

Josh 13 The land allocated
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Well we're looking at the book of Joshua,
and there have been some really exciting stories.
The crossing of the Jordan River,
the spies visit to Rahab the Prostitute,
The defeat of Jericho,
The sin of Achan,
The Gibeonites pulling the wool over Joshua's eyes.
Good stories with lots to learn about faith.
And then you hit chapter 13.
It's not really a story.
It's more like a geography lesson in a place you've never been.
Not very inspiring at all.
I slept through my geography classes when I was at school.
Why would I do more by choice now I'm an adult?
Well the reason is that this is the inspired word of God.
It may not be very inspiring, but it is inspired.
When we say the Bible is inspired,
we don't mean that it is inspiring.
Inspiring means that it makes you feel motivated and encouraged
to read it.
Inspired means that it comes from the mind of God.
They are quite different things.
The story of Rahab is inspiring.
Here's a woman who had lived a dissolute life
putting her trust in the God of Israel.
And she is welcomed.
I find that inspiring.
The geography lesson explaining to me what land got given
to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh,
I don't find that inspiring.
To be honest, I find it a bit boring.
But it is inspired.

That means God thought it up.
It's obvious the Lord thought it up.
The very first sentence of the chapter tells us,
Josh 13:1 "When Joshua had grown old, Yahweh said to him ..."
It's God's voice.
These are God's words.
It's inspired.

What do we do with God's inspired words when they are boring?
The right thing to do
is to find the principles that God is communicating,
and put them into practice in your life.
We don't have the luxury of being self indulgent
and only focusing on God's words that make us feel inspired.
God might have some very important message for us
in the boring words.
You don't want to miss out on that message.

I mean this geography lesson goes on for 7 chapters.
The division of the land goes from chapter 13-19.
God obviously must have thought it was important.
You're lucky I'm only preaching one sermon on these 7 chapters.
And Kate is lucky I didn't make her read 7 chapters.

So what's going on?
Joshua has grown old.
He's over ninety.
That's getting on a bit to lead Israel out on to the battle field.
Much of the land had been conquered,
but there was still a fair bit to go.
So the important thing is encouraging Israel to finish the job.
Joshua knows that he's not going to be around forever.
There is still work to do.
There will still be work to do when he dies.
And the nation needs to continue the work,

even after the leader who had lead them through much of it goes to be with the Lord.

The job is not finished.

There's a sense in which that is quite like the church's ministry.

It's never finished.

Imagine we had our new Op Shop built, the kitchen renovations were finished, would it be time to relax?

No it wouldn't.

That's when it's time to start.

Time to start using the resources God gives you to build his kingdom.

Anyway, back to Joshua.

He is inspiring Israel to finish the job, by telling them who gets what.

You can imagine that this geography lesson was not boring for them.

It's like sitting down listening to a will being read out.

You are waiting to hear which bit you get.

That's not boring.

And if the bit that has been allocated to you still has Canaanites living in it,

then you are going to be quite insistent

that the nation doesn't stop the work of conquest until you get your bit.

Well I want to draw some principles from the way the land was divided.

1. The land moves from power and wealth being concentrated to power and wealth being dispersed.

So when the land was ruled by the kings of the Canaanites, basically the king had all the power and all the wealth, and the people had nothing.

That's how it was with kings in the ancient world.

The king owned everything.

He let the little people have some land to work

because he needed someone to grow the crops and tend the herds.

But at the end of the day,

what was produced belonged to him.
 He would pay the people enough to keep them working.
 That was it.

But when God divides up the land for his people,
 every family grouping is given their inheritance .

Inheritance is a big word in the passage.

13:6-7 "Be sure to allocate the land of Israel for an inheritance,
 as I have instructed you,

and divide it as an inheritance

among the nine tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh."

It's an inheritance for every family grouping.

The boss man doesn't scoop the lot.

Everyone gets their bit.

Remember that in the Old Testament,
 there wasn't talk about eternal life
 the way there is in the New Testament.

The blessing of God for his people
 is an inheritance in the Promised Land.

And God's inheritance for his people is shared out amongst them.

Even Joshua, the great leader.

What does he get in the Promised Land?

What are the benefits of being in charge
 and dealing with the grumbling of the people?

He gets one town for him and his family to settle.

You can read about it in chapter 19.

Timnath Serah in Ephraim is Joshua's town.

That's all he got.

Some as everyone else, pretty much.

OK that's principal #1.

Instead of power and wealth concentrated,
 we have power and wealth dispersed in the Promised Land.

2. Power and wealth is dispersed forever.

I mean, you can imagine

that even with the land being divided very fairly,
it wouldn't take long for the Reinharts and Forrests
to amass some wealth.

Gina and Twiggy would be buying the land of other families
in no time flat.

You might have started off with power and wealth dispersed,
but in no time flat,

power and wealth would be concentrated again.

But that's not how it worked in the Promised Land.

This is different to every other nation in history.

But when Joshua says,

this is your inheritance,

he means, "This stays in your family forever."

So if you sell a parcel of land,

the buyer gets the land.

That is allowed to happen.

But if the buyer dies,

then the land is not considered part of his estate to pass on to his family.

Instead, the land reverts to the original family.

It's their inheritance and it stays with them.

So the kind of intergenerational inequality

that is a blight on just about every other nation

was just not possible in Israel.

Certainly not possible

if they heeded Joshua's words inspired by the Lord.

That tells us something about God's view of wealth and power.

God thinks it better if wealth and power are shared around
not concentrated in the hands of a few.

There's no imposition of absolute equality in Israel.

It's not like all of the production of the nation

was equally shared amongst its inhabitants.

But there are mechanisms put in place that limit inequality.

Limit its duration and its extent.
They limit it more than it is limited in Australia,
and we live in one of the more equal nations
currently operating in the world.

What conclusions should we take from this as Christians?

There are all kinds of things you could say,
but bear in mind this is extrapolating from the passage.
I'm not now preaching God's Word but Tim's take on a plausible way
to apply God's Word in an extremely different situation.

Some people will get poor through their own actions:
laziness or bad choices.

Some people will get rich through their own actions:
hard work or good choices.

Some people will get poor through the actions of others.
Maybe they got ripped off.

Maybe their parents made poor choices.

Some people will get poor through misfortune.

You can't help being born in a war zone.

Some people will get rich by ripping others off.

Some people will be rich because their parents made good choices.

Some people will be rich by good fortune.

I think the way God set up property to work in the nation of Israel
is telling us that God wants to minimise the opportunity
for people to be poor by birth.

God wants everyone to get a fair shot at life.

That's the point of having property revert to the original family
after the death of the buyer.

It means one generation can fall on hard times,
but there won't be intergenerational grinding poverty.

At some point the kids get their family's inheritance in the land back,
and once again they have the means to grow food
or graze animals again.

What does that mean for us?

I think as Christians, it's good for us to help kids get a shot at life.

Whether that's supporting a Compassion child,
 or supporting universal education and healthcare in our community.
 Some kids get born with significant disadvantages.
 It's good to do what we can to counteract that.
 Remembering of course that the greatest disadvantage to be born with
 is being born in a situation
 where you will grow up without hearing the gospel.

Ok, the next principle about dividing up the land.

This is number 3.

Principle number 1 was that power and wealth are dispersed.
 Principle number 2 was that power and wealth are dispersed forever.

Principle number 3 is about God's people working together.

Which tribes do we hear about their land in today's passage?

It's Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh.

Why are we hearing about them first?

Why not Judah or Simeon or Benjamin?

The reason is because those are the tribes

who were given their land on the east side of the Jordan River.

Their inheritance is the land that used to belong to Sihon and Og,
 the kings of the Amorites.

Their inheritance is land that was conquered
 while Moses was still the leader of Israel.

I mean this is old news.

why is it being included in Joshua 13?

This all happened in Exodus.

The reason is that it's very important to God that his people stay united.

It would have been very tempting

for the people of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh to sit back.

"Hey, our land has already been conquered.

Why don't you other nine and a half tribes
 go and take over the rest of the land?

We've got our bit."

No way. It doesn't work like that.

The other tribes helped to conquer Sihon and Og,

you can help conquer the rest of the land.

And so as a way of symbolically showing that the Transjordan tribes are in with the rest of the nation, Joshua has them march across the Jordan river in front of the rest of the nation.

And when Joshua is telling the rest of the nation who gets what bit, the transjordan tribes' parcels of land are recorded again. It's just a way of emphasising the unity of the nation.

What does this tell us?

I think it tells us that we should think of ourselves as united with God's people.

And that needs to come out in how do practical things.

So take for example

the planting of churches in growth corridor suburbs.

Should it just be up to the people of Clyde to build a church in Clyde?

We've got our church in Hastings,

but it was built for us a long time ago.

I guess you could imagine the church conquering Melbourne like Joshua conquered the Promised Land.

How do we conquer Melbourne?

By having a church within easy reach of every household.

We've already conquered this bit.

But should the people who live in this bit sit back

and tell the people of Clyde to conquer their own bit by themselves?

That's not how Joshua did it.

So I would hope that when Paul Barker says to us,

"I want to build a church in Clyde",

that we would be the first to offer what help we can.

Ok the last principle about dividing up the land.

4. In the end, we are all Levites.

The Lord is our inheritance.

So this comes from verse 14,

"But to the tribe of Levi he gave no inheritance,

since the food offerings presented to Yahweh, the God of Israel, are their inheritance, as he promised them."

And it's again in verse 33.

"But to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; Yahweh, the God of Israel is their inheritance, as he promised them."

So what's the deal.

All of the other tribes get some land.

But the Levites get no land.

Why?

Well the point of land is so that you can produce a living.

It's not like the Levites didn't have houses to live in.

You can read in chapter 21

about the towns the Levites were given to live in.

They had houses.

The just didn't have farms.

And they didn't have farms because they didn't need farms.

They had a different job.

Their job was to teach the people the Law of the Lord

and to look after the temple.

And for doing that work,

the food offerings that the people made to the Lord in the temple would belong to the Levites.

So instead of growing food,

they ate the food that was offered to the Lord.

Well at a surface level,

that is just God providing for ministry to be done.

The people need to be taught the Law of the Lord, otherwise they will forget how to please God.

That's why Joshua read it out to them

at the covenant renewal ceremony in chapter 8.

The people need to be able to make sacrifices.

That's how their sins were forgiven under the Old Covenant.

These things needed to happen.

God was making provision to make sure they did.

At another level, God was being really smart.

You see he could have instituted a part time ministry.

He could have given the Levites farms along with the other tribes, and told them to run the temple and teach the people in their spare time.

And then the people wouldn't have needed to sacrifice as much, because there wouldn't have been a whole tribe to feed.

The sacrifices could have been more symbolic.

But there would have been a problem with that.

If the Levites didn't depend on running the temple for their livelihood, then they could have decided not to bother,

or only to bother with the bare minimum.

And that would quickly have characterised the whole nation's attitude towards God.

People are naturally slack if they can get away with it.

The Levites needed to depend on the temple for their livelihood so that they were 100% committed to their work.

And the rest of Israel

needed to make a significant commitment to the temple worship, so that they would put real value on their relationship with God.

So we've looked at the surface level and the slightly deeper level.

But there's another even deeper level.

Verse 14 says the food offerings are the Levites' inheritance.

But verse 33 puts it a different way.

"Yahweh the God of Israel is their inheritance."

The psalmist, Asaph, puts it this way in Psalm 73:26.

"My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever."

Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

There's a chorus we used to sing in my teenage years,
"I bow my knee before your throne."

One line in the song is,
"I seek the giver not the gift."
That's what this verse is point us to.
The Lord is the Levites inheritance.
That doesn't mean they miss out on the physical stuff.
It means the Lord is worth more than the physical stuff.
That our relationship with the Lord
should be cherished more than the physical stuff.

What does that mean for the Christian.
I guess it means that we would pray, read the Scriptures,
listen to Christian music, even choruses from the 1980s,
hang out in church services,
because we want to be with the Lord,
not because we feel like we ought to.
The Lord himself is our inheritance
and that is something to be cherished.

Let me remind you of the four principles from the division of the land.
Principle number 1, power and wealth are dispersed.
Principle number 2, power and wealth are dispersed forever.
Principle number 3, God's people work together.
Principle number 4, the Lord is our inheritance.