

“The Lord Gives Rest.”

The seventy-first in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 1:10-18; Hebrews 4:1-13

It is easy to imagine the excitement that raced through the camp, when the order was given to pack up in preparation to cross the Jordan River and enter the land of promise. The people of Israel waited forty long years for this day to come. In just three short days, they would be ready to cross the river and they would at last possess that bountiful land which God promised to give to his people as their covenant inheritance. The armies were to prepare for battle, the people would participate in a ceremony in which they acknowledged God’s choice of Joshua as their covenant leader, and then soon, they would be on the move. It was truly a great day in the history of Israel.

Last time we began a new series on the Book of Joshua. When we last took a break from our study of the unfolding drama of redemption “I will be your God and you will be my people,” we had completed the Book of Deuteronomy. We left off with the people of Israel camped on the plains of Moab, just to the east of Canaan. All that stood between Israel and the promised land was the Jordan River and the fortified city of Jericho. While Israel was camped in Moab, God renewed his covenant with Israel—our Book of Deuteronomy. But then Moses died and was succeeded by Joshua, a man chosen by God to lead the Israelites into the promised land and take possession of it—despite the presence of the Canaanites in the land, a group of tribes known for their great ferocity. The Book of Joshua is the account of this transitional period in Israel’s history, when the people of God entered the land, conquered the peoples living there, and then became a great nation, just as God had promised to Abraham.

As we began this series, we considered the geo-political situation on the eve of the conquest. Living in a land between the three great empires of the day (Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittites), the Canaanites were flourishing at this time and there was great prosperity throughout the land. Then we briefly reviewed the life of Joshua (Moses’ assistant), before we turned to the first nine verses of Joshua chapter one in which God renewed his promise to give Israel the land of Canaan. This was that promise God made first to Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob, a promise which was renewed to Moses (and Israel) when God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. Joshua is now the covenant mediator, but God’s covenant promise remains unchanged. The critical question is, will the people of Israel remain faithful to the terms of the covenant so as to receive this inheritance and become a light to the nations?

Before we turn to our passage, I’d like to do a bit more introduction to the Book as a whole. There are a number of important themes which appear multiple times in this book, and it might be useful to identify them at the beginning of this series.

As we saw last time, the main theme of Joshua is the possession of the land. The original promise of a land for God’s people was given to Abraham in Genesis 12:7, and is restated in more detail in Genesis 13:14-17: “*The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.’*”

This promise was re-affirmed to Moses in Exodus 3:8, while the Israelites were still in Egypt. “*I have*

come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” In a sense then, the Book of Exodus marks the beginning of the move from Egypt toward the land of promise, while the Book of Numbers is an account of the continuation of that journey.¹ While many in that first generation who left Egypt had died in the wilderness, there were perhaps some in the household of Joshua or Caleb, who were around when Moses promised the people that God would take them to a land flowing with milk and honey right before they left Egypt. But there is no doubt that every Israelite—man, woman and child—even those among that generation which was born and raised in the wilderness, knew this promise by heart and lived every day and walked every mile in light of it.

Another key theme in Joshua is the fact that God has repeatedly demonstrated to Israel his great faithfulness in keeping his promises. Because God has promised his people a particular land, the people were not just wandering around aimlessly through the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula (although it may have seemed that way at times). No, God was directing them to that good land he would give them. His people would arrive at just the perfect time, so that Israel would indeed be in the best position to receive that which God was giving them. God repeatedly reaffirms his promise to do this, and then as the Book of Joshua unfolds, God fulfills his promise. This is what makes disobedience to God’s commandments and doubting his word such serious sins. It wasn’t like God was absent from his people, and it wasn’t like he had not made good on his promises. Even though the people of Israel will walk many miles and even though it will take them many years, as they head out from Egypt and wander through the Sinai, they have every reason to believe that God will do as he has promised.

Another theme we will see again and again is covenant—the context in which all of this takes place. By covenant we don’t mean that there is only one covenant, but that God is the covenant maker and that he relates to his people and deals with them by means of covenants. In Eden (just as soon as Adam falls into sin) and then again with Abraham when God calls him to leave his home and go to a land far away, God promised that he would redeem his people from their sins by sending them a Savior—Jesus Christ. This is the covenant of grace. Its chief requirement is faith in the promise (that is, trust that God will provide a means to save us from our sins). In fact, God even grants to us the faith to believe the promise.

But God also made a national covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. The way in which this particular covenant is administered is part of that covenant of grace God made with Abraham—God provides a priesthood, animal sacrifice and a tabernacle, to provide for the forgiveness of sin and all pointing ahead to the coming of Christ—this particular covenant is based upon the so-called “works principle.” God will bless those who obey him. He will curse those who disobey him. This blessing-curse motif will appear throughout the Book of Joshua as it is tied to the covenant at Sinai. There are covenant renewal ceremonies, and there is the ark of the covenant, which is the symbol of God’s presence with his people. The Book of Joshua is packed with covenant themes and language.

There are other theological themes in Joshua as well, such as the stress upon Israel’s holiness before the Lord—the response of his covenant servants to his presence and promise. There is the theme of rest, to which we will turn this morning. And there is Joshua’s leadership of the people throughout the time of conquest. It is interesting to note, that Joshua does not name a successor at the end of the book, as Israel enters the period of the Judges, a time when Israel does not have a king and the people begin to do those

¹ Howard, Joshua, 56-57.

things which seem right in their own eyes. We will discuss all of these things in some detail as we proceed.

One more thing we need to do this time, is undertake a quick review of the ground we covered last time, because this sets the stage for our text.

As we saw in verses 2-5, we find what amounts to a summary of the entire book. *“Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”*

The first thing we find here is that God has chosen Joshua to replace Moses as covenant mediator—Joshua will now lead the people Israel into the land. Second, God will give Israel that land currently inhabited by the Canaanites, precisely because the land where the Canaanites live is God’s land to give Israel. As I mentioned last time, the various tribes who occupy the promised land (the Canaanites) are squatters and interlopers, living in that land God had promised to give to Israel. This is important to keep in mind because God will soon order their complete and total destruction and this is, in part, the reason why. Third, the boundaries of the promised land are same as those recounted earlier in Genesis and Numbers—from Lebanon on the north, to the Euphrates on the East, to Gaza on the south, to the Mediterranean Sea on the west. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for our study of redemptive history, God promises that he will be with Joshua (and all of Israel), and therefore, the Canaanites—no matter how fierce—will be no match for the power of God. This is why Joshua is to be strong and courageous, because God is with him and will never leave him nor forsake him. Israel could never take this land in their own strength, but God will indeed give to them the victory.

As we turn to our text (verses 10-18), the account shifts from promise to action. The time has come. The people are to get ready to move. It’s time to break camp and get ready to march.

Once the covenant promise had been reaffirmed, in verses 10-11 we learn that *“Joshua commanded the officers of the people, ‘Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people, ‘Prepare your provisions, for within three days you are to pass over this Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.’”* The reference to “officers” here does not refer to military rank, but to a group of men who are administrative officials and who were widely respected among the people. They are among those described in Numbers 11:16-17 as men who possessed the Spirit of God. *“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.’”* In this case, the presence of the Spirit refers to a supernatural gift of wisdom so that these men could rule and govern the people effectively.² This is in the backdrop of the New Testament’s teaching about Godly and wise men ruling Christ’s church—men

² B. B. Warfield, “The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,” in Biblical and Theological Studies (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1968), 139.

who are likewise supernaturally equipped by the Spirit to serve and fulfill their respective callings.

These officers serve an important governmental/administrative function within Israel. While the priests served a distinctly religious function in connection with tabernacle and the animal sacrifices, these officers served a secular, administrative function among the people. They would be the ones to give the exciting news to the people that the day they had waited for had finally come. They would be the ones to make sure the people were ready to march, and that the army (about 40,000 men according to Joshua 4:13), would be in position to protect the people from an unexpected attack once they set out.

Joshua instructs these officers to go through the camp and get the people ready to march. Given the large number of people, children, animals and possessions, this was a major undertaking—especially given the fact that they have been camped at Moab for some time. The people of Israel had broken camp many times before. They were used to doing this and they knew what to do. But this time it must have been vastly different. They were not breaking camp only to wander further into the wilderness, seemingly without end. This time, they were breaking camp with the goal of finally entering that land so as to receive that which God had promised them so long ago. Everyone must have been very excited.

The command given to the people was very specific. The people were to get everything ready—specifically, they were to ensure that they had sufficient provisions to cross the river and survive for a time before enjoying the bounty which God had promised them. According to the command, Israel is to go into the land (led by Joshua, who was to demonstrate strength and courage) so as to receive that which God has promised. Once again, the stress falls upon the fact that the land is God’s gift to give.³ Furthermore, these commands are tied to works principle of covenant blessing and covenant curse. If obedient to the will of God, Israel will receive the promised blessing. And so in this context, the three days of preparation to enter the land amounted to an act of worship and a step of faith. Joshua has given the command, the officers have alerted the people and now Israel, as a unified people and nation, will go to march together and then cross over the river.

In verses 12-13, Joshua now gives specific instructions to three tribes: Reuben, Gad and a portion of the tribe of Manasseh. *“And to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, ‘Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, ‘The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.’”* The reason for this instruction is found back in Numbers 32 and Deuteronomy 3:12-20, where Moses had given these two and a half tribes the promise that they would possess that land lying to the east of the Jordan (land not in Canaan). This is the land in Moab where Israel was currently camped. Joshua’s action was important for the future and unity of Israel. Although these two and a half tribes would not possess that part of the promised land lying to the west of the Jordan River—nevertheless they would cross over with the rest of Israel and help them conquer the land. This was a sign that the people of Israel were unified—even though the nation was composed of twelve distinct tribes. In fact, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh had agreed to do this back in Numbers 32:25-27, and as we will see in Joshua 22, they did indeed keep their word and will be rewarded accordingly.⁴

Part of Israel’s preparation was to make sure that as the people marched, they formed what we might call

³ Hess, Joshua, 76.

⁴ See the discussions in: Hess, Joshua, 76; Howard, Joshua, 92.

a “battle array.”⁵ This means that scouts and skirmishers were well ahead of the main body of the people, with the army marching in such a way as to be able to respond to a surprise attack on either flank. The Israelites would be especially vulnerable while on the move. This command is spelled out in verse 14. *“Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan, but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and shall help them.”* These “men of valor,” were the best soldiers and would serve as the point of the spear.

The reason for this particular command to the two and a half tribes was stated in verse 12, and spelled out again in verse 15 in the context of Israel’s conquest of the land—*“until the LORD gives rest to your brothers as he has to you, and they also take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. Then you shall return to the land of your possession and shall possess it, the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you beyond the Jordan toward the sunrise.”* All of the great covenant themes are mentioned here, the possession of the land, the fact that it is a gift of God, and that Israel must obey and respond to God’s command given through Joshua and the officers of the people.

Something else is introduced here for the first time—the theme of rest. Sabbath rest is the goal of the creation itself (according to Genesis 1:1-2:3), as well as part of the revealed will of God (in the fourth commandment and Israel’s celebration of the Sabbath—Exodus 20:8-11). The idea of “rest” is also tied to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt as stated in Deuteronomy 5:20—*“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”* In Joshua, the idea of rest appears again, this time in reference to the people’s entrance into the land.

Throughout the Book of Joshua, a time of rest for the people of Israel follows deliverance from their enemies (Joshua 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). Later on in Israel’s history, the idea of rest (in this same sense of being delivered from enemies) will point ahead to a time in the future (in the messianic age), when God’s people would dwell safely in the land, finally delivered from all their enemies so that the people can live in peace (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4).⁶ At this point in redemptive history, it was Israel’s defeat of the Canaanites which would secure the promised rest. Israel has already escaped from the armies of Pharaoh and they have defeated the Amalekites. Now the tribes of Canaan are added to the list. It is victory which secures the time of rest. This same pattern is found in the New Testament, when Jesus secures rest for the people of God, by conquering our greatest enemy, the guilt and power of sin.

Therefore, as Israel seeks to enter the land, victory over their enemies will allow them to stop and put down roots. Remember, these people were slaves in Egypt, under the cruel tyranny of their Egyptian masters. For the last forty years they have wandered through the desert. They have no homes. They are nomads. Rest meant coming to that land which God have given them, building a home, establishing a family, cultivating the land and raising a large number of animals, and enjoying what we might call a normal life. While all of these things involve a great deal of manual labor, it was rest in the sense that the people could live in peace, without wandering, without fear of attack. They would work for six days, rest on the seventh, and enjoy the blessings of God. This was rest. And this kind of rest following a victory, pointed the people of God ahead to that kind of rest described in Hebrews 4 (our New Testament lesson), where we rest from our works, because Christ has defeated sin, and death and the grave.

⁵ Howard, Joshua, 93.

⁶ Hess, Joshua, 78.

Upon hearing this command from the officers of the people, we read of their response in Joshua 1:16-18. *“And they answered Joshua, ‘All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you, as he was with Moses! Whoever rebels against your commandment and disobeys your words, whatever you command him, shall be put to death. Only be strong and courageous.’”* These words echo the response of Israel after hearing the commandments of God read to them by Moses as recounted in Exodus 24:7—*“Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’”*

Just as the people obeyed Moses, so now they will obey Joshua. In fact, there are a number of scholars who believe that this section of Joshua amounts to a formal ceremony of sorts in which the loyalty of the people was transferred from Moses to Joshua, in a sense acknowledging the Lord’s choice of Joshua to lead them.⁷ This not only involved the two and a half tribes who would fight for land they would not inherit, but may have extended to all twelve of Israel’s tribes. God had appointed Joshua, and the people of God have accepted Joshua as their leader. The Israelites are swearing their loyalty to Joshua to the point that should any one rebel against him (as did the people back at Kadesh Barnea—Deuteronomy 9:23), they shall be put to death. In many ways, this is what is going on when we elect and install new officers in the church—except for the stoning to death part about disobeying them. God chooses those who lead his church, and in our ordination service—which has roots going back to ceremonies like we see here in Joshua—the people of God ratify and affirm their loyalty to those whom God has called to lead.

It won’t be long before the people of Israel pack up, cross the river and possess the land. They will enter that rest which God has promised them. But what the Israelites don’t understand is that their rest in Canaan is intended to point the people of ahead to that rest granted us by Jesus Christ.

As we saw in our New Testament lesson, the author of Hebrews reminds us that *“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”* Israel’s rest in the land of Canaan, while real, was not that rest which God had ultimately promised to his people. That rest is found only in Jesus Christ (the greater Joshua), who has done those works and achieved the great victory—in his doing and in his dying—which allows us to rest from our labors.

In fact, that rest won for us by Jesus will one day be realized when we cross over—not the Jordan River—but into the presence of God. There at last, in the true promised land which is glorious beyond measure (because of the presence of God in all his glory) we will be forever safe from all our enemies. Jesus Christ has won the final victory for us, defeating sin and conquering death and the grave in his cross and resurrection. This is why we are exhorted to strive to enter that rest through faith in Christ and then to live our lives in light of that glorious day when all the struggles of life finally give way to the ultimate Sabbath rest in the presence of our God. The Lord promises rest to his weary people. That rest comes through faith in Jesus Christ. When Joshua leads Israel into Canaan and they are victorious over the Canaanites so they can rest, Joshua is actually pointing us to Jesus Christ, in whom we find that true Sabbath rest which God has promised to his people. For Jesus has won the victory. As he himself promises us, *“come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* For he is our Sabbath rest and he is the fulfillment of everything God promised to Israel on the plains of Moab.

⁷ Hess, Joshua, 79.