

All Came to Pass

The eighty-fifth in a series: “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 21:41-45; Revelation 21:1-27

By [Kim Riddlebarger](#)

Although Joshua has grown a bit long in the tooth, there is still much for him to do. As Israel’s covenant mediator, Joshua must ensure that Israel’s armies capture those remaining portions of that land which God promised to his people and which were still not occupied by Israel. Also, Joshua must divide the land of promise (Canaan) among the twelve tribes of Israel. Finally, in order to fulfill God’s command given through Moses, Joshua must establish six so-called “cities of refuge” (providing mercy to anyone who accidentally takes another’s life) as well as forty-eight Levitical cities, where the priestly tribe, the Levites, can dwell in the midst of the people and graze their cattle. As these things are accomplished, we are witnessing God keep his promise to Israel. Even though this land was promised to them more than four hundred years earlier (back in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), at long last God’s people dwell in peace and safety in Canaan. As these things are accomplished, the central theme of the Book of Joshua becomes crystal clear—God’s promise to Israel has become a glorious reality. But as things once promised become realities, this also means that the era of Joshua’s leadership is coming to an end. It will not be long before Israel enters that period of biblical history known as the time of the Judges and the story of redemption will take yet another dramatic turn—this time for the worse.

As we continue our series on Joshua, we have come to the final chapters of this remarkable book. There are still a number of loose ends to be wrapped up before Joshua says “farewell” to his people in chapters 23-24. Now advanced in years, in chapters 13-21 Joshua is given instructions from the LORD that will ensure that the people of Israel will take possession of all the land God promised to them before Joshua dies. That land will be divided among the twelve tribes, as in these chapters, legal title of the land of Canaan passes from YHWH to the people of Israel as their promised inheritance to the Lord. Even though we have briefly surveyed these chapters which are, in effect, title deeds to the land, every line in these chapters is proof that God has kept his promise. The people of Israel are now dwelling in that same land promised to them so long ago. The Canaanites

have been evicted and the people of Israel are recipients of this wonderful gift from YHWH—legal title to the land of promise.

As we saw last time, Joshua ensured the capture of all the remaining land to the north and to the south, just beyond the boundary of those areas currently inhabited by the Canaanites. While in chapters 13-21, we have the legal record of Joshua dividing the land among the tribes of Israel in fulfillment of God's promise to his people, in chapter 20, we read of Joshua establishing the six "cities of refuge" which provided legal protection for anyone who accidentally took the life of another—in modern parlance this is known as manslaughter or negligent homicide. Since nothing in redemptive history is accidental, with the establishment of these six cities, we are pointed ahead to Jesus Christ—the great high priest. In the case of someone who commits manslaughter, they must flee to one of these cities of refuge and remain there until the death of the high priest. The symbolism here is obvious and powerful.

Clearly, the death of the high priest in a symbolic sense sets the man-slaughterer free. This points us ahead to the death of Jesus, who is both the great high priest and at the same time the divinely appointed once for all sacrifice for sin. That God provides for relief from sins such as manslaughter is a good thing and demonstrates that even though Israel was under the blessing-curse principle based upon the covenant God made them at Mount Sinai, the covenant of grace (first made with Abraham) was never annulled, and still remained in force, ensuring the salvation of believers within Israel. It was Jesus after all who said that anyone who was angry with his brother or sister was just as guilty of murder as the one who actually took life (Matthew 5:21-22). Therefore, as the death of the priest in one of the cities of refuge allows the manslaughterer to go free, so too the death of Jesus frees us from the guilt of our sins, including the hatred of our neighbor. With images like this found throughout the Book of Joshua, we are reminded that the Canaanites were not Israel's greatest enemy—sin and it wages are our greatest foe. And now, the greater Joshua (Jesus) has defeated both sin and death.

One more thing: That God's promise of land to Israel is not the reality (but merely foreshadows the reality) becomes clear when we observe how the New Testament (especially the Book of Hebrews) looks back on these events recorded in Joshua. Israel's possession of the land is not the ultimate inheritance for the people of God, as the land of Canaan points us ahead to our eternal inheritance in Christ, namely the riches of heaven. This, then, is the theme of our sermon. Israel dwells in the land of promise in anticipation of that greater rest and blessing in that better land that even now God is preparing for those who love him. The land of Canaan is intended to point us ahead to heavenly things yet to come, the final realization of those promises God made to Abraham. Canaan is the type of which heaven is the reality.

II. We pick up where we left off last time, as we turn to Joshua 21 and the account of the establishment of forty-eight Levitical cities.

Some historical background here is very important so as to understand what's going on in this chapter. Recall that the Levites were the priestly tribe of Israel, and as such, they were not given a specific section of land as an inheritance. In fact, as we read in Joshua 13:14, *"To the tribe of Levi alone Moses gave no inheritance. The offerings by fire to the LORD God of Israel are their inheritance, as he said to him."* This means that the Levites were to be scattered among the various tribes throughout Israel so as to serve as "salt and light" to the people of God. The Levites were to serve as teachers of the law and they will be the ones to conduct the sacrifices for sin. So, while the Levites were not given a specific chunk of land, they were given forty-eight cities scattered throughout Canaan in which to live.¹

This is spelled out in verses 1-3 of Joshua 21. *"Then the heads of the fathers houses of the Levites came to Eleazar the priest and to Joshua the son of Nun and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel. And they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, 'The LORD commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pasturelands for our livestock.' So by command of the LORD the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasturelands out of their inheritance."* In verses 4-40, we read of Joshua assigning these forty-eight cities to the descendants of Aaron and Levi. There are, however, a couple of things in this introductory section of this chapter of some importance to the subsequent redemptive drama and these are well worth noting.

First, the center of Israel's religious life was now Shiloh, not Gilgal. Once Israel had occupied the land, the tabernacle moves to a more central location. The tabernacle will remain in Shiloh for several centuries until the temple is built later on in Jerusalem. Note, that the text here emphasizes that Shiloh is "in Canaan." No doubt, this reinforces the idea that God has kept his promise to the Levites, and that they too would have an inheritance in the promised land "in Canaan" as they served in the tabernacle. The second thing worth noting is that the Levites are the last of the tribes to receive their inheritance.

Once they are given the forty-eight Levitical cities, all of Israel's twelve tribes possesses that which God had promised them. The Conquest is now over and Israel has received its inheritance (the land) promised to them (the blessing) under the terms of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Here, we see Israel's obedience to the covenant and it is clear that a strong sense of national unity was present. Sadly, this will be short-lived, and as we've noted before, this is really the high-water mark in redemptive-history for Israel. It is all downhill from here on out.

¹ Howard, Joshua, 387.

Since verses 4-40 of chapter 21 read like a deed or a will, we will skip over them this morning. But there are other biblical references to this passage which are helpful. In Numbers 35, there is a detailed account of the measurement for land surrounding the towns that would belong to the Levites. This tells us that many of these cities were very small hamlets with but a few houses. Since I Chronicles 6:54-81 repeats the list of cities found here in Joshua 21, this is a good indication that these cities and the Levitic priesthood played a very important role well into Israel's future history. However, the key point here is that the people of Israel voluntarily give up these cities from among their own portion of their inheritance to support the nation's priests. The people of God are returning to God a portion of that land which had been given to them, and so this is certainly part of the theological backdrop to the notion of tithes and offerings, wherein the people offer gifts back to the Lord out of that which he has so graciously provided to them.² We don't give to get (as the prosperity preachers tell us), we give out of gratitude from that which we have already received from the Lord.

Jumping ahead then to the end of the chapter, the establishment of these forty-eight Levitical cities throughout the land is summarized in verses 41-42. *"The cities of the Levites in the midst of the possession of the people of Israel were in all forty-eight cities with their pasturelands. These cities each had its pasturelands around it. So it was with all these cities."* The Levites are given these cities to establish homes and raise their families, as well as land upon which their cattle could graze—this was vital since the Levites were given no tract of land as their own and this enables them to influence all of Israel.

This entire section (chapters 13-21) comes to a close in verses 43-45, as Joshua gives us a brief but theologically loaded summation of this entire section regarding the distribution of the land among the twelve tribes, the establishment of the six cities of refuge, and the forty-eight levitical cities. He simply states, *"thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass."* This glorious summary is indeed what one commentator calls the "theological heart" of the entire Book of Joshua.³ These three verses tell us that everything which Israel was promised, has been fulfilled throughout the earlier chapters of this book. All of those unrealized expectations when the nation was still camped back at Moab (out in the wilderness), directly across the Jordan River from Jericho, have come to pass. Nothing of the land promise remains yet to be fulfilled. God has kept his part of the covenant, and so the only question that remains is, "will Israel do the same?"

² Hess, Joshua, 281.

³ Howard, Joshua, 397.

From a literary perspective verse 43 (which speaks of Israel settled in the land and living at peace) summarizes chapters 13-21. Verse 44 (which speaks of the Conquest and Israel's many battles with the Canaanites) summarizes chapters 1-12. In verse 45, Joshua sums it all up, yet again.⁴ Joshua's point in this summation is to direct God's people to reflect upon the glories of all those things that the people of Israel have seen and done, from that time when they were outside Canaan, looking across the Jordan River at the good land, flowing with milk and honey, to the present, when the people actually possess that which promised. This is the moment in Israel's history when the people actually begin to enjoy the fruit of those vines they did not plant, dwell in the homes and cities they did not build, and drink from the wells they did not dig. YHWH has done all of this for them. The land and its bounty is his gift to his people. The land is at peace and rest. No longer is a man like Caleb taking up arms against the Canaanites in the hope that one day he will possess the land. Now at age 85, some forty-five years after he scouted out this land for Moses, he's sitting in his rocking chair, on his porch, somewhere near Hebron, watching his sons raise their sons, watching his crops grow and his animals graze, and he lives on land to which he now has legal title. This is his gift from YHWH. It was like this for all of Israel.

The application would should take from this is a bit detailed, so I want to spend some time developing it.

This summary statement (specifically the statements in verses 43, "*God gave to Israel all the land*" and in verse 45, "*Not one word of the promise failed . . . all came to pass*") addresses a matter of great controversy dividing Reformed Christians from evangelicals. It has to do with eschatology and is the direct implication of God's promise regarding the promised land, which Joshua empathically says is now already fulfilled. As many of you know, our dispensational friends believe and teach that the land promise God made to Israel is an everlasting promise. Deny this, they say, and you are disobeying God, as well as laying the groundwork for anti-Semitism. This is why in dispensational circles, Israel's rebirth as a nation in 1948 is held out as the critical sign that God is ready to make good on the promise made to Israel back in the days of Abraham. In dispensational circles this is tied to the seven-year tribulation and the appearance of Antichrist. The return of Israel to Palestine in 1948 is supposedly then the fulfillment of the land promise God made to Abraham on behalf of Israel. They say that the generation living when Israel becomes a nation will be that generation which sees the return of Christ.

But there's a huge problem with the dispensational understanding of the land promise. According to Joshua, the land promise has already been fulfilled! "All came to pass!" The twelve tribes of Israel have already taken possession of the promised land. As we have seen, Joshua 13-21 is the account of legal title passing from YHWH to Israel. Not one word of God's promise was left unfulfilled,

⁴ Howard, Joshua, 397.

says Joshua. Indeed, at the time Joshua writes this book, Israel possesses the land. It is theirs. They have the deed because this is YHWH's land to give them.

Of course, the question remains, "will the people of Israel keep possession of land that is now theirs?" If you know anything about the rest of the story of redemption you know the answer to that question. "No," they didn't keep the land. Israel was eventually evicted from Canaan by YHWH because of Israel's repeated disobedience to God's commandments which invoked the curses of the same covenant which the people were obeying during the time of Joshua. Israel basked in covenant blessing under Joshua, but by the time of the Kings (several hundred years later, Israel was disobedient and apostate and came under the covenant curses, including being evicted from the land God had given them through the Conquest.

Just as Adam and Eve were cast from Eden after breaking the original covenant of works, Israel was cast from Canaan both at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, when the vast majority of Israelites were taken to Babylon, and then again after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. This time, the Jews were dispersed into the four corners of the earth, never to return to the land again, unless this is what is going on when Israel became a nation yet again in 1948. The question for us then, "is the formation of the modern nation of Israel a fulfillment of God's land promise to Abraham as dispensationalists teach?" According to Joshua 21:43-45, the answer to that question is "no." God's promise of the land to Israel was fulfilled to the letter during the Conquest and distribution of the land.

This raises the question of the modern nation of Israel, along with the question of how this helps us understand our own promised inheritance as Christians. To make sense of this as well as better understand the nature of the inheritance which we receive, we need to know something about the covenants upon which these promises are based. The problem is that people confuse the blessing/curse structure of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai with the gracious covenant God made with Abraham, which is entered through faith in God's promise to save sinners from their sins. We need to keep these two different covenants completely distinct, and not mix them together as one covenant.

Let's start with the covenant God makes with Abraham—called the covenant of grace. This covenant was first promised to Adam (in Genesis 3:15) and then ratified with Abraham (Genesis 12 and 15) who is the father of the faithful. Abraham's seed (Jesus Christ) will save all those, who like Abraham trust in the finished work of God's redeemer to save them from the guilt and power of sin. In other words, through this gracious covenant ratified with Abraham, God promises to save his people from their sins. After Christ comes, this is the same covenant (the "new covenant") now ratified in Christ's blood.

This explains why it was that when Abraham was promised the land of Canaan (a promise which was fulfilled during the time of Joshua) the New Testament reinterprets the land portion of that promise (which is said to be everlasting). In Hebrews 11:8-10, we read, *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise [i.e. Canaan], as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* The author of Hebrews commends Abraham because even though the land promise was something he could see with his eyes, by faith, Abraham knew that the land in Canaan pointed ahead to that heavenly city whose builder and architect is the Lord.

To put it simply, four hundred years earlier, Abraham saw that same land in which Israel now dwells at the time of Joshua. By faith, Abraham knew the land was but a faint picture of what awaits those who believe God’s promise to save them from their sins. This is why in Romans 4:13 when Paul is discussing Abraham as an example of someone whose sins are not counted against them because they trust in Christ, Paul can say that the promise God made to Abraham made him heir of the world, not just the title holder to the land of Canaan. In other words, under the terms of the covenant of grace first made with Abraham, God’s promise is extended from Canaan to the ends of the earth. The land promise isn’t revoked. Its transformed. Before the coming of Christ, the promise was of a land in Palestine. But with the coming of Christ, God’s people are now heirs of the whole world. In Christ (who is the “true Israel”), the boundaries of the “promised land” land are extended to the very ends of the earth. Christians fill the whole world, they come from every race and tongue under heaven, and one day we will dwell in the new heavens and earth of which Abraham foretold. Whatever Israel becoming a nation means in the providence of God, it is not the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (the covenant of grace). That covenant was fulfilled in Christ and extended to the ends of the earth. Those who enter this covenant through faith in Christ know what Abraham knew, that the land in Canaan is intended to point us to a heavenly city.

This covenant of grace is completely unlike that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, which is grounded in the works principle. Israel (as a nation) was promised blessings for obedience and threatened with curses for disobedience. At the time of Joshua (which is the highwater mark in Israel’s history), the people have obeyed the LORD. God fought for them against the Canaanites and cast them from the land. Israel was given the land at that time. They lived in peace and the land had rest from war. But should the people of Israel worship other Gods and sin against YHWH, they will come under the covenant curses and they will lose title to the land, and then be cast out. This is very important to keep in mind because Israel will be disobedient, and will be eventually evicted from the land, after a series of covenant lawsuits are brought against the nation by YHWH himself speaking through Israel’s prophets. Ironically, that eviction was carried

out by the Babylonians and again by the Romans—a reversal of Israel’s conquest of the Canaanites, as pagans now cast Israel from the land.

In order to keep the covenant God made with Abraham and then with Moses distinct, it may help to think of it this way. There were certainly Jews living at the time of Joshua who received national blessing under the terms of the covenant at Sinai. They enjoyed peace, fruitful land, lots of kids, big figs and grapes, but were not believers in the promise. Such people trusted in their own righteousness. When they died (perhaps, after a long, full life on earth), they did not enter heaven and they will face God’s eternal wrath because they did not trust in Christ. No doubt, there were also Israelites living at times of national disaster (when God was meting out covenant curses on the nation) and who may have watched their house burn, their sons killed, their daughters taken into slavery, but who nevertheless believed God’s promise to save sinners, and as they themselves were put to death by a Babylonian sword, entered eternal life. This person lived at a time when the nation was under God’s curse, and yet remains a child of Abraham and an heir to the heavenly city, just as Abraham was. Christ’s blood and righteousness has purchased this inheritance for them because they believed God would provide this salvation for them.

How does this impact our view of heaven and our inheritance? Simple. Those who don’t trust Christ will never see the heavenly inheritance. Canaan at the time of blessing is the best they can hope for. They will never enter that heavenly city prepared by God for those who trust his promise and which is described by John in Revelation 21, our New Testament lesson. Such a person who lives in Israel at a time of national blessing (like we see during the days of Joshua) may die rich, fat and happy, but then suffer eternal loss. But for those like Abraham, who know that Canaan is not all there is, through faith, they see God’s material blessings as but a faint picture of those unspeakable glories which lie ahead and which John describes in Revelation 21. They also understand that whatever suffering God sends them in this life, will give way to blessings beyond all human imagination. Canaan, (i.e. material blessing) during a time of blessing or curse, is not our ultimate inheritance. There is life that is truly life yet to come. This is what Abraham believed, and what John saw in his vision.

When Joshua and Caleb scouted out the good land that Israel now possesses, as recounted in Numbers 13:27, they told Moses that “*We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey.*” But contrast this with the vision that John is given when he scouts out the greater Canaan, that heavenly city, which Abraham and all those who have faith in Christ will one day receive as their inheritance:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the

dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." 9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel measurement. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. 22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb book of life.

Beloved, this is what awaits all those who trust in Jesus Christ. This is our land of Canaan. When Joshua says, "it all came to pass," this is where the eyes of faith take us—from Canaan, to the heavenly city.

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