

This morning I am in the eighth week of a sermon series I am doing on the Old Testament book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible. If you're unfamiliar with this book of the Bible, the historical context is that the Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt, have been set free by God, using a man named Moses, with the plan of bringing them to the land of Canaan, a land which God had promised to their ancestor Abraham 600 years earlier. After the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years as a result of their disobedience, Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, where they fight many battles and drive out the wicked inhabitants of the land. There are essentially three parts to Joshua: the preparation for the Promised Land, the conquest of the Promised Land, and the division of the Promised Land. This week, we are squarely in part 3, which spans from Joshua 13-21. I will not be reading long sections of these chapters, since most of it is a record of the boundaries of the sections of land given to the various tribes. But I will be summarizing the four main points that we need to take away for our life and faith today.

The first three points are all ones we have talked about in previous weeks, so I will not spend a long time on them.

### 1) God is true to His promise to give them the land of Canaan

*Joshua 21:43-45 - So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. <sup>44</sup> The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. <sup>45</sup> Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.*

This summary statement at the end of the division of the land of Canaan is clearly the main message being communicated by this section. 680 years ago, God promised the land to Abraham. He continued promising to Isaac and Jacob, and now the promise has finally come to pass. The reason there are so many chapters given over to outlining the various territories is because this is a monumental moment in the life of ancient Israel. After being slaves in Egypt, wandering in the desert for 40 years, and years of battling against other nations, the Israelites can finally rest in their own land.

Now, we can also see from this section that clearly God's timeline is not like ours. He promised the land, and 680 years later He gives it to them. One main reason we have talked about is that He was giving the inhabitants of the land time to repent,

but they were unwilling, and so finally God used Israel as an instrument of judgment to drive the wicked nations. But God can be trusted, and in His timing, not ours, He will be true to His Word.

*Numbers 23:19 - God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*

## 2) The Israelites must take hold of God's promise by faith

This has been a recurring theme throughout Joshua. God makes specific promises, but unless the people take hold of them by faith, they will not receive the promise. Certainly, the greatest example was that the previous generation did not enter the promised land because of their lack of faith that God would be true to His Word. And this theme continues during the division of the land:

*Joshua 18:1-3 - The whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh and set up the Tent of Meeting there. The country was brought under their control, <sup>2</sup> but there were still seven Israelite tribes who had not yet received their inheritance. <sup>3</sup> So Joshua said to the Israelites: "How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you?"*

This is a great picture of God offering a gift, but like any gift, it must be received. It must be opened. In order for the tribes to receive their inheritance, they must actually go and take possession of the land. God can promise, but in order for the promise to be fulfilled, it must be received by faith. This is also instructive for us, for as Peter wrote:

*2 Peter 1:3-4 - His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*

This is not some sort of name it and claim it theology. This is simply a recognition that every promise of God requires an act of faith on our part in order to receive it. For example:

*John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes in him** shall not perish but have eternal life.*

**Matt 6:31-33** - *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

God has so many promises, but they are not received passively. They are activated by an act of faith: Believe in Him. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Hope in the Lord. Confess your sins. Love Him. Present your requests to God. Receive the promises of God through an act of faith.

### 3) The incomplete obedience of the Israelites in driving out the other nations will come back to bite them

This is another theme that shows up repeatedly in Joshua. For example:

**Joshua 17:14-18** - *The people of Joseph said to Joshua, "Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people and the LORD has blessed us abundantly." "If you are so numerous," Joshua answered, "and if the hill country of Ephraim is too small for you, go up into the forest and clear land for yourselves there in the land of the Perizzites and Rephaites." The people of Joseph replied, "The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots, both those in Beth Shan and its settlements and those in the Valley of Jezreel." But Joshua said to the house of Joseph-- to Ephraim and Manasseh-- "You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out."*

The author of Joshua presents two contrasting reality – the Israelites have settled in the whole land, but they also have not driven out all of the inhabitants. The problem was not their ethnicity; the problem was their idolatry and wicked practices. As long as the other nations stayed in the land, their idolatry and practices would be a thorn in the side of the Israelites, leading them away from God. And, in fact, this is what we see over and over throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

This is a reminder to us that sin is not to be trifled with. There is a reason that Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that if our eye causes us to sin, then gouge it out, and if our hand causes us to sin, then cut it off. He is not speaking literally, but is using non-

literal hyperbolic language to communicate the insidiousness, the gravity of sin, and how unless we destroy it, it will destroy us. Some of you need to hear that message today.

The fourth implication of the division of the Promised Land is one I want to look at in more detail today. In ancient Israel, there were 12 tribes in Israel, one belonging to each of the 12 sons of Jacob. One of his sons was Levi, and the descendants of Levi, the Levites, were the priestly tribe in Israel. The priests served in the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, offering sacrifices to God for the sins of the people and speaking for God to the people, and the Levites served in various other functions, such as packing up and moving the tabernacle, guarding it, and cleaning it. As it says in Deuteronomy 10:8-9:

*Deuteronomy 10:8-9 - At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister and to pronounce blessings in his name, as they still do today. <sup>9</sup> That is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as the LORD your God told them.)*

And as God gives Joshua instruction on dividing the Promised Land, this is what he says about the Levites, echoing Deuteronomy 10:9:

*Joshua 13:33 - But to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; the LORD, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them.*

Instead of giving the Levites a portion of the land, they were spread throughout all the other tribes, living in sections of those divisions, helping each tribe maintain faithfulness to God. They did not receive their own portion of the Promised Land, because the Lord was their inheritance. The Lord was their portion.

4) The Levites' portion is the Lord, pointing us to an inheritance greater than land

What does this mean and what is the significance of this statement for us today? First of all, this reality is significant for us today because:

1) We are all priests

Did you know that? This may be a paradigm shift for you, especially if you are from a Catholic background. Not only are we all saints, according to the New Testament, but we are also all priests.

*1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 - As you come to him, the living Stone-- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

In the Old Testament, there was a specific tribe of people who functioned as the priests and Levites. But on this side of the cross and the resurrection, we are all priests. Not priests by birth, because you are of the line of Levi, but rather priests chosen by God, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. **What does that mean?**

The Old Testament priests were mediators between God and the people, with two main functions. In one direction, they offered prayers and sacrifices to God for the people. Individuals did not approach God on their own to offer sacrifices; they had to go through the priests. And in the other direction, they proclaimed the Word of God to the people. They taught, they tutored, they made written copies of the law and explained it to the people. The people received God's words through the priests. The priests were the mediators, the middle-men, between God and the people.

But when Jesus died, everything changes. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The sacrificial system was fulfilled by Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. The way was made for every single believer to enter the presence of God through the one mediator, Jesus Christ.

*1 Timothy 2:3-6 - This is good, and pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup> For there is **one** God and **one mediator** between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who gave himself as a ransom for all men-- the testimony given in its proper time.*

There is one mediator, Jesus. There is no longer a need for a human mediator. Salvation does not come through a priest and the sacraments he administers. You

do not need to go through me to gain forgiveness or meet with God. You do not need to confess to a priest in order to be declared forgiven. We can all go directly to Jesus.

**Hebrews 4:14-16** - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

And we do not need the priest to speak God's words to us. We can go directly to His Word, as His Holy Spirit illuminates its meaning to us.

There is no human mediator the way there was in the Old Testament. Instead, this side of the cross and the resurrection, we are all priests. In the Godward direction, we can all intercede for others before God.

**James 5:16** - *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

And we can offer sacrifices to God – not the blood of bulls and goats, but our own lives, offered to God through acts of sacrificial love.

**Romans 12:1** - *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as **living sacrifices**, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.*

And in the other direction, we can declare God's words to others. We can be a part of bringing others to the throne of God.

**1 Peter 2:9-10** – *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

We can remind others of God's forgiveness that is over them. We can offer that priestly duty to others.

You are a priest. Just as the Levites were scattered among the territories in order to help the people of God stay faithful to God, you have been called to do the same. Part of your role as a believer is to help bring others before God through prayer, and to help bring God to others through declaring God's Word.

## 2) The Lord is your portion

Unlike the other tribes, the Levites were not given their own territory. They were scattered among the territories in order to help the people of God stay faithful to God. And they were told that they would not be given their own territory as their inheritance, for the Lord would be their inheritance, their portion. **Is this sad for you?** Do you think that they got the raw end of the deal, for they would not have a plot of land for their tribe? Or do you recognize that, while it may have been more challenging for the Levites this side of eternity, they were actually given the better deal? Do you resonate with the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 73, who said:

*Psalm 73:25-28 - Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup> But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.'*

What does it mean that God is our portion or inheritance?

To see God as our portion or inheritance is to see Him as our wealth, as our richest possession, so to speak. To see God as the one who sustains and satisfies us, as opposed to our material possessions. It is to desire and live for more of Him, not more stuff. It means believing that everything that belongs to God is ours because we are in Christ, and living as someone who knows that this is true wealth.

*Romans 8:16-17 - The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup> Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

*Galatians 4:4-7 - But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. <sup>6</sup> Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*

We are heirs of all that is His. Think of the inheritance we have received! We have a restored relationship with God. We have received His Holy Spirit. We have received eternal life. We have His promises. We have treasure in heaven. We have Him! His kingdom is ours!

*Matthew 25:34 - "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

*1 Peter 1:3-5 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

We have the kingdom. We have eternal life. We have true wealth, beyond anything this world can offer. Joy unspeakable, peace that passes understanding, love that never leaves, a full restoration of health, perfect community, and oneness with the divine, forever! The Levites did not have their own territory, but they received the best portion. In the same way, no matter what we may lose or miss out on here on earth, He is our portion, and in Him we find all that our heart truly needs.

*Lamentations 3:19-26 - I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. <sup>20</sup> I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. <sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

The Levites were not given land, because the Lord and their calling to minister to Him and to others was their portion, their inheritance. And that was greater than any piece of land could ever be. And we who are called to be a kingdom of priests walk in those footsteps today. Whether we are rich or poor, living in a mansion or a trailer, working at a job we love or hate, whatever our lot, we have the Lord, and He is our portion, and nothing else compares to Him. And He has called us to be a kingdom of priests, bringing others to the Lord and the Lord to the world.