

Joshua 13-19 is one of the classic “boring bits” of the Old Testament. The Jordan River isn’t parted; the walls of Jericho don’t fall down miraculously; the sun doesn’t stand still in the sky. It’s basically a list of Israel’s tribes with descriptions of the borders of their land allotments. If you were tempted to skip any part of Joshua, it would be this one.

So, how do we read and interpret the “boring bits” of the Bible? What I hope to do this morning is consider a few tips for interpreting Old Testament passages like this one so that we can understand their significance, not merely to Old Covenant Israel, but to us as followers of Jesus.

**A basic question to ask is, “What’s going on here?”** If you had to summarize Joshua 13-19 in just one sentence, what would you say? Here’s my answer: **The Lord gave the tribes of Israel their inheritance in the land.** How did I get there?

**First**, as mentioned, the entire passage deals with dividing the land among the Israelite tribes. **Second**, it is quite clear that it is *the Lord* who gives this inheritance. In our scripture reading, **verse 5 of chapter 14** says, **“The people of Israel did as the Lord commanded Moses; they allotted the land.”** Notice that word **“allotted.”** Each inheritance description opens with something like “The allotment of the people of...” or “The lot of...” “Allotted” reminds us that they cast lots to determine which tribe received which portion. Casting lots was a method that God authorized for Israel’s use to discover his decision in certain situations. Ultimately, it isn’t the Joshua or any human court giving out this land. It is the Lord. **Finally**, the passage repeatedly calls these allotments an “inheritance” (see 14:2).

So, I conclude: **The Lord gives the tribes of Israel their inheritance in the land.** As I meditate on that truth, something odd stands out to me. I wonder if you notice it too. It’s this: **They receive their inheritance from the Lord.**

**What is an inheritance?** In the time this occurred, an inheritance was essentially property that changed ownership when a parent died—usually that parent was the father and the new owner was the firstborn male (with other male descendents receiving lesser portions). So, in general, **inheritance is property that male descendants take ownership of upon the death of their father.**

The first readers of Joshua would have caught the significance immediately. The son(s) are not individuals, but a collective people—a nation, its tribes and their clans. And the father is the Lord—only he is not deceased, nor will he die! This inheritance-giving father is alive—eternally! He’s God!

**What implications does it have that the inheritance giver is still—and always will be—alive?** It would seem that, since the Lord does not die, he continues to be the true owner. He is giving it to his son (Israel), but it is still the Lord’s. Israel may possess it, but only on the Lord’s terms.

That idea certainly fits with the nature of the Old Covenant—the terms of the Lord’s relationship with Israel. The Law stated that they would possess and live in the land he gave them provided they kept covenant. If they obeyed the Lord according to the Law of Moses, they would be blessed with life in the land. But if they did not keep covenant, they would be cursed—even to the point of forfeiting their inheritance.

**So, what might be the message and application the author intended for the original readers?** Here’s one thing: **The Lord, who never dies, gave you this inheritance to possess. It is a gift (not a purchase), and the Lord still has authority over it. Therefore, you must love the Lord with your whole heart and obey him completely, if you wish to keep it.**

**So, how does this speak to us, as believers in Jesus Christ, participants in the New Covenant?** First, we’re reminded that **God is our Father who gives us our inheritance.** Jesus says in **Luke 12:32**, **“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”** Jesus tells his flock, *“God is your Father!”* Moreover, our Father *gives us* his kingdom.

**So, this might be our application:** You may be obsessed with accomplishments, wealth-building, or your reputation as a successful person. You’ve made achievement the sole focus of your life. Perhaps you are tempted to greed, selfishness, and safety. You don’t want to share, to help those in need, or to sacrifice your time and possessions for the good of others. What does Jesus say to us about our inheritance?

Don’t strive for what you should eat and what you should drink, and don’t be anxious. ...your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be provided for you. Don’t be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make money-bags for yourselves that won’t grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.<sup>1</sup>

The inheritance *your Father* gives you is “an inexhaustible treasure;” it can never be stolen or destroyed! You’re free to seek God’s kingdom (and not your own) because *your Father* delights to give it to you!

But that raises a question: **What about our sin?** We know in our hearts that we’re no different than the Israelites. The Word of God and our own consciences tell us that we all sin and fall short of God’s glory.<sup>2</sup> If Israel couldn’t keep the inheritance, what makes us think that we can? Hear what Paul says about our inheritance in **Ephesians 1**, **“In [Christ] we have also received an inheritance...In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the**

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:29-34 (CSB)

<sup>2</sup> Romans 3

**word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance...<sup>3</sup>**

**We receive our inheritance “in Christ.”** You see, Jesus is the perfect Israelite. He fulfilled the Law; he embodied what it commanded. He not only kept all of its commands in his life, he satisfied all of its curses in his death on the cross. This means the Law has no claim on him, no power over him. He’s done everything the Law said to do—and suffered the every curse it threatened for disobedience. The Law is silenced by Christ.

The good news is that we are “in Christ” when we “put our hope in Christ.” To be “in Christ” means to be united with him in such a way that what is true of Jesus becomes true of us. If he is righteous in God’s sight, then we are righteous. If he was cursed for our sin in God’s sight, then the curse we deserve is satisfied and removed.

Paul says that we were “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” when we believed the gospel. In fact, Paul says **“the Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession.”**

What does it mean that the Holy Spirit is part of our inheritance? (And remember what Jesus said about the indwelling of the Spirit, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and **we will come to him and make our home with him.**”) The first thing we inherit is God himself—Father, Son, and Spirit.

In **Galatians 3:14**, Paul actually refers to “the promised Spirit” as “the blessing of Abraham.” In Genesis, God promised that Abraham would be blessed with descendants and inherit the land. But where does Paul get the idea that this blessing, this inheritance would be “the Spirit?” *Where does Paul come up with the idea that we would inherit God?* I think he gets it from our passage. Look at **Joshua 14:4-5**, **“And no portion was given to the Levites in the land, but only cities to dwell in, with their pasturelands for their livestock and their substance.”** When they allotted *the land*, the Levites didn’t inherit any of it. Why not?

**Joshua 13:14** says, **“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.”** They don’t receive an inheritance (of land) because the burnt offerings to the Lord would be their inheritance. As Israel’s priestly class, the Levites would serve the Lord in the sanctuary. They would live off of the offerings given to the Lord. In other words, they would inherit a seat at the Lord’s table and dine in fellowship with him. **Joshua 13:33** takes it further, **“But to the tribe of Levi Moses gave no inheritance; the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance, just as he said to them.”** The priestly class of Israel would inherit God.

This shows us what priesthood is—it is to inherit God and fellowship at his table. And this is what God intended for all his people. In **Exodus 19:5-6**, the Lord told Israel: **Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured**

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:11-14 (CSB)

**possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”**

**“You shall be to me a kingdom of priests.”** That is the great promise of salvation and destiny of God’s people. And what do priests inherit? They inherit the Lord. This is good news for believers in Jesus! Listen to what they proclaim about Jesus in **Revelation 5:9-10**:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Those who are ransomed for God by the blood of Christ are made “a kingdom and priests to God.” In Christ, you and I are priests to God. We have inherited God himself and a place at his table. This is why the Apostle Paul can call the Holy Spirit the downpayment of our inheritance. Christ redeemed us so that we might inherit God and live with him! The present indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a foretaste of the day to come when we will sit at the banqueting table of our Lord and dwell with him forever.

**Now there’s an application!** If you mourn as one who is impoverished, thirsty, hungry, poor, insignificant, and are considered the scum of the earth because you believe in Jesus—blessed are you, for you shall inherit God! He will be yours as much as you are his. That almost sounds too good to be true. So you might be asking, How can I be sure I will receive this inheritance? Who gets this inheritance *for real*? This passage has something to say about that too.

Another question you can ask of long repetitive passages like ours is: **What unique things happen in this text? Or, Where is there an interruption in the pattern, and why is it there?** There are a few times in our text that the author interjects with narration, usually telling us about some special circumstance of inheritance.

For example, in **verses 6-12**, Caleb approaches Joshua and recounts how Moses sent him (along with Joshua and ten others) to spy out the land. His brothers—all except Joshua—brought back a report that “made the heart of the people melt” in fear. They said it was impossible to conquer this land . They did not believe the Lord’s promise. Caleb, on the other hand, “wholly followed the Lord [his] God.” In response to his faith, Moses swore that Caleb would receive the land he spied out. Now, forty-five years later, Caleb steps forward to claim it.

Caleb is now eighty-five years old, but his body is still as strong as when he was 40. But more importantly, Caleb’s *faith* is just as strong. He says, **“So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out**

**just as the LORD said.**” Caleb has such faith that the Lord will keep his promise to drive out the inhabitants of the land that he asks to be given the country where giants lived in reinforced cities.

What we see here (as we do with Joshua at the end of chapter 19) is that **Caleb received his inheritance on the basis of faith.** He was promised this land because he trusted God to keep his word. And now, still trusting that God will keep his word, Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite claims the land in faith.

Back up a second. Who was that again? “Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite.” Wait. He’s the son of a *Kenizzite*? That would mean he’s not an Israelite. He’s a Gentile. How is it that a Gentile has become a part of Israel and receives a share in their inheritance? We don’t know the full story of how Caleb’s father, a Kenizzite, became a part of Israel. But we do know this—Caleb trusted the Lord to keep his word. And by faith, this Gentile found inclusion and inheritance in Israel.

In **chapter 15**, we read how Caleb promises the hand of his daughter Achsah in marriage to whoever captures a particular city. His nephew, Othniel, does so and marries Achsah. Achsah urges him to ask her father for a field (an inheritance). For whatever reason, it is she that approaches her father and—she doesn’t ask—she tells him to give her a blessing. She insists on something more than land; he will give her springs of water also. Caleb does what she says. So, here we have a Gentile woman, not only included in Israel but inheriting land herself.

In **chapter 17**, we read about the daughters of Zelophehad—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. We first meet them in **Numbers 27**, in a rather startling scene. Their father died in the wilderness without any sons. So, they went together and stood before Moses and all the leaders of Israel. They told them that their father had no sons and that it was not right for his name to be forgotten simply because he only had girls. Then, they didn’t ask, they *exhorted* Moses and Israel’s leaders to give them a possession. Moses goes before the Lord who affirms the daughters’ command; they are to be given the inheritance of their father. The Lord goes on to state that their demand should become standard practice—“a statute and a rule.” It takes quite a bit of confidence (that is, faith) in the Lord’s sense of justice for a group of women to appear before all the assembled leadership of Israel and exhort them.

Now (as with Joshua) we meet them again in **Joshua 17**. At this point, they are married<sup>4</sup> but it is not their husbands who show up. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah approach Eleazar the priest, Joshua, and the leaders of Israel to remind them what the Lord commanded Moses—to give them an inheritance. They still had faith that the Lord would keep his promise given decades before. These five women received an inheritance alongside the men of Israel by faith.

So, instead of only Israelite men receiving an inheritance, we see a Gentile, five women, and a Gentile-woman receiving an inheritance. What’s going on here? This sort of thing

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<sup>4</sup> See Numbers 36

happens throughout the Old Testament. The Lord showing us that being one of his people is not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart. Paul puts it this way in **Galatians 3**:

...through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus. For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise.<sup>5</sup>

Inheritance is not a matter of being a free Jewish male sons. Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are not the categories of inheritance. There is only category that inherits the promise, and that is *Christ*. And through faith you become "sons of God in Christ Jesus." If you are a son of God in Christ Jesus, then you are an heir according to the promise.

**There's an application too!** No matter how much you feel like you don't measure up, you don't fall into the categories that the world honors and celebrates—or the categories the *church* celebrates and honors. God has no use for those categories. He has one Son, one heir, to whom he gives everything—Jesus Christ. And if you are in Christ, then you are a son of God and inherit as such.

So, trust in Jesus and not yourself! Inherit God by faith! That brings us to a final quick, simple, but very important point.

Another question we might ask of such texts is: **Where does this fit into the big story?** Here—no matter how boring this text might seem—the answer is quite exciting. It would have certainly have been a big deal for the Israelites. Many hundred years early, the Lord promised their Abraham to make his offspring a great nation and to give them this very land. Their parents heard this promise from their parents in Egypt. Their parents spoke of the promise to them as they traveled in the wilderness. And now, God's done it. God kept his word. And that right there is the main point—**the Lord keeps his promises**. In particular, **the Lord keeps his promises to those who believe**.

Do you desire an inheritance that is inexhaustible, incorruptable, eternal, and kept for you? Do you desire to fellowship with God and dine at his table? Do you want to have God's spirit, to have a perfect and imperishable body, to live in God's house, in a glorious city, on a new earth, where God has removed every bad thing, wiped every tear from your eye, and given you all the good you could ever imagine? That inheritance is yours when you trust in Jesus. God promises. And God always keeps his promises.

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:26-29 (CSB)