

Group Study Outline

LAUNCH QUESTION

READ Joshua 21:43-45. (On a big sheet of paper) record everyone's first reactions to what these verses say. (Allow some time for this if you want to get beyond the 'ooh, it's wonderful, isn't it?' comment!)

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Let's be clear on the story so far.

Where are we in the storyline of the Joshua? (cf 19:51)

How does this fit with Gen 12:7?

What is God giving to his people in Joshua 20:1-9?

Why are these 6 cities an example of a generous God providing for his people?

What is God giving to his people in Joshua 21:1-42?

Why are these 48 cities an example of a generous God providing for his people?

FOCUS on 21:43-45

Re-READ Joshua 21:43-45

What has God given his people? (NB 'give', 'gave' or 'given' comes three times) How has he given these things (according to these verses)?

Read Joshua 1:13, 15; 11:23, 14:15; 1 Kings 2:46, 5:4; Matt 11:28

(perhaps get different people or pairs to look up different verses?)

What is the significance of the 'rest' that God has given here in Joshua 21:44?

READ Hebrews 4:8-10

Did God give rest to Joshua (and the people of Joshua 21), or not?

READ Hebrews 11:13-16

What does the person of faith believe about land given in this world?

The Levites had a role to be teachers to the people. What were they modeling to the people by not having any proper territory of land allocated to them?

What do you think is meant in Joshua 13:33; 14:2-3?

THINKING IT THROUGH

Use some of the things we've seen tonight to help each of the following:

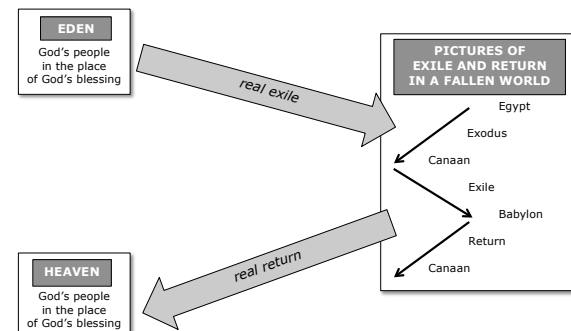
- Rob can't understand why God doesn't answer his prayers. Surely Joshua 21:43-45 teaches that God never withholds good things from his people.
- Heather can see that God promised this land to Israel, and that he kept that promise. But she wonders what God has promised her.
- Ben thinks that 'rest' would be something wonderful for his busy, busy life. But he goes home tonight wondering why God doesn't give him the rest he craves. Does God actually keep his promises?

Why should we thank God that Joshua 21:43-45 is true?

Joshua 20:1-21:45



The Big Story that the Bible tells is all about **exile** and **return**. Ever since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, we remain in **exile** from the place of God's blessing ... and that will never be recovered until we **return** to the new heaven and earth. The Bible gives us lots of pictures of mini-exiles and mini-returns, but they are not the real exile and return. So, it was awful for Israel to be far from their home, enslaved in Egypt, but it was never as bad as all humanity far from God and enslaved to sin. And similarly, although it was good when, at the end of the OT, Israel returned from their exile in Babylon, it never quite lived up to the hype promised (eg) in Isaiah 65:17f (since that is looking forward to a completely new heaven and earth).



That's why every believer is like Abraham (Heb 11:8-10, 13-16). Even when he was in the land, he didn't think that that land on earth was the full extent of the land God had promised him: he (and us) desire 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one' and we 'groan' now until we can return there (Rom 8:18-25).

Joshua at a glance

The book of Joshua tells the story of a significant 'mini-return': God had shown Abraham the land where his descendants could enjoy prosperity. Before that happened, they would have to go into Egypt to be slaves there for 400 years (Gen 15:13-16) until God rescued them to bring them back to this Promised Land. Joshua 21:43-45 sounds like the punch line of that story: *the Lord gave to Israel all the land ... rest on every side ... just as he had sworn to their fathers*. God always delivers on any promise he ever makes. (Of course, since we know that this land then is only a picture of all that God has truly promised to us in the heavenly Promised Land that still lies ahead, we are confident that he will keep that even bigger promise and take us there too.)

JOSHUA	
chapters	
1-5	crossing into the land
6-12	taking the land
13-22	dividing the land
23-24	keeping the land

Theme Sentence

God keeps every one of his promises: he'll do everything he's promised to do.

Application

- God is very generous: he promises to give ... and he keeps every promise.
- God will give to his people not just a land, but 'rest' in our heavenly home.

[NS]

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Commentary

19:51 is a clear signpost in the text: Joshua has just completed apportioning the territory in the Promised Land to the (ten-and-two-half-) tribes.

What remains are two bits of unfinished business from the instructions Moses gave in **Numbers 35**. So Joshua continues to follow his script, written for him by Moses, as instructed by God.

CHAPTER 20 / CITIES FOR REFUGE

Deut 19:5 gives an example of killing 'without intent or unknowingly'. To avoid one tragic death leading to another 'revenge killing' before due process, here is a place for 'the manslayer' to 'stand before the congregation for judgement' (6). So, don't misunderstand 'refuge': these cities are not a place to escape justice, but for true justice to trump the rule of the mob. (There's more info on 'cities of refuge' in Num 35:9-34; Deut 4:41-43; 19:1-13.)

Three cities have already been set aside east of Jordan (cf Deut 4:41-43). Now the remaining three 'inside' the land, to the west of Jordan, are identified.

Why does the death of the high priest change things (in 6)? Two possibilities:

- the death of the high priest signifies the end of a period where a temporary amnesty has been allowed;
- (more likely) Num 35:33-34 explains that when anyone is killed, their blood 'pollutes the land'. Such defiling is improper for the land 'in the midst of which I dwell'. There must be blood atonement. If it was intentional murder, then it's the murderer's blood that must be shed to atone for the defilement, but in the case of an unintentional killing, then the priests 'shall bear their iniquity' (Num 18:1, 23) and the blood/death of the 'chief sacerdotal functionary' achieves atonement.

If this second alternative is correct, we are taken straight to the Lord Jesus, the great High Priest whose death atones for all our sins.

CHAPTER 21 / CITIES FOR PRIESTS

The people of the tribe of Levi were the only grouping of the ten-and-two-half-tribes of Israel who weren't allocated an area of land as their inheritance. Why not? Because 'the Lord God of Israel is their inheritance' (13:33; 14:2-3), expressed in 'the offerings of fire to the Lord' (13:14). What does this mean? It was 'a continual reminder in the Israel of the spiritual values transcending the physical and the eternal eclipsing the temporal' (Jackman). The true believer knows that they are 'strangers and exiles on the earth ... seeking a homeland ... desiring a better country, that is, a heavenly one' (Heb 11:10-16). The Levites were a living example of holding very loosely to earthly ties.

Of course, they still need to live somewhere! So, like Caleb (in 14:6f), they come to claim what Moses had promised to them. And are given their 48 cities, with pasturage, by the other tribes. The larger the tribe, the larger the number of cities they donate (so the allocation is in proportion to the resources).

This ensures that the leaders of the nation's faith and worship (and specifically here in their role as 'teachers' cf Deut 33:10) are scattered through all the tribal territories of the land. The Levites had duties at Shiloh (where the tabernacle was kept), but only on a rota ... the rest of their time would be spent strengthening the spiritual life of the people in their own locality.

Their message is: 'the Lord is our portion/inheritance for ever' (Ps 73:26) and therefore 'our portion/inheritance in the land of the living' (Ps 142:5). And this is a lesson not just for the Levites, but for all God's people of all time.

CONCLUSION (21:43-45)

The two big themes of the book of Joshua are:

- God's promises
- the people's inheritance.

verse 43	summarises chapters 13-21
verse 44	summarises chapters 1-12
verse 45	summarises the whole

The conclusion in these three verses brings those two themes together, with a bookend that matches 1:6, for the Book of Joshua is all about the land God swore to give to their fathers.

This conclusion begins with a 'Thus ...' In other words, this bit of Joshua is telling us the way in which the Lord 'gave' Israel the land and rest in the land. How did it happen? He gave the land (43a). How? They took possession of it (43b). He gave them rest (44a). How? Their enemies were defeated (44b). Conclusion: he kept his promise to give them rest in the land (45).

'Rest' (44) is a huge Bible word! Its significance goes back to the seventh day (in Gen 2:1-3) where it means something like 'everything 'everything ordered as God intends it to be'. There was nothing more needing to be added to complete the completed, very good world that God had made. There are points in Israel's history where it feels as if Israel really has arrived at that intended goal. Here in Joshua, for example, where it marks off sections (cf 1:13, 15; 11:23, 14:15, etc). It recurs at the high point of the kingdom under Solomon (1 Kings 2:46, so 5:4). But truly this 'rest' is only to be found in the Lord Jesus (Matt 11:28), and only to be enjoyed fully in the new heaven and earth that we must 'strive to enter' (cf Heb 3:7-4:13). The key NT text to understand this is Hebrews 4:8-9. The rest that Joshua gave the people here in the land was not the true (ie ultimate, always-intended-since-Gen-3) 'Sabbath rest'.

This explains why Joshua can make it sound here as if it's all complete ... and yet also speak of much left still to be completed. Like Abraham (see intro above), he thought the land was wonderful, but he didn't think that that land was the full extent of the land God had promised him.

So, the future may turn out not to be as good for Israel as these optimistic verses suggest. The point here is that, if that does turn out to be the case, there's no deficiency in the Lord. Yes, there may be lots more land yet to possess (13:1 and cf Judges 1). But that does not negate how much they already do possess. Yes, there are still enemies to drive out (16:10; 17:12-13; 18:3). But that does not negate how much rest they already enjoy. Like Romans 11:33-36, this is a moment to revel in a generous God's good gifts (whilst still looking ahead to all-that-is-in-the-future that this anticipates).