

Land for the Remaining Seven Tribes

Joshua 18:1–10
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This evening’s text records the distribution of land among the last seven tribes of the children of Israel. He carefully explained how it was done.

God’s Presence

But before we consider this, we need to see an even more important change that had taken place. Verse 1 says that *the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there.*

The congregation had moved. From the time the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, they stayed at Gilgal, which was fairly close to Jericho. Gilgal was their military command center, their base of operations. But our text says they had relocated to Shiloh, which was about fifteen miles northwest of Jericho in Ephraim’s territory. This is where the tabernacle would remain for almost four hundred years until the city was eventually destroyed. With the tabernacle there, Shiloh became the center of Jewish religious life. Moses wrote, *But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come.*

The congregation’s relocation to Shiloh shows they were starting to settle in the land God had given them, thus transitioning to a new life. But it’s a lot more than a simple geographical change. It was also a spiritual change. Note that verse 1 also mentions setting up *the tabernacle of the congregation*, i.e., the tent of meeting. This is the very first time this appears in the book of Joshua, and again it’s the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to dwell among his people. Leviticus 26:11–12 says, *And I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people.*

Now, the tent of meeting is an interesting feature in the Exodus narrative. Two large sections of Exodus focus on the tabernacle: several chapters give detailed instructions about how to make it (chs. 25–31), and several more chapters describe its actual construction (chs. 35–40). Between these two groups of chapters, the tent of meeting just appears with no background in chapter 33. We don’t know where it came from or why it was made. But it became very important. After the Israelites worshiped the golden calf, Moses pitched this tent outside the camp — far away from it —

to show that God had turned his back on his people. And whenever Moses would go out to the tent to talk to God, the people stood up and watched as he went in, waiting to see what would happen. They saw the cloudy pillar descend and stand at the door.

There Moses pleaded for the people as their intercessor. Verse 11 says that God spoke with him *face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend*. Yet, a few verses later, God refused to let Moses see his face (v. 20). The tent of meeting was a place where God both revealed and hid himself. He revealed his grace and glory to Moses, but allowed him to see only his back parts. Though distant, God was still with his people and could be consulted through a mediator.

From this account, it's clear that the tent of meeting wasn't originally the same structure as the tabernacle. When these things took place in Exodus 33, the tabernacle hadn't been built yet. And when it was built, it was placed in the middle of the camp, not outside it. And it was where God met with Moses, and not where the Israelites brought sacrifices. But at some point the tent of meeting seems to have merged with the tabernacle so that one tent served both functions: it was a place of sacrifice and a place where God met with his people through an intercessor. When did this change take place? Some say that it was as soon as the tabernacle was completed, and others claim it was many years later, but it definitely ended with Solomon's temple because 1 Kings 8:4 says that the tabernacle of the congregation — the tent of meeting — was placed inside the temple.

For our purposes today, two things stand out about this.

First, throughout most of the Old Testament, a variety of terms were used interchangeably to describe the tabernacle. The term used tells us what the writer wanted to emphasize. Joshua clearly wanted to emphasize the fact that God was with his people, so he called it the tent of meeting. The tent of meeting was especially dear to him since Moses stationed him there. Exodus 33:11 says that *Joshua, the son of Nun, departed not out of the tabernacle*. In fact, Joshua doubly emphasized God's presence in this evening's text — first with his reference to the tent of meeting in verse 1, and again in verse 10 where he cast lots before the face of God (לִפְנֵי יְהוָה), i.e., in God's presence. Thus, God's presence among his people brackets the entire passage. Based on this, some commentators argue that tonight's passage is the focal point of the distribution of all the land in chapters 13 through 19.

And second, although the tent of meeting partly revealed and partly concealed God's presence, in the New Testament Jesus fully disclosed him, something Moses could never have done. John 1:18 says, *No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him*. His revelation of the Father was so complete that he once said to his disciples, *He that hath seen me hath seen the Father* (John 14:9). And the apostle Paul, reflecting on Moses and the tent of meeting, added, *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,*

hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Thus, the final distribution of land took place explicitly in the context of God dwelling among his people. He was available to them. He announced to them his sovereign will. And this resulted, according to the end of verse 1, in the people being able to survey the land to see what God had given them.

The Seven Tribes and Their Land

Following this, verse 2 says that *there remained among the children of Israel seven tribes, which had not yet received their inheritance*. Joshua's question to them in the next verse seems rather harsh given that God hadn't yet commanded them to take their land, but I doubt that this is what he intended. He was simply reminding them that the land was contractually theirs already, and that the only thing for them to do was take it. Note the past tense of Joshua's question: *the land, which the LORD God of your fathers hath given you*. The land was theirs from the very beginning. In the third verse of the first chapter of Joshua, God said, *Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses*. God's will for the land has never been in doubt.

But if the seven tribes were to receive their inheritance, they had to lay hold of it, just as the other tribes had done. To accomplish this, Joshua had the people choose from among each tribe three men, who would go through the land and describe what they saw. Only then would the land be divided into seven parts.

The work that these twenty-one surveyors did was extremely important. We see it in two ways. First, in the repetition of Joshua's instructions. Verse 4 says that they were to *go through the land, and describe it*. Verse 6 says the same thing: *Ye shall therefore describe the land into seven parts*. And Joshua mentioned it again in verse 8, saying, *Go and walk through the land, and describe it*. And finally, verse 9 records that the men did exactly what Joshua said: *they went and passed through the land, and described it by cities into seven parts*. When the Lord says something four times in the space of five verses, he's telling us to pay attention. And second, Joshua emphasized the importance of their work by requiring them to make a written account of their survey. The verb translated *describe* in the four verses that I just mentioned literally means to write. That's how the KJV translates it two hundred and eleven times. It uses other words only eleven times: *describe* (seven times), *subscribe* (four times) and *record* (once). Thus, the surveyors went through the land and returned to Joshua with a written report of all the cities, etc., according to its seven divisions. Based on this, there

should have been no question that the land would be distributed equitably. Later generations could also refer to it.

The last verse of this evening's text tells us that all the land had been divided among the children of Israel. Verses 5 through 7 describe previous allotments: Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh in verse 5; and the three tribes east of the Jordan in verse 7. Verse 7 also reminded the Levites that they had no inheritance because the priesthood was their inheritance. The other seven tribes also received their land.

Following this evening's text, we have a chapter and a half describing what the seven tribes received. From 18:11 through 19:48, we have the report that the surveyors gave Joshua. Here are its main provisions:

Benjamin (ch. 18:11–28). Benjamin was a small tribe and received land between Ephraim and Judah along the Jordan River. Its territory included some important cities, viz., Jericho, Ai, Bethel and Gibeon. The fact that Benjamin butted up against Judah became important later when the nation divided into two kingdoms. Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom, which preserved the true worship of God for a time.

Simeon (ch. 19:1–9). Next came Simeon. You might remember that Simeon and Levi led the slaughter of the Shechemites, for which Jacob later prophesied that they would have no land of their own. Yet God was gracious to them. He allowed Simeon to live within certain cities in the land of Judah, thus they had no boundaries. But the cities they received were mostly in the south, which meant they were the first line of defense against the Edomites. Levi, as we already mentioned, inherited the priesthood and thus received cities throughout the other tribes.

Zebulun (ch. 19:10–16). Zebulun and three other small tribes received land in the north. Zebulun lay in the western part of lower Galilee, just east of Mount Carmel.

Issachar (ch. 19:17–23). Issachar was Zebulun's brother — both were sons of Leah, Jacob's first wife. His territory lay next to Zebulun's.

Asher (ch. 19:24–31). Asher's land, which ran up the Mediterranean coast from Mount Carmel, was exceptionally fertile. However, it also exposed this tribe to the pagan influences of Tyre and Sidon. In fact, Solomon gave part of it to King Hiram (1 Kgs. 9:11–13).

Naphtali (ch. 19:32–39). Naphtali was next to Asher but more inland. Later in the New Testament, several important cities had been founded there, viz., Capernaum, Cana and Bethsaida. Isaiah 9 prophesied that Zebulun and Naphtali would be blessed with the light of the gospel. The Bible tells us that Jesus conducted a lot of his ministry there.

Dan (ch. 19:40–48). Dan was the last of the seven tribes to receive land. Its land lay between the Mediterranean Sea and Jerusalem, and included the major Philistine settlements, which explains why chapter 19 says that it had trouble taking possession of its land.

If you want more information about these tribes, I would refer you to A.W. Pink's commentary, *Gleanings in Joshua*. He goes into much greater detail concerning them and recounts both their earlier and subsequent history..

All of this reminds us, again, that there's more to God's promises than we realize. If the Lord had only wanted to give his people land, why didn't he have them stay in Egypt and bless them there with Egypt's wealth? Hebrews says, *And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned* (ch. 11:15). But it wasn't just about land. The Lord chose to plant his people specifically in a land that he would give them, a land that he would bless, which they would also use in his service. Hebrews continues, *But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city* (v. 16). In the Old Testament, the land that Joshua distributed anticipated the reign of Jesus Christ. Today, it testifies to his reign throughout the entire world.

I'll end this evening with the last paragraph of James Boice's sermon on the division of land. He had just one sermon on this topic, covering most of chapters 13 through 19. Here's how he concluded it:

Although there is land for every Christian to possess, each must be possessed by Christ before he or she can possess it, for it is by his strength and not by our own that we can do anything. The kingdoms of this world are our inheritance, for they are Christ's, and Christ is ours. But we are Christ's inheritance—he spoke of us to the Father as “those whom you gave me”—and we must be fully possessed by him if we are to enter into all that Christ has for us.

To that, we can only add a resounding Amen. Amen.