



UNFOLDING REDEMPTION

—
THE HEART
OF THE GOSPEL
IN THE STORY OF
OLD TESTAMENT
HISTORY
—

IAN J. VAILLANCOURT



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Unfolding Redemption* by Ian J. Vaillancourt

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com

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LAND

SETTLING THE REDEEMED

IF WE FIND THE BOOK OF JOSHUA challenging, we are not alone. This book is focused on Israel's offensive military takeover of the land of Canaan. In some battles YHWH calls his people to eradicate everything that breathes, including women, children, and livestock. At other times survivors are allowed, including a Canaanite prostitute and her family during one battle, and an entire people group in another. As the battle scenes taper off, the book gets geographical, with nine relentless chapters of ancient place names and tribal allotments.

Although our initial impression of Joshua may be lukewarm, its inclusion in God's Word should lead us to search for answers to the parts of the book we find challenging. As we understand the book of Joshua in the flow of the Bible's grand story of redemption, we discover a message that is extremely encouraging, practical, and life-giving. In this chapter, we will dive into the surprisingly important theme of a land for God's people. We'll begin in the books that lead into Joshua, and this will equip us to understand the book of Joshua in a much deeper way. We'll close with some wonderful gospel applications as we look forward in the Bible's story to the way Jesus fulfills the Old Testament hope.

GENESIS 1-3: THE LAND CREATED, GIFTED, LOST, AND ANTICIPATED

Before we can make sense of a land for Israel in the book of Joshua, we need a big-picture understanding of the Old Testament teaching on this theme. The Hebrew word *erets* is translated “earth” or “land,” depending on its wider context. This word appears 2,504 times over the 929 chapters of the Old Testament, including its first and last verses (Gen 1:1; 2 Chron 36:23). That is an average of more than two and a half times per chapter.¹ But this is not all: The Hebrew word *adamah* is translated “ground,” “land,” or “earth,” depending on its wider context, and it appears 222 times in the Old Testament—from Genesis 1:25 to 2 Chronicles 33:8. This reveals that from beginning to end, the Old Testament tells a very earthy story of redemption.

In Genesis 2, the camera lens zooms in, with an intimate look at the creation of the man and the woman. In this scene, YHWH God plants a garden—more earthiness—where he puts the man to work it and keep it (Gen 2:8, 15). Then he creates the woman and performs the first marriage ceremony (Gen 2:18, 21-25). In the original creation, place matters: Eden is an enclosed, protected sanctuary, where YHWH God walks among his people in perfect fellowship (Gen 3:8).

Then paradise is lost. Genesis 3 tells the tragic story of temptation by the serpent and the first couple’s rebellion against God’s word. Although they have been lavished with every imaginable blessing, they grasp for more, and so they lose it all. At this time they are cast out of the special land where YHWH God dwelled in their midst (Gen 3:22-24).

I have a calendar in my home that features the art of Thomas Kinkade. In it, Kinkade explains the rationale for his *Hometown Lake* painting: “I believe that people in every area of our nation and all parts of our culture share this vision, this longing for a peaceful

¹This is not to say that *erets* occurs in every chapter. It does not. But it is the sixth-most frequently occurring noun in the Hebrew Old Testament.

lakeside place.”² Genesis 3 not only makes sense of this longing for a peaceful lakeside place; it also reveals why such a haven will never ultimately satisfy our deepest longings. Even for those who have been reconciled to God through Christ, Hometown Lake is still affected by the fall into sin. Mosquitos still bite. Weeds still grow. Hot summers and cold winters are still unbearable. And disease and death still make Hometown Lake a place of pain and tragic loss.

Genesis 3 explains why we yearn for a real, earthy haven, one that is much more satisfying than Hometown Lake. And it also begins to paint a glorious portrait of redemption that will unfold for the rest of the Bible’s story. Even as our first parents were about to be barred from their perfect garden sanctuary, YHWH God promised that a descendant of the woman would one day win the ultimate victory over the descendant of the serpent (Gen 3:15). And as another initial act of kindness, YHWH God covered the shame of his people (Gen 3:21). Even before he cast humanity out of the garden, YHWH God was already hinting toward an eventual restoration.³

THE REST OF THE PENTATEUCH: THE PROMISE OF LAND

The rest of Genesis unfolds east of Eden, outside YHWH’s special earthy place. Along the way, the story builds on the promise that YHWH will redeem a people for himself and that he will also open the way to a real, earthy place where he will live among those people once again.

This theme is prominent at the call of Abram, when YHWH commands, “Go *from your country* and your kindred and your father’s house *to the land that I will show you*” (Gen 12:1, emphasis added). Once again, place matters. Abram obeys, and when he arrives, YHWH promises that he will give that very land to Abram’s offspring (Gen 12:7). Then Abram travels through the land of Canaan, building

²Thomas Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade Special Collector’s Edition 2024 Deluxe Wall Calendar with Print: Lakeside Splendor* (Andrews McMeel, 2023).

³For this reason, Sandra L. Richter describes the Bible’s big-picture story as the epic of Eden. See Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2008).

altars to YHWH (Gen 12:7-8). By doing this he is claiming the land for YHWH—this is a geographical locale where YHWH will be worshiped. The Canaanites may have possessed it at the time, but Abram believed YHWH’s promise.

As the book of Genesis unfolds, the land promise to Abram is filled out with more details. For example, YHWH speaks of the expansiveness of the land that will be an everlasting possession for his offspring (Gen 13:14-15; 17:8). YHWH will multiply Abraham’s offspring “as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore,” and Abraham’s offspring will “possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen 22:17). Later, YHWH promises Abraham’s son, “To your offspring I will give *all these lands*” (Gen 26:3, emphasis added). When Genesis 22:17 and Genesis 26:3 are read together, they reveal that Abraham’s descendants will be innumerable, and they will also possess “the gate of his enemies” and “all these lands” (Gen 22:17; 26:3).⁴ These passages hint that the borders of this Promised Land will begin small and eventually grow to accommodate an expanding people of God.

Despite the amazing promise of YHWH, Abraham never enjoys its earthy fullness. In fact, YHWH tells him his descendants will have to wait four hundred years until this promise will be fulfilled (Gen 15:13-16). In his lifetime, Abraham owns only a tiny gravesite in Canaan (Gen 23). But this gravesite for Sarah (and later Abraham) is purchased in faith that YHWH will one day fulfill his earthy promises. For this reason, when Abraham’s grandson Jacob dies in Egypt, he arranges for his remains to be carried to this same grave (Gen 50:4-14). Then, in the exodus from Egypt, the bones of Joseph are also transferred from Egypt to the grave in Canaan that Abraham purchased (Ex 13:19).

The exodus is an exit out of Egypt and toward the land of Canaan, where God’s people will dwell with him (e.g., Ex 3:8). But when they sin by worshiping a golden calf, YHWH says he will *not* go with his

⁴I was first pointed to the connection between Gen 22:17 and Gen 26:3 in Oren Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 34 (IVP Academic, 2015), 71-73.

people into the Promised Land (Ex 33:3). Moses replies with a desperate prayer of intercession: “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Ex 33:15-16). In the end, YHWH relents and agrees to accompany his people into the Promised Land.

What does Exodus 33 teach us? The Promised Land was not to be an ancient Near Eastern version of Thomas Kinkadee’s Hometown Lake. If it were to be a beautiful, serene place without the special presence of YHWH among his special, redeemed people, it would be an empty shell. YHWH’s promise of a land was not merely so that his people could finally settle into family homes with pastoral views. The reason the Promised Land would be a blessing was clear: YHWH would be there, and his people would experience settledness and rest in his presence and under his favor. From this place they could worship YHWH freely and fulfill their role as a kingdom of priests who would shine the light of YHWH to the nations around them (see Ex 19:6). For these reasons, Israel’s settledness in the land would be another step in the Bible’s story toward a return to Eden.

Later, YHWH initiates the fulfillment of his promise, when he sends spies to scout out the land before his people take it in battle (Num 13:1-2). But the people respond with fear, and their unbelief means that an entire generation has to die during a forty-year hiatus in the wilderness.

Later still, Deuteronomy finds the next generation of God’s people perched on the border of the Promised Land. In three long speeches, Moses prepares them to enter. These include the promise of blessings for covenant keeping, curses for covenant breaking, and restoration for covenant repentance (Deut 28; 30:1-10; cf. Lev 26). A central feature of these warnings is the people’s proximity to the land: If they keep the covenant, they will be blessed in the land; if they break the

covenant, they will be driven from the land; if they repent from their sin, they will be restored to the land.

JOSHUA: ENTERING AND POSSESSING THE LAND

In light of what we have learned in the story so far, the tremendous blessing of a land for God's people comes into focus. Far more significant than a people group's desire to have a settled place to call their own, the Promised Land was a spiritual blessing from Israel's covenant God. In this place, other gods would not be worshiped, YHWH would dwell among his people, and they would be free to worship him in the way he commanded. To use the language of the Bible, they would be given *rest*. As we will see, Israel's possession of the land in Joshua would not usher in the ultimate, promised rest, but it would be a significant step toward this goal.

The book of Joshua has four big sections, and James M. Hamilton Jr. has pointed out that each part is best understood when we notice its key, repeated word.⁵ As we embark on the book, table 1.1 expands on Hamilton's breakdown:

Table 1.1. The unfolding story of Joshua

Section of Joshua	Key Word	Example Scripture Passage
Joshua 1–5	"crossing over" into the land (also translated "passing over," "passing through," etc.)	And 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.'" (Josh 1:10-11, emphasis added)
Joshua 6–12	"taking" the land (in battle)	"Joshua took all that land, the hill country and all the Negeb and all the land of Goshen and the lowland and the Arabah and the hill country of Israel and its lowland." (Josh 11:16, emphasis added)

⁵See James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2010), 144. For a similar reckoning, see also Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 15 (InterVarsity Press, 2003), 126-27.

Section of Joshua	Key Word	Example Scripture Passage
Joshua 13–21	“apportioning” the land to each tribe of Israel (also translated “allotting” or “dividing”)	“The people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses; they <i>allotted</i> the land.” (Josh 14:5, emphasis added)
Joshua 22–24	“serving” YHWH in the land (and <i>not</i> “serving” foreign gods)	“Now therefore fear the LORD and <i>serve</i> him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers <i>served</i> beyond the River and in Egypt, and <i>serve</i> the LORD.” (Josh 24:14, emphasis added)

Joshua 1–5: Crossing over into the land. Deuteronomy concludes with Israel on the cusp of entering the Promised Land, and in Joshua 1–5, the Hebrew word for “crossing over” is emphasized.⁶ In this section, Israel finally moves into the land YHWH promised to Abraham’s descendants. The book famously begins with repeated calls for Joshua and the people to “be strong and courageous,” but in context this is much more than a pep talk about personal strength and courage. YHWH promised Israel this land, and YHWH is about to give it to them. Strength and courage will be rooted in trusting YHWH and his word. As YHWH puts it, “Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go” (Josh 1:7).

In Joshua 1–5 Israel keeps YHWH’s torah, or instruction, as they send spies into the land, cross over into the land, circumcise the new generation of males, and celebrate the Passover in Canaan. In particular, the story of Israel crossing over into the land is told in a similar way to the Red Sea crossing of the exodus: In both scenes YHWH causes the waters—this time, of the Jordan River—to stop up so Israel can pass through on dry ground (Josh 3). This is a signal to the people that YHWH will be with them in this crossing over into the Promised

⁶Also translated as “go over,” “pass over,” “went through,” etc.

Land, just as he was with the previous generation of his people in the exodus from Egypt.

Joshua 6–12: Taking the land. Next, Joshua 6–12 describes Israel taking the land through a series of battles. From the outset, YHWH’s blessing on these endeavors is clear, as a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab believes that YHWH is going to give Israel success in battle. She houses and hides the spies in her home in Jericho, and then sends them away with an escape plan (Josh 2). For this reason, this most unlikely of converts is incorporated into Israel at the end of the battle with Jericho (Josh 6). What a wonderful display of YHWH’s blessing to all the people of the earth (Gen 12:3). In this first battle, YHWH also disables Jericho’s defenses, but only as his people obey his strict marching orders. After the walls of the city are destroyed by YHWH, the people enter and win the battle.

This scene raises two ethical questions that surface numerous times in Joshua: Why did YHWH sanction a war of aggression, and why did YHWH command his people to devote everything in the city to destruction? As we begin to think through these questions, we should guard against making light of their gravity. I freely acknowledge we won’t be able to resolve all the tensions in a chapter as brief as this one, nor should we ever make light of any biblical scene in which YHWH pours out his wrath. But what we will be able to see is how the events in this book are important for the Bible’s understanding of God and his unfolding plan of redemption. What are some insights to help us make sense of this unique event from biblical history?

The first challenge is answered when we look all the way back in the biblical story to Genesis 15. In this chapter, YHWH initiates his covenant with Abram. This passage reveals that Abram’s descendants will be servants in a foreign land for four hundred years and that YHWH will then judge the nation they serve and bring them out with great possessions (Gen 15:13-14). Four hundred years before the exodus from Egypt, YHWH predicted it to Abram. The reason for

this four-hundred-year wait is also revealed: “For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16).

Gordon Wenham explains that in Genesis 15:16, “the Amorites stand for all the inhabitants of Canaan” who lived there prior to Israel.⁷ Although we are not told the specific sin of the Amorites in this verse, 1 Kings 21:26 reveals that the later King Ahab “acted very abominably in going after idols, *as the Amorites had done*, whom the LORD cast out before the people of Israel” (emphasis added). In this verse, the idolatry of the Amorites is said to be the reason they were cast out of the land in the book of Joshua. Brian Rosner explains why this was the case: “In the Bible there is no more serious charge than that of idolatry. Idolatry called for the strictest punishment, elicited the most disdainful polemic, prompted the most extreme measures of avoidance, and was regarded as the chief identifying characteristic of those who were the very antithesis of the people of God, namely, the Gentiles.”⁸ This is because YHWH is the only true God and therefore is rightly jealous for all worship to be reserved for him alone (e.g., Ex 20:5).⁹

The Hoover Dam is a wonder of early twentieth-century engineering. It is fed by the Colorado River, fills Lake Meade, and at capacity can “contain 28.9 million acre-feet of water covering about 248 square miles.”¹⁰ Imagine for a moment that a reservoir of this size was dry but was slowly being refilled by a garden hose. In this illustration, the massive, empty reservoir represents the extent of YHWH’s patience and mercy, and the water trickling in represents his wrath, prompted by humanity’s sin. The four-hundred-year wait until

⁷Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Zondervan, 1987), 332. See also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1990), 436.

⁸Brian S. Rosner, “Idolatry,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 570.

⁹While at first it may sound counterintuitive to think of God’s jealousy as a positive thing, consider that he is the only being in the universe for whom jealousy is *not* a sin, since he truly *is* God and so truly *does* deserve all worship, commitment, and devotion.

¹⁰“Hoover Dam,” Water Education Foundation, n.d., www.watereducation.org/aquapedia/hoover-dam.

Abram's descendants can possess Canaan is precisely because YHWH is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex 34:6-7). But during those four hundred years, the sin of the Amorite people will cause YHWH's wrath to keep trickling into the dam until it will finally overflow and burst forth. This is because YHWH is also a God “who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34:7).

This means that the wars in the book of Joshua are not mainly political wars of aggression. In these wars, YHWH is *simultaneously* giving Israel the land he promised them and using Israel as his means of pouring out his wrath on a people group's long-standing lifestyle of iniquity. As Stephen G. Dempster puts it, “The coming of the kingdom means that Israel must be agents of divine judgment, purging the land of its sinful population, preparing it for the presence of the holiness of God.”¹¹ Since the lives of their enemies—which were given by God—are being used to destroy God's image and corrupt God's world, they are offered back to God in an act of divine judgment.¹²

David J. H. Beldman adds, “The conquest of Canaan was a one-time event in the history of God's plan of salvation. The conquest was indeed commanded by God, but it was a unique event with a limited scope. Conquest was not a pattern that Yahweh set for his people; their identity was not as a conquering nation.”¹³ The trickle of YHWH's wrath prompted by this people's sin had filled the massive reservoir of YHWH's patience beyond capacity, and so the dam of YHWH's wrath burst forth, and Israel was the vessel of that wrath.

As a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab is spared and, along with her family, incorporated into Israel, we learn that even at the eleventh

¹¹Stephen G. Dempster, *The Return of the Kingdom: A Biblical Theology of God's Reign* (IVP Academic, 2024), 100.

¹²See Dempster, *Return of the Kingdom*, 107.

¹³David J. H. Beldman, *Deserting the King: The Book of Judges*, Transformative Word (Lexham, 2017), 76.

hour, if any of those great sinners would come to YHWH's side, they would be rescued and incorporated into his people. And since the Israelite Achan will later be put to death by YHWH for his sin (Josh 7), we learn that YHWH's distribution of judgment or mercy has nothing to do with ethnicity, gender, or any other arbitrary thing: The issue is faithfulness or unfaithfulness to YHWH.¹⁴

This also helps to explain the other ethical challenge in Joshua: the slaughter of seemingly innocent civilians and the destruction of property (including livestock). YHWH had already made clear to Israel through Moses that all the nations that currently inhabited Canaan had polluted the land with wicked practices.¹⁵ He had also commanded that these wicked nations be devoted to complete destruction in order to keep idolaters and idolatry out of Israel's home with YHWH.¹⁶ Paul R. House adds further, "Israel's role as instrument of divine punishment is accentuated by its commitment to take no spoil but rather to place all captured wealth in the treasury of the Lord (6:18-19). This is not an excursion meant to enhance Israel's financial standing."¹⁷

As we step back and survey the Bible's big-picture story, we also discover that the holy wars in Joshua are not the Bible's greatest display of God's wrath. These wars pale in comparison to the great white throne judgment described in Revelation 20. On this great and terrible day, judgment will not merely come for individuals or cities or even for all people living at a specific time in history. Every person who has ever lived will be raised for judgment. They will stand before the great white throne and will either gloriously enter a new heaven and a new earth in God's presence forever (Rev 21-22) or they will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15), a place where "their worm

¹⁴I first learned this insight in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Crossway, 2023), 165-66.

¹⁵See, e.g., Lev 18, especially Lev 18:24-25, 27.

¹⁶See Deut 7, especially Deut 7:2, 5, 25. This point is also made in Deut 20:10-18.

¹⁷Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 204.

shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (Is 66:24; cf. Mk 9:48). The wars in Joshua are a sober display of YHWH’s just wrath toward unrepentant sinners, but they ultimately point forward in the Bible’s story to the final judgment for all people of all time.

Joshua 13–21: Apportioning the land. After the holy wars, the apportioning of the land comes in Joshua 13–21. To twenty-first-century readers, these chapters are likely difficult to enjoy because they are a detailed record of geographical boundaries, place names, and land lotteries. For the ancient Israelite reader, though, every detail in these chapters was glorious.

If any of us were to receive a vast inheritance, would we be *bored* as the lawyer read through every detail about every investment and every property that was now ours? To the heir, the lawyer could read all day, and their excitement would only grow. Since the land allotment in the book of Joshua was much more than a *physical* inheritance, its possession was even more glorious. This land was a gift from YHWH, a place for his people to own and into which they would settle. Most importantly, it was the location where YHWH would settle *among* his redeemed people, where they would be free to worship him in the way he commanded. These chapters are a crucial step toward the Bible’s ultimate goal of YHWH’s people entering a new and better garden of Eden, a return to YHWH’s presence and favor that will never be lost and will only be glorious.

Joshua 18:1 is a great summary verse for this section: “Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel assembled at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them.” Oren Martin explains the important link between rest in the land and tabernacle: “The dwelling place of God is set up *after* rest has been achieved.”¹⁸ Once again, YHWH’s gift of land has a purpose: so

¹⁸Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 89.

YHWH can dwell in the midst of his people (in the tabernacle), and his people can freely worship him in the way he commands.

In case we are tempted to look back on this section of Joshua as the highest point in the Bible's story, these chapters also hint toward something ominous. Although Joshua emphasizes the faithfulness of YHWH in lavishing his people with their inheritance, we also discover whispers of trouble along the way, whispers that will turn to shouts in the book of Judges. While Israel has clearly been called to rid the land of idolatry and to only ever follow YHWH's lead in battles, the Gibeonite people deceive Israel into making a covenant with them (Josh 9). Although they voluntarily become Israel's servants, Deuteronomy 7:2 was clear that making a covenant with Canaan's idolatrous inhabitants would pollute the land with continued idolatrous practices and tempt God's people to do the same. Hamilton explains further that the book adds short notes about Israel's failure to completely drive out "the Geshurites or the Maacathites (13:13), the Jebusites (15:63), or the Canaanites in Gezer (16:10), and a series of Canaanite cities remain in the allotment to Manasseh (17:11-13). Near the time of his death (23:14), Joshua warns Israel about the polluting influence of these wicked people (23:7, 12)."¹⁹ Although the land is now under Israel's control, this control is not yet total.

Joshua 22–24: Serve YHWH in the land! Finally, in Joshua 22–24, the people are called to serve YHWH in the land (as opposed to serving other gods). The scene takes place many years after the allotment of land, near the end of Joshua's life. Joshua acknowledges the remaining peoples in the land and makes two speeches before he will die. In these, he calls the people to "do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses" and specifically not to "mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them" (Josh 23:6-7).

¹⁹Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 152.

Instead, they are to “cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day” (Josh 23:8).

Joshua continues by warning Israel that if they cling to the nations that remained in the land, intermarrying with them and committing idolatry along with them, the nations will “be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you” (Josh 23:13).

In his final speech, Joshua begins by reviewing YHWH’s faithfulness from the promise to Abraham to the possession of the Promised Land (Josh 24:2-13). In light of this, he calls the people to choose that day whom they will serve: “But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15). The people respond with resolve, but Joshua’s response is surprising: “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins” (Josh 24:19). The book concludes with Joshua’s death and a note that the people served YHWH during the days of Joshua and the elders who outlived him. Dempster observes, “The implication is that once these leaders were gone the people stopped following the Lord.”²⁰ We’ll have to wait until our next chapter to see this play out in the book of Judges.

LOOKING FORWARD TO CHRIST: ABRAHAM AND HIS OFFSPRING WILL BE HEIRS OF THE WORLD

We will fill out more of the Old Testament story of land in later chapters of this book. For now, it is enough to say in summary that the ominous warning at the end of Joshua will come to fruition: Israel will eventually lose their land. Although they will later return and rebuild under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, this return will not be complete. The Old Testament concludes with a yearning for fullness.

²⁰Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 130.

As we turn to the New Testament, we discover a primary emphasis on Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament hope, the proclamation of the gospel, and the spread of the church to the ends of the earth. But far from merely *spiritualizing* the Old Testament promises of land, God will also lavish his people with an expansive (and eternal!) home. In the New Testament, the focus is primarily on forming his special people in Christ before the story climaxes with these people in their global, new-earthly inheritance.²¹

How should Christians apply the Old Testament land promises? As we read the New Testament with this question in mind, we discover that it develops a rich theology of the land in a focused, Christ-centered manner and also in an expansive, earthy manner.

A focused, Christ-centered view of the land. As we recall the main function of the land—that YHWH will settle among his settled people—we discover why the New Testament doesn't emphasize the land of Canaan as the geographical boundary of his people: Jesus is the presence of God dwelling intimately among his people. He is *Immanuel*, a Hebrew word that means "God with us" (Is 7:14; Mt 1:23). In fact, according to John's Gospel, Jesus is the Word who is eternal, who is with God, who is God, who is the Creator, and who is the source of life. *This Word* was made flesh and *tabernacled among us* (Jn 1:1-5, 14). Just like the first tabernacle, this tabernacle was fragile—Jesus was born in a human body with all of its weaknesses. Also just like the first tabernacle, this one also housed *the presence of God among us* (Jn 1:14). The Old Testament land, with YHWH dwelling among his people, pales in comparison to the focused, Christ-centered fulfillment of the land promises in the New Testament.

This also explains why Jesus can say, "Destroy this *temple*, and in three days I will raise it up," and why John can add, "He was speaking

²¹See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Crossway, 2018), 523; Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 118.

about *the temple of his body*” (Jn 2:19, 21, emphasis added). Since the tabernacle and temple had the same purpose, the principle is the same. Here Jesus is talking about his coming death and resurrection on the third day. As he speaks to Jews in the Jerusalem temple, he also corrects them: The *real* temple, the temple to which the Old Testament temple pointed, *is his body*. Once again, in the person of Jesus, the land promises find their initial fulfillment because he *is* God’s presence among his people.

An expansive, earthy view of the land. Earlier in this chapter, we noticed that the Old Testament does not define the geographical boundaries of the Promised Land with uniform precision. I suggested that this was to make room for an ever-expanding people of God who will possess “the gate of his enemies” and “all these lands” (Gen 22:17; 26:3). This seems to hint that the borders of the Promised Land will begin small and eventually grow to accommodate an ever-expanding people of God: Joshua 21:43-45 is just the beginning of Israel’s possession of land.

Although Jesus embodies the purpose of the land, with God dwelling among his people, the New Testament also maintains the importance of place. In fact, it *expands* its borders. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promises that the meek will “inherit *the earth*” (Mt 5:5, emphasis added), and he also “taught his disciples to pray that God’s (heavenly) kingdom would come to earth (Matt. 6:9-10).”²² The apostle Paul later adds, “The promise to Abraham and his offspring that *he would be heir of the world* did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom 4:13, emphasis added). Jesus and Paul are clear: The Old Testament promise of land will not be ultimately fulfilled until God’s people inherit *the entire world*.²³

²²Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 126.

²³In the Old Testament, Ps 72:8 and Zech 9:10 also speak of a coming king whose rule will be “from sea to sea, [and] from the River to the ends of the earth.” Thanks to Jonny Atkinson for pointing me to these Old Testament texts (personal correspondence).

This explains why the most mature Christians live with a holy dissatisfaction: They yearn for a fullness that will never be completely attained in this life. Even though we have been redeemed by Christ and we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, something much better is coming, and that something is *earthly*. As the apostle Peter teaches, “According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

When a Christian dies, they are away from their body and at home with their Lord, which is better by far (2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23). But the Christian’s *eternal* inheritance is *not* an out-of-body existence in heaven. There is something much better coming: a future when God’s Old Testament people and New Testament believers in Jesus will be given eternal resurrection bodies that will never wear out. In those bodies, they will live on a new earth forever. In this awesome place it will be declared, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with [humanity]. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:3-4). The land promise for God’s people is of an eternal, embodied, global inheritance.

Boyd Seavers summarizes beautifully the way Christians should apply the Old Testament land promises:

When Christians read Joshua, every victory God secured and every claim of land Israel enjoyed should remind us of God’s faithfulness and be viewed as a pointer to the great victory won by Jesus over the enemies of sin and death, which secured us a lasting inheritance (Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Peter 1:3-4). Those who read Joshua rightly, gain hope for the day when complete perfect peace will be realized throughout the entire world.²⁴

²⁴Boyd Seavers, “Joshua,” in *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus’ Bible*, ed. Jason S. DeRouchie (Kregel Academic, 2013), 174.

What a glorious day that will be! In the end, as we understand the Old Testament teaching on a land for God's people in light of the Bible's grand story, it deepens our love for Christ and helps us to yearn with certain hope for our future, awesome inheritance in a new heavens and a new earth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Prior to reading this chapter, what was your understanding of the Old Testament teaching on the Promised Land?
2. Reread Genesis 22:17; 26:3. How do these two verses hint toward a future land possession that will be much more expansive than any earthly territory that Old Testament Israel owned?
3. What is the main purpose of the land, according to the Old Testament? Share some example passages aloud with your group that reinforce this teaching.
4. Read Genesis 15:12-16. What are some of its key insights for understanding the book of Joshua?
5. Why is it important that Christ fulfills the Old Testament hope of land before that inheritance expands to the entire world (e.g., Mt 5:5; Rom 4:13), a new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-5)?
6. Share something you learned in this chapter that you found particularly insightful and encouraging.

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