for the Lord's people to take dominion over the earth. We learn to imitate the faith and avoid the folly of Israel as we focus on 15:13-19, 16:1-5, 17:3-6, 17:14-18:3, and 19:49-51.

Summary of the Text

Chapter fifteen includes the land allotted to Judah (vv. 1-12), the exploits of Caleb and Othniel (vv. 13-19), and the cities given to the tribe (vv. 20-63). Chapters sixteen and seventeen detail the land given to Ephraim and Manasseh. Chapters eighteen and nineteen contain seven divisions of land for Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. The narrative concludes with Joshua's personal inheritance according to the word of the Lord (19:49-51). What started with Caleb in chapter fourteen ends with Joshua, a division of this great inheritance before the presence of the Lord at the tabernacle in Shiloh (19:51).

Beating the Giants

Caleb pleaded the promises of Yahweh to Joshua and received the mountain of Hebron in chapter fourteen (vv. 12-15). We get a more details now, that Caleb drove out the three sons of Anak: Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi (14:14). From there he goes to Kirjath Sepher and offers the hand of his daughter Achsah in marriage to the one who conquers it (v. 16). Othniel the son of Kenaz succeeds and marries her, and she then convinces him to ask her father for a field. Caleb asks her what she desires, and she requests a blessing, springs of water to complement her land, and so she receives upper and lower springs (vv. 18-19). This story confirms what Caleb thought to be the case, that formidable Anakim inhabit the land. He wanted to fight them forty-five years ago and does so now with great success—but not without help. He calls other men to succeed with him, and Othniel rises to the challenge. Here is the next generation of giant-killers joining the ranks. Othniel will be the first judge in Israel who delivers them from eight years of subjugation under Cushan Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia, providing forty years of rest (Jdgs. 3:9-11). We would not see this story as a typical paradigm for biblical courtship (!), but Achsah is a prized woman who shows wisdom to complement her beauty. Her request to secure water in the dry Negev region would lead to prosperity, and the story of her request is told again in in Judges 1:12-15. Beat the giants, get the girl, and build a life.

The First Will Be Last

In order of birth, Manasseh comes first and then Ephraim (16:4), but when it comes to distributing the land Ephraim is named first and then Manasseh (vv. 5-10, 17:1-13). This occurs without comment but it derives from Judah's blessing back in Genesis where he crossed his hands, putting his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Manasseh. This displeased Joseph but his father assures him that Manasseh is blessed and will become a great people, but Ephraim's "descendants shall become a multitude of nations" (Gen. 48:19). The Joseph story was one of envy and betrayal, but he broke out of it by forgiving his brothers and seeing the Lord's providence even through their wickedness (Gen. 50:20). God does not abide by what is called "equity" in our time, which is really covetousness and envy—discriminating against people to ensure equal outcome. The Lord gives different gifts to different people and those who are thankful for His grace and mercy are empowered to be faithful with little and then later with much more. He keeps us guessing, *sometimes* blessing the last more than the first, using the base and despised of the world, the things are not, to bring to nothing the things that are so that no flesh should glory in His presence (1 Cor. 1:28-29).

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Daughters of Sarah

Within the tribe of Manasseh, Zelophehad had five daughters and no sons. They had petitioned Moses that their family land not be given to the nearest male kinsman, but to them: “Why should the name of our father be removed from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers” (Num. 27:4, 1-11). The Lord sided with them and here they are like Caleb asking for their inheritance (17:3-6). These are daughters of Sarah because in great faith she followed the Lord when she went with Abram out of Ur, out of Haran, and when they were as good as dead, she believed the Lord’s promise that He would give her a son. She even named him Isaac, meaning “laughter” because it was hilarious. The daughters’ father is not as good as dead; he died already in the wilderness. They now claim what was far off back in the wilderness. Rather than fade off in fear, they walk by faith (1 Pet. 3:6).

Discontent & Unbelief

As one might expect, Joshua gets some pushback on the allotment of land. Ephraim and Joseph would like some more (17:14). Joshua tells them to take some of the forest country of the Perizzites and giants, but they complain don’t think they can do it (vv. 15-17). This theme runs through these chapters: failure to drive the Canaanites out (15:63, 16:10, 17:12-13). Baal worship is like cancer in the lymph nodes. Even if dormant for a time, it will spread. Turn the pages to Judges and you see how this comes to fruition (1:27ff.). Ungodly discontent refuses to thank God for what He has given and then will not ask Him for more. But godly discontent can say with Caleb and the daughters of Zelophehad, “We would like this. Can we go get it?” but still trust the Lord if it doesn’t come to pass. You cannot please God without faith and faith believes that He exists *and* that He rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). Faith doesn’t sit on its hands complaining about what it doesn’t have, but believes God will bless and so takes the land.

Joshua & the Greater Joshua

Joshua finishes dividing the land and the children of Israel bless him with an inheritance, the city of Timnath Serah in the mountains of Ephraim (19:49-50). The two promise-believers who would inherit the land did so at the beginning and the end of chapters 14-19 (Num. 14:30). When you consider the conquest as a whole, it was, well, a conquest—they succeeded. The sins they committed did not turn the Promise Land into the Curse Land. The fact that they would go into exile later doesn’t change this settlement, and even then restoration will follow. When Israel rejected the messiah, He rose from the dead, told them to disciple all the nations, and poured out the Holy Spirit so they would succeed (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:4). The Church has had a lot of setbacks over the centuries, but the Lord has been multiplying His people and blessing the preached word which is now believed by over two billion people alive today. We can’t help but see—and should see—problems in our midst, but they don’t change the advance of Christ’s kingdom that has a better mountain than Hebron and a greater city than Kirjath Sepher—Mount Zion and the new Jerusalem that descends from heaven.