

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST ON EVERY SIDE
(JOSHUA 21:43-45)

I. Introduction

II. The Lord Gave to Israel All the Land (Joshua 21:43)

- A. Verse 43 presents us with two basic, historical facts.
- B. First of all, the Lord has given Israel the land he promised to their fathers.
 - 1. *Abraham*: “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess” (Gen 15:7)
 - 2. *Isaac*: “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father” (Gen 26:3)
 - 3. *Jacob*: “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring” (Gen 28:13).
 - 4. The land was promised by God long before either Moses or Joshua came on the scene. The events of the book of Joshua are but the fulfillment of this ancient promise that God had made to Israel’s forefather Abraham more than seven hundred years before the events in Joshua.
- C. Second: Israel had taken possession of the land and had settled there.
—Israel is now the dominant power in the land and largely settled in.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What are the two truths from 21:43? (2) What did God promise Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

III. The Lord Gave Israel Rest (Joshua 21:44)

- A. “And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers” (v 44)
 - 1. This verse encapsulates the whole purpose of Joshua, or one of the central purposes of Joshua, which is about how Israel came to have the land that they did.
 - 2. It was because the Lord had given them the land.
 - 3. Here again, two important truths meet us.
- B. First, *salvation and victory are gifts from the Lord*.
 - 1. This is an idea which we had seen numerous times in Joshua. Consider:
 - a. “And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor’ (6:2)

- b. “And the LORD gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it...” (10:30)
- c. “And the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel...” (11:8)
- 2. A constant refrain in the text is that the Lord gives victory to his people. Whenever Israel overcomes their enemy, it is because the Lord had done so for them.
- C. A second truth we see in verse 44 is that God is *a promise-keeping God*: “just as he had sworn to their fathers...”
 - 1. Covenants or promises are means by which God has chosen to relate to his human creatures.
 - 2. When the Lord makes a promise, he is bound to fulfil his word, because his glory and reputation are at stake.
 - 3. This means that in those places where God has promised blessings to his people, God is not free to do otherwise.
 - 4. A very good instance where we see this dynamic at work is in Exodus 32, where Moses pleads with the Lord not to destroy Israel after they had made the golden calf. But on what grounds does Moses make his case? Listen to 32:11-14

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

- 5. When we hear about God being a covenant-keeping God, we must remember that it is because of this divine trait that the human race actually has a future. It is only because God has made a promise to redeem sinners that you and I can have hope.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What were two truths that meet us in this 21:44? (2) Why is the idea of covenant or promise so important in the Scriptures? (3) How did Moses make the case for God to have mercy on Israel (Ex 32:11-14)?

IV. Two Kinds of Covenants

- A. While we are on the topic of covenant, here is also a good place to mention that the nature of the promise or the covenant is also important. God makes two kinds of promises in the Bible.
- B. The *conditional* promise: “If you do this, I will bless you in such and such a way.”
 - 1. This kind of promise is associated with the suzerain-vassal treaty.

2. In ancient times, a greater king (suzerain) may enter into a political relationship or alliance with a lesser king (vassal)—and stipulate the conduct that he expects of the lesser ruler.
 3. In the event that the vassal breaks the rules that have been imposed by the suzerain, there will be punishments.
 4. The Law of Moses is very much like an ancient suzerain-vassal treaty (Horton, *God of Promise*, 33), because it requires obedience as a condition for blessing. Consider the following texts:
 - a. “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD” (Lev 18:5)
 - b. “The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers” (Dt 8:1)
- C. The *unconditional* promise: “I will do this for you.”
1. This kind of promise is usually associated with the *royal grant*.
 2. Unlike the suzerain-vassal covenant, a royal grant covenant is mainly unconditional.
—More precisely, the main conditions are fulfilled by the promise-maker and/or someone other than the beneficiary.
 3. The king, patron, or benefactor promises to do good to the beneficiary—and that is that.
- D. When we come to the Lord’s promise of land, what kind of promise is at work? Is it a primarily conditional or unconditional promise?
1. On one level, it seems that the promise is conditional, because of verses like Deuteronomy 8:1.
 - a. Israel’s ability to gain and retain the land seems to be, in some way, conditional on Israel’s obedience.
 - b. If Israel keeps God’s Law faithfully and entirely, God will allow Israel to live in peace and keep the land.
 2. But is that all there is to the picture?
 - a. No—because there is another promise functioning in the background.
 - b. Long before God gave Israel the Law of Moses (the suzerain-vassal treaty) God had already promised Israel’s ancestors that Israel will get the land (royal grant).
 - c. That promise, made much earlier to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is an *unconditional* promise in that the main conditions are fulfilled not by the beneficiary (Abraham) but by the benefactor himself (the Lord).
 - d. Thus, when God made the promise to Israel’s forefathers, he did so as a gift, not as a reward for their labors.
 3. What does this mean for Israel? It means that Israel is guaranteed the land, no matter what happens.
 - a. Yes, God commands Israel to fight for the land.
 - b. Yes, God even chastises Israel for their disobedience by removing the land from them for a time during the exile.
 - c. But here’s where the unconditional promise to Abraham kicks in: Whatever happens, come what may, exile or death, Israel will always

come back to their place, because this land has already been set aside for them.

- d. Even after Israel loses the land in the exile, God promises that he will save his people, gathering them like a good shepherd and bringing them back to their homeland. Ezekiel 11:17: “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’”
 - e. So in the end, Israel will gain the land; not by their works, not by their attempts to obey the Law, which have all come up short; but by the sheer grace and goodwill of God.
- E. If we want further evidence that we are on the right track in thinking this way, listen to how the apostle Paul himself explains it in Galatians 3:17-18.
1. Verse 17: “This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward,” that is, after the promise that was made to Abraham, “does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.”
 - a. Paul is distinguishing between the Law of Moses and the unconditional promise to Abraham 430 years prior to the Law.
 2. Verse 18: “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”
 - a. Paul is making his case for why salvation is ultimately *not* by works of the Law but by the grace of God, which is received only through faith in Christ.
 - b. It is for this reason: Long before even the Law of Moses (suzerain-vassal treaty) was even given, God had already made an unconditional promise of land and salvation to his people (royal grant).
- F. Of course, who is part of Israel is another issue that will come up later.
1. In the New Testament, it becomes clear that “Israel” are only those who have identified themselves with the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ.
 2. Not just any person who descended biologically from Israel is part of God’s Israel. Romans 9:6: “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel [.]”
 3. Moreover, Israel is very closely associated with the Church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.
 - a. In 1 Peter 2:9, it is the Church that is called “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession”—all titles once given to Israel (cf. Ex 19:6).
 - b. From Galatians 6:16, it seems that both Israel and the Church may well be the same entity.
 - c. Thus, it is to this Israel—the Church of Jesus Christ—that the Promised Land belongs.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What are the two kinds of promises/covenants that we see in Scripture? How do they differ? (2) How is the covenant associated with the Law of Moses different from the covenant associated with Abraham? (3) How does Paul make his case for salvation-by-grace as opposed to salvation-by-works in Gal 3:17-18? (4) Who is the Israel of God today? Who is the Israel that inherits the promises?

V. Who Owns the Land Today?

- A. This certainly has repercussions for today: Who owns the Promised Land today?
- B. Many Jews who want to cling to the present land of Israel say that the Promised Land belongs to them because of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- C. But is that the case? Are their claims justified on biblical terms?
1. If the only Scriptures we have are the Old Testament, it is understandable that we should believe that.
 2. But if we believe that God's appointed Savior is Jesus Christ, then we would have to say no, for the simple fact that only those who belong to Jesus are truly members of Israel. Only those who carry the promise of God by union with Jesus Christ belong to Israel.
 3. As difficult as it may be, the notion that the present nation-state of Israel is the same as God's Israel is very hard to defend theologically.
 4. Many good Christians believe that we should always defend the present-day political state of Israel because they are God's chosen people.
 - a. Some nations, like the United States, have made it an near-religious duty to stand with the state of Israel no matter what. But that is not always based on good theology.
 - b. While there may be good reasons to protect the nation state of Israel, it should not be because the state of Israel is the nation of God.
 - c. Scripture seems to point toward the idea that only those who believe in Messiah Jesus carry on the true heritage of Israel.
- D. For God to be a covenant-keeping God is a massively important thing, because it is on this that the future of the world rests.
- E. Because God made unconditional covenants to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and then later on to King David in 2 Samuel 7; and then later on to Israel again in Jeremiah 31; the story of Israel and of the human race can continue.
—There is no power in creation that can stop God from accomplishing his goals for his holy ones.
- F. “Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands”—this is as much a statement of promise as it is a statement of the present state of affairs in Joshua 21.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Is it appropriate for non-Christian Jews to use the Bible to insist on taking the present land of Palestine as their home? Why not? (2) On what grounds could other nations align themselves with the present nation-state of Israel?

VI. Not One Word had Failed (Joshua 21:45)

- A. In verse 45, we have yet another affirmation of God's faithfulness to Israel.
- B. Notice that the phrase “not one” is repeated, which implies that God desires to emphasize this truth: “Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.”
—Once again, the covenant-keeping of the Lord is brought out.
- C. So, all in all, this entire passage is shot through with the faithfulness of God.

1. Verse 43: “he *swore* to give to their fathers.”
 2. Verse 44: “And the LORD gave them rest...just as he had *sworn* to their fathers.”
 3. Verse 45: “Not one word of all the good *promises* that the LORD had made...”
- D. The idea of covenant or promise is everywhere in this passage.
- E. Since this passage summarizes all that has gone before, it is clear that God’s gracious covenant with Israel’s fathers forms the foundation of the entire history of Joshua. —It is precisely because of the promises that God made to the fathers of Israel that Israel has been enabled to possess the land that God had promised to them.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How does God’s covenant function in relation to the history of Joshua and Israel?

VII. The Promise Is Also for Us

- A. All this is good news not just for Israel but for the whole world as well, because God’s promise to Israel’s forefathers was made with a view to bless the entire world.
- B. What did God promise to Abraham and his offspring? Take a look at Genesis 22:15-18:

¹⁵And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

- C. The promise that God made to Abraham and consequently to Israel was not just for the sake of Israel, but also for the sake of the world. This promise would be the means by which God overturns the curse that he pronounced upon the world at the Tower of Babel and even earlier than that, the curse that was pronounced over the original sin of Adam and Eve.
- D. But the Holy Spirit has more to say about the promise. Who was the offspring to whom the promise was made?
 1. If we read from Genesis, it seems that the offspring would be all the physical descendants of Abraham.
 2. But God has packed more into the promise.
 3. Galatians 3:16 says, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”
 4. When God made the promise to Abraham, saying that in his offspring the nations will be blessed, that his offspring would be multiplied more than sand on the seashore; and, going back to Genesis 12:7 where the promise to the offspring was first made, this word “offspring” does include the descendants of Abraham.
 5. But they are not just any descendants of Abraham—they are the descendants of Abraham who are joined to Christ Jesus.
 6. This is because Jesus is the supreme *Offspring* of Abraham; the ultimate *Descendant* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus was the primary One to whom

the promises were addressed; and then from there, those who are connected to Christ, whether Jew or Gentile.

- E. If we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are offspring of Abraham. Galatians 3:29: “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”
- F. Because we have put our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, you and I have come to share in the unconditional promise, the royal grant, which God has made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Promised Land—and all that it foreshadows!—belongs to Abraham’s offspring in Jesus Christ.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How is God’s covenant with Abraham good news for the rest of the world? (2) Who is the main Offspring with whom God has made his covenant? (3) According to Galatians 3:29, who is Abraham’s Offspring?

VIII. It’s All About the Lord

The central lesson is not about us. It’s about God. God is the One who is the primary Actor, the main Driver of this passage and the history of which it speaks. “Thus *the LORD gave* to Israel all the land that *he swore* to give to their fathers” (v 43). “And *the LORD gave* them rest on every side just as *he had sworn* to their fathers....*the LORD had given* all their enemies into their hands” (v 44). “Not one word of all the good promises that *the LORD had made* to the house of Israel had failed...” (v 45). Over and over again, this Scripture impresses upon us that it is the Lord who has done the work for his people. Does that mean Israel sat back and did nothing? Of course not. The second part of verse 43 clearly says, “And they took possession of it, and they settled there.” But that was all that Israel did. What Joshua 21:43-45 emphasizes is that God alone is the One who has secured victory for his people. Salvation is entirely from beginning to end the great work of God.

What is our response to this truth?

- A. First: Work as if everything depended on God.
 - 1. All the good works that God commands us to do, what are these in the end but the works of God through us? Our good works are the means by which God fulfils his will in the world.
 - 2. If we are aware of this—that our good works are really God’s works through us—what happens? How would that change the way we come to our work in the world? It should fill us with...
 - a. joy, a sense of holy excitement and purpose.
 - b. energy to do the good pleasure of the Lord.
 - c. intentionality, seeking the Lord’s agenda in our own areas of service.
- B. Second: Be comforted knowing that God’s work will be completed in our lives.
 - 1. Now that we know all about God’s promise of life to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Lord Jesus, Paul’s words in Philippians 1:6 take on new significance for us: “And I am sure of this,” the apostle says, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

2. Philippians 1:6 is an individualized version, or better, an individualized application, of God's gracious promises to Abraham and to his Offspring, Jesus Christ.
3. So come what may, we do not lose heart. We can truly cast our hope in God. Rest assured: God will finish what he has started.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How should we respond to God's unstoppable work in and through our lives? (2) What does it mean to work as if everything depended on God? What is involved in this? (3) What comfort can we receive from Philippians 1:6? How is Philippians 1:6 an individualized application of the larger promises of God to Abraham and his Offspring, Jesus Christ?