

p 7 WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

Getting Acquainted

An obscure, landless people invade a land with fortified cities, trained armies, and powerful kings? This is exactly what Israel did—with great success!—under Joshua’s leadership. Joshua is a fascinating narrative, but it is not easy to read, and its significance for the Christian can be difficult to grasp. There are familiar lines in this book, including God’s famous command to Joshua (“Be strong and courageous”; 1:9) and Joshua’s covenantal vow (“As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD”; 24:15). While these verses have meaning for Christians today, as we will see later their immediate context is very different from our own: Joshua is the leader of a nation commanded by God to invade the ancient land of Canaan and kill all of its inhabitants. It can be difficult to understand why this kind of story is in the Bible—for the questions it raises and for the obscurity of its ancient history.

For many, the Bible presents enigmatic challenges, especially in the narrative portions of the Old Testament, like Joshua. Nevertheless, according to God’s wisdom, this book *is* in the Bible and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (see 2 Tim. 3:16). As we will see, Joshua is as marvelous as it is at first mysterious. Joshua will teach us about the unfailing promises of God springing from his unfailing faithfulness. It will teach us about the justice of God against sin and the great mercy of God toward sinners.

p 8 In fact, you might be surprised to learn that this is a book about heaven and hell, sin and salvation; it is about Jesus—and it is about you, the twenty-first-century reader. What Israel ultimately needs is something much greater than a plot of land on which to live. Joshua and the people will settle the land, but they will also die there because of sin’s curse. What they need is a cross and a new creation. And while the story of Joshua doesn’t get us all the way there, it makes us long for that eschatological reality. It makes us long with great expectation for this cross and for a city whose maker and builder is God, for a heavenly city, for a new creation in which everything is right and everything is at rest.

It will take some work to follow the Bible’s lead in making these connections, but we will make them before we’re done, and the journey will be worth it. As we read and study together, may we rejoice in a fuller vision of the kind of Savior Christ is, the kind of people Christ saves, and the kind of salvation Christ brings.

Placing It in the Larger Story

Central to the book of Joshua is God’s promise of land. The very structure of the story makes this clear, as seen in the outline provided below. Though often in a more subtle fashion, this theme

stretches from the first page of the Bible to the last. The promise of the land of Canaan has its origin in God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). God called Abraham from among the nations and gave him several promises, including land, a nation, and blessing to the rest of the nations through him. The story of Joshua develops each of these promises, but its focus and emphasis is clearly on God's promise of land.

Frequently in Joshua we'll see references to the promises given to Abraham and his offspring. And yet God's promise of land has a certain broader context. The land theme goes further back than Abraham. God made Adam in his image and placed him in Eden. Adam and his race were to multiply and fill the earth, exercising dominion over it. But that didn't happen. Instead, Adam turned from trusting God. As promised, God cursed Adam with death and sent the first human pair outside the garden. This is where the story of land begins. The entire salvation story of the Bible is a response to what happened in Eden. When God promised Abraham a place of blessing, he essentially promised him what was lost in the fall—a place for the enjoyment of God's presence, a return to Eden. This is why the land of promise is regularly referred to as “like the garden of Eden” (Gen. 13:10; Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 36:35; Joel 2:3).

Orbiting around the theme of land in Joshua are numerous other themes crucial to the Bible's salvation story:

- **p 9** In the land, God's people will experience *rest*.
- The land is a gift from God *promised* to his people.
- God's *covenants* with Abraham and Moses provide the context for the story of Israel inheriting the land.
- *Obedience* is required for entrance into the blessing of the land, even as *disobedience* will lead to cursing and failure to take the land.
- The Lord *judges* the Canaanite inhabitants in the land by means of his people.
- The Lord fights for his people as the *Divine Warrior* to judge and drive out the inhabitants of the land.
- The land is never fully obtained, evidencing a *tension in the storyline* leading us to Christ by showing our need for a new covenant with a fully obedient covenant mediator.

The book of Joshua is a story of salvation within the Bible's larger story of salvation through Christ, and each of these themes has a part to play in pulling the story along. Indeed, Jesus will come as a new Joshua to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Through the story of Joshua, God is advancing his promise to bless his people with rest in the land. He will do this through his man Joshua, as Joshua and the people entrust themselves to the Lord with full obedience to his Word.

Key Verse

“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.” (Josh. 21:43)

Date and Historical Background

The historical setting for the book of Joshua is given in the first line of the book: “After the death of Moses” (1:1). This time marker indicates the situation of God’s people. Forty years had passed since the exodus, years spent wandering and waiting to cross the Jordan and inherit the land promised by God. Like a sequel to a movie, this book opens on the cusp of the rest of the story. As the first book written after the death of Moses, Joshua picks up and develops many of the themes established in the first five books of the Bible.

The author of Joshua is not specified. And while some have suggested Joshua as the author, the recurring phrase “to this day” (4:9; 5:9; 6:25; etc.) seems to indicate that the book was written later, or at least that an editor updated the book at a later date.

p 10 Outline

I. Crossing into the Land (1:1–5:15)

- A. Joshua receives and gives his marching orders (1:1–18)**
- B. Joshua sends in the spies and receives good news (2:1–24)**
- C. Israel crosses the Jordan and God does wonders (3:1–4:24)**
- D. Israel renews the covenant and Joshua meets the Lord’s commander (5:1–15)**

II. Taking the Land (6:1–12:24)

- A. Joshua takes Jericho, a paradigm for victory (6:1–27)**
- B. Achan sins and Israel falls at Ai, a paradigm for defeat (7:1–26)**
- C. Israel deals with Achan and takes Ai (8:1–35)**
- D. Israel covenants with some Gibeonites and thus Gentiles get in on salvation (9:1–27)**
- E. Joshua defends Gibeon and takes the south (10:1–43)**
- F. Joshua takes the north and the author takes an inventory of kings (11:1–12:24)**

III. Dividing the Land (13:1–21:45)

- A. Allotments for the eastern territories (13:1–33)**
- B. Allotments for the western territories (14:1–19:51)**
- C. Provision for justice and worship (20:1–21:45)**

IV. Serving the Lord in the Land (22:1–24:33)

- A. Joshua’s parting speech to the eastern tribes (22:1–34)**
- B. Joshua’s parting speech to Israel’s leaders (23:1–16)**
- C. Joshua’s parting speech to the nation (24:1–33)**

As You Get Started

One way to get a sense of Joshua’s message is to grasp its context. Read Deuteronomy 32:44–47. What was Israel to do and why? Next, read the first and last chapters of Joshua; write down the key words you expect to emerge time and again throughout the book.

p 11 Based on your current understanding, how are the themes of *land* and *rest* fulfilled in Jesus Christ? What significance do these themes have for the Christian?

From what you know so far about the book of Joshua, what excites you? What confuses you? What questions do you hope to answer through this study?

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a few minutes to ask for God's help to grasp the story and significance of the book of Joshua, with all of its promises and commands. Ask for a clearer vision of the kind of Savior Christ is, the kind of people Christ saves, and the kind of salvation Christ brings.