

Dividing the Land

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Preacher: Rev Iver Martin

[0 : 00] We're going to turn now once again to that chapter, to Joshua chapter 18, page 231. We'll start the chapter again at the beginning. Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel assembled at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there, the land lace of Jude before them.

There remained among the people of Israel seven tribes whose inheritance had not yet been apportioned. So Joshua said to the people of Israel, How long will you put off going in to take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you?

I think it's important, first of all, to try and remember where this chapter appears in the history of the Old Testament. The people of Israel, who Moses had led through the wilderness for 40 years, had now crossed the Jordan and they were in the promised land.

Moses had died and their leader was Joshua. And his task was, first of all, to lead the people from one chapter in their history over the Jordan, the River Jordan, and into the land that God had always promised to give to Abraham and his descendants.

Up until that point, it was a promise. Up until that point, nobody had ever seen the land that God was going to. They had heard about it, they knew about it, or at least they knew some things about it, but they hadn't experienced until they stepped foot over the Jordan and entered into the land itself.

[2 : 00] Their first task was to drive out the people who lived there. Now, I suppose, according to today's world, today's world would take a very dim view of that fact, that historical fact.

And that's why it's important to explain it, not in terms of politics, but in terms of what God commanded the people to do. The fact that Israel drove out the inhabitants of Canaan was not because they wanted ethnic cleansing, or not because they believed that they were some kind of elite amongst the human race.

It was simply and purely because God had given them this express command to do so, and they had to do what God wanted them to do.

And then it comes to this chapter here, in this part of the book of Joshua, where having done so, at least to some extent having done so, they now are in the position where they are going to divide the land of Canaan out amongst themselves, amongst the people of Israel.

This was now the fulfillment of what God had promised up until that point. So far, it had been a promise. So far, they had to, in order to, that promise had simply been an act of faith on their part, and now it was a reality.

[3 : 24] They were actually standing, every one of them, within the land that God had promised his people. And this chapter describes how the land was divided amongst them.

Now, first of all, there was the tribe of Judah, and we read about this earlier on in the book of Joshua, that the tribe of Judah, they got the portion of the land that was south, and then there were the three tribes that wanted a certain part of land that was east of the River Jordan.

And these were Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. They had previously asked Moses if they could have this part, not to go over to the west part of Jordan, but to stay on the east part, and Moses had promised them that land.

And then there was the tribe of the Levites. The Levites were the priests, or amongst whom were the priests, and they didn't have land that they could call their own because of the particular work that God had assigned them to do.

Now, if you take away these five tribes, you have seven tribes left. And chapter 18, the chapter in front of us, it describes how those seven tribes, they divided the land that God had given to Israel amongst each tribe.

[4 : 42] So that meant that they had to identify seven portions of land, seven areas, and then they had to decide which area was going to belong to each of the tribes.

I want to say three things about this chapter, because you'll probably be thinking, well, this is one of the most obscure chapters in the Bible. You only have to read the last part of it, and you only have to experience the difficulty of reading all these names.

And then before that, there seems to be this endless list of, it seems to be a geography lesson as it would have been in the old days, without PowerPoint and without magic boards, or without blackboards even, or maps.

This is a geography lesson of the, and it's actually quite an interesting one. I'm sure that many of us grew up, as I did, in Sunday school with a map, with a big massive map of the land of Canaan, or maybe even two or three different maps that showed the land of Canaan at different times in the Old Testament.

And one of them would have been, it would have shown all the different areas that belonged to the different tribes. And, of course, that information comes from this very chapter.

[5 : 56] And it shows all the different areas that were going to be assigned, that were going to be assigned to each of the tribes. But it's not just a geography lesson. And neither is it just a tedious list, a tedious description, of where the border of one tribe ended, and where the border of the other tribe began.

Neither is it just a difficult list of names, the kind of names of places that we read at the beginning. This is God's Word. And every part of God's Word has something to tell us in the 21st century, something in which God is addressing His own people, and in which we are able to learn something and to discover something that is applicable for our own lives as God's people, and something that is a challenge, I hope, to those who aren't.

So I want to say three things about the division of the land that God had given to His people. First of all, I want us to say very simply, and you might think it's so obvious that it shouldn't be said, but I'll explain this in a minute.

The land, first of all, had to be divided. That's the first thing. That's what the chapter's about. The land had to be divided.

The second thing I want us to think about this evening is that the land had to be divided legally. Whenever you're dividing land and giving land or transferring land or whenever there's a question of ownership, it has to be legal in order that there should be no question about who owns the land.

[7 : 31] This chapter is a legal document. It is proof. It's down on paper, black and white. Who owns what? Amongst the people of Israel. It's a legal division.

So the land had to be divided and the land had to be divided legally. But then the third thing I want us to look at this evening is that it had to be divided by lot.

It had to be divided fairly, equitably, and it had to be divided before the Lord. This was a very solemn event that took place.

Verse 7 tells us that, or rather, later on, it tells us that it was to be divided before the Lord in the presence of God.

So let's look at these three very simple things this evening and I hope that we'll be instructed by it. First of all, the land had to be divided. Now, why am I saying that?

[8 : 28] Well, because the people of Israel had come across the Jordan. They were now beginning to settle in the land. They had driven out most of those who had inhabited Canaan, as I said, by the express command of God.

And if you want to blame anybody for this, you have to blame God. It was his command that drove the people of Israel to drive the people of Canaan out of the land.

But now, remarkably, astonishingly, at the end of all that, the people seem to have just become lazy. And they were unwilling to take that step forward in their possession of what God had given them.

And that's why Joshua has to scold them. And he has to give them a wake-up call. In verse 3, Joshua said to the people of Israel, How long will you put off going in to take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you?

How long? In other words, this was a rebuke coming from Joshua, but it was also a rebuke that was coming from the Lord. As Joshua spoke to them, they knew that God was speaking to them. And he was wakening them up from what appears to have been a laziness and a complacency.

[9 : 51] Already, they were beginning to get so accustomed to their new life and this new chapter in their history that they were not thinking of the next step.

They were becoming too comfortable the way they were. and the way they were was clearly an unsatisfactory situation. They were just kind of, I suppose, settling anywhere and everywhere, not according to any kind of order.

And they were looking rather to the present than to the future. They weren't thinking of the next generation. They weren't thinking of what God was doing, not only amongst them, but for the whole, for the world to come.

God had a purpose for the world to come and his purpose was going to be that it was through the people of Israel that Jesus was going to come into the world. That was his ultimate purpose. And the people of Israel were rather than looking forward to those promises being fulfilled, they were becoming self-satisfied. And it's the easiest thing in the world even for Christians to become self-satisfied and complacent with the way things are rather than looking into the future and asking God what step God wants us to take for the sake of doing his will and completing his purpose.

[11 : 19] See, these people, I'm sure, they were already beginning to enjoy the land that was flowing with milk and honey. They were enjoying the good food that they were already experiencing.

so different from the wilderness where they were wandering, not knowing where they were going to be from one day or one week to the next. And the hardships that inevitably there were in the wilderness having to cry out to God for water and having to cry out to God for manna and quail and all the rest of it.

They were enjoying the great variety of food that there was and they were enjoying the goodness of the land. So they stopped and they forgot who they were and they began to live for the moment rather than living for the Lord.

They began to lose sight that this was God's gift to them that at last they were now enjoying the thing that they had believed in and that they were hoping for all along.

Now it was a reality then the expectation was all gone. It disappeared. And you know there is a sense in which it kind of reflects the way we can be sometimes in the gospel.

[12 : 35] We can lose sight of how magnificent God's gift has been to us. We've been thinking about this as we've been going through the book of the letter to the Ephesians in chapter 1 in which Paul lists he gives a blow by blow account of all the massive privileges that there are in being a Christian.

We've been called from all eternity. We've been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. We've been loved by the Father. We have an inheritance and so on.

And one of the things we've noticed is that how to the extent to which we can lose sight of how massive the joy of the Christian life and the privilege of the Christian life is.

And it can happen very quickly. And here is God's people and they are now enjoying the privilege of God having brought them all the way through the wilderness 40 years in the wilderness now they're there and then they've lost that sense of anticipation and that sense of excitement at what God has done for them and that sense of excitement at what God will continue to do for and that willingness to say to the Lord here I am send me because the Lord who had brought them to this point was the Lord who still had a purpose for them.

Life did not begin life did not end on the day that they crossed the Jordan in many ways it was only beginning for them and it's the same when we come to Christ when we come to Christ life is only the beginning there's a whole lifetime however long or short God has for us a whole lifetime ahead of us and who knows what that might be and sometimes people can be afraid of looking into the future of course we don't know what the future has for any one of us and if we knew what the future was then maybe we would shy away from it and run from it and yet there's a sense in which a Christian has to say Lord don't let me become complacent don't let me become so caught up with the present that I just want to live now and I don't want to think about the future I want to continue to be led by your spirit and I want every day to obey you no matter what that costs and no matter what it involves

[15 : 25] I met a woman last week in Peru and she came from Ireland I'm sure she perhaps wouldn't be very keen on me talking about her in this way but it just struck me there must have been a time in that woman's life when she wouldn't ever have imagined that she would end up in a shanty town surrounded by people of incredible poverty doing the most difficult job that I could ever imagine anyone would do I'm sure there must have been a light maybe not so long ago when she

would never have imagined that that's what the Lord had for her to end up 12,000 miles away from home in a different culture and yet there she is because she was willing to obey the voice of the Lord and you know the Lord never makes us do things reluctantly he doesn't drag us kicking and screaming he makes us willing to do things but yet we have to be willing by listening to his voice and here the people of Israel were losing their willingness they were becoming lazy they were becoming complacent and that's why

Joshua had to wake them up and said how long will you put off going in to take possession of the land which the Lord the God of your fathers has given you you see there's only one way to once you discover Christ that's it there's no going back you're on the beginning of a road that's full of unexpected events unexpected turnings but listen you know that every turning there's nothing that happens at random you know that God is in control of every event and he's leading and guiding you from one day to the next and that's what makes the Christian life such an adventure it is an adventure I know that you're perhaps thinking I'm exaggerating I'm not exaggerating at all the Christian life is full of unexpected happenings and yet there's something within us that is afraid of them once what we have now we want to keep what we have now we want to stay where we are now and we're not willing to step out into the unknown to step out of the boat and onto the water and to follow Jesus wherever he asks us and commands us to go so the land had to be divided somebody had to be the first person to stand up and say right we're going to do we're going to do it even although it's a difficult job and it has to be done we're going to do it because God wants us to do it the second thing that I notice about this is that the land had to be divided legally and I'm sure that you probably wondered as I read

I deliberately read the second half of the passage deliberately read it I was tempted not to read it and all kinds of thoughts were going through my mind earlier well the congregation is going to wonder what possible lesson can be drawn from this tedious description of the we know very little I'm sure there's very few of us here this evening that know that are so familiar with the geography of Judah and Israel and the Middle East that we'll be able to identify some of these places like Beth Horon and Zemarai and Bethel and Parva and Ofra and all these places you need a map don't you but that's the point that's the point they didn't have the benefit of Google Earth they didn't have the benefit of GPS they didn't even have the benefit of satellite photography or all the kind of conveniences that we have today so that we're able to draw maps and it would be such an easy thing for us to just download a map of the

Middle East and to just draw the lines where we thought they would be they actually and what happened was that Joshua chose three representatives of each of the seven tribes that means 21 men had to get up and who knows how long this took but they had to travel all over the area and they had to write a description it it amazes me it amazes me when I look you know you go to museums sometimes and you see old maps and maps as they were drawn at the time of men like Scott of the Antarctic and even before then you think how in the world did they know the shape of these countries and of course the shape of these countries is not always accurate is it when you look at a really old map and compare it with an accurate satellite map then you know of course that there's a difference but nevertheless you can't help admiring those men who were able to draw and to figure out the shape of different areas and countries just from the description that they saw and that's what's happening here these men would have gone all the way through the areas of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and all of these places and they would have described what they saw they would have written down everything where the forests were where the mountains were and where the rivers were and each of the areas each of the sections of the land and then they had to take it all the way back again to Joshua because of the importance of dividing can you imagine what would have happened one day if they hadn't divided the land tribe by tribe and furthermore can you imagine what would have happened if it hadn't been done legally accurately and each of these 21 men had to be accurate they had to be absolutely precise in what they were doing they couldn't just say oh well

I think it's round about this area where there are three trees no no they had to be absolutely accurate in everything so they could bring all the information back so they could write it all down and so that so that the borders were clearly defined and so that each portion each area of land was given to each tribe can you imagine what would have happened if it hadn't been like that it was easy then you see everybody was kind of in a relaxed holiday mood they had all won the battle over their enemies so they were celebrating and so they were being able to they were able to relax can you

imagine once they had settled how soon would it have been where one family would have said to another hey that's my land you're on and the other family would have said no it's not that's my land you're on we belong to the land belongs to us no it doesn't where's your proof I'm quite sure that you know enough about land to know that land has to be defined legally the ownership of land has to be defined legally and the more precise that you can make that ownership then the less chance there is of problems coming in the future less chance there is of dispute about ownership and that's exactly what you have here a legal document that defines where every portion of land is going to be and who it's going to belong to to avoid you see

[23 : 15] God is God is he cares about his people and what this is is a provision for them to prevent them falling out with one another but what it also is it is historical and legal proof that God keeps his word up until that time God had promised Abraham Isaac and Jacob and all of those who had been forefathers of Moses he had promised them that one day they would that he would lead them to the promised land and now they're in a position where it has become a reality every tree is mapped every mountain is becoming known they're becoming familiar with the actuality of God's promise what up until then had been simply something that they had put their faith in now they were seeing it for themselves and if ever there was a proof that God keeps his promise it's

Joshua chapter 18 God is saying to them here it is here's everything that I promised you there were some of you who didn't believe I was ever going to bring you here some of you who wanted to die in the wilderness some of you even wanted to go back to Egypt because you believed you were better off in the old country even although they were cruel to you and they put to death your babies and they made you to work and you were suffering terribly and then you had the gall to say to me we want to be back in Egypt that's what they said some of them some of them simply didn't believe that God was good enough to bring them into the land of Canaan they believed that God was a liar and he would never fulfill his promises they believed that Moses was a fraud just the same way as they think that Jesus is a fraud that he will never ever fulfill the eternal life well here it is this is the legal proof down to the last tree that God was had fulfilled his promise to

Israel now what do we do this we take this chapter we say just as certainly as he fulfilled his promise in one point in history and as his promise became a reality for the people of Israel so when he tells us tonight those who believe in me will have everlasting life I go to prepare a place for you then we can lay hold of that with absolute certainty even though we've never seen it just the same way as the people of Israel never seen the land of Canaan until they crossed over and then they saw it then they lived in it so tonight we can take this chapter as living proof all the proof that we need that God keeps his word when he tells us tonight that God so loved the world and gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life that promise is to you tonight that means if you believe and trust in the

Lord Jesus Christ his death and his resurrection if you ask him to open up your heart and ask him to change your life he will complete that promise and faith is where we believe that promise without having seen it now what was faith to the people of Israel was now a reality one day it will be a reality for us as well those who believe in Jesus it will be a reality question is do you believe in it do you take him at his word here it is Joshua 18 proof that God keeps his word but the land was also divided by lot this chapter describes to us of the fact that it wasn't a free for all can you imagine what would have happened if Joshua had said well decide amongst yourselves who the land is going to belong to there would have been a scrabble everybody would have been going for the best places and two families or two tribes would have found a good place and they would have then gone to war to decide who was going to take ownership of the best place because in the land of Canaan there were some places that were more fertile than others some places that were more hilly and rocky some places that were more full of trees some places and so on and so forth and of course the best land was a premium they were dependent on their cattle their cows their sheep to find pasture and so the best land was always more desirable and so if Joshua had left it to every tribe to decide which section then they would have destroyed one another and they would have put each other to death they would have killed each other so what they did was they took the description or the map they would have placed it in front of the people they would have divided out each area each natural area into seven different sections and then what they did was they cast lots but this wasn't a lottery it wasn't down to luck or chance or randomness they cast lots before the Lord that's what we read they cast lots before the verse 10 Joshua cast lots for them in

Shiloh before the Lord what that meant was that this was God's way of leading and guiding his people to the right choice and to the right place to live now I don't want to go into the theology of casting lots we actually find it on one or two different occasions in the Bible for example amongst the disciples when Judas went and hanged himself the disciples decided to have one other disciple to take his place and the way they chose between the two contenders was to cast lots again before the Lord but doing so in God's presence prayerfully asking God to show the disciples which one of these two men he wanted to be a replacement for Judah for Judas Judas Iscariot then having cast lots they knew that this was God's choice and that's the important thing in this chapter as each tribe discovered by the lot which area of land was to be theirs they knew that that area was

[30 : 24] God's gift to them and so they went confidently and set up their homes and began to cultivate the fields began to pasture their animals began to settle and have families and to marry and to do everything that you do in in your new home confident that they weren't in the wrong place they were in the right place because they knew that God had led them there and had given them that land as his inheritance and so those who lived by faith they would wake up every morning they would look out their windows and they would thank God for what he had given to them and the provision that he had made for them every day they looked out they looked out and they saw the goodness of God and the marvelous generosity of God in having and having brought them safely into Canaan and having given them his promise and that's the way we should be as well if you're a believer in the Lord Jesus tonight every day

God tells us to rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice that's what the apostle tells us rejoice in the Lord always why are we to rejoice there are times in our lives where we are our circumstances are difficult and where we have trouble and where we have dark things where we experience dark things and yet even amongst all of that we're able to rejoice in how God has provided for our every need and he has given us the greatest gift of all which is his son Jesus Christ listen if we have Christ we have everything whatever else we have to face if you have the Lord you have everything you lack nothing and I lack nothing if I belong to Jesus Christ and that means once again as I've said so many times the most important thing that stands in front of every one of us this evening is where we are with Jesus because if we're in Christ we have everything and we're able to say that the Lord is my provider he has provided everything for me according to his riches in mercy and yet am I not right in saying or in guessing that many for many of those people it would be the opposite they would do what you and I do so often they would look out their windows and they would look far away beyond the valley and they would and the Benjaminites would look over to the Nephtalites and they would admire what they had Benjaminites maybe had rocky ground difficult to cultivate not as fertile and look at these look at that other tribe 20 miles away from me I can see how green their grass is why did God not give me that land it's what we do isn't it just what we do always looking over the fence at someone else even as Christians someone else's gifts someone else's circumstances someone else's job someone else's health someone else's looks someone else's talent their money as soon as you begin to think like that it's like a worm that starts eating its way into your heart and destroys you don't ever underestimate how serious envy and jealousy is it can destroy you that's why it's important that there are chapters like this that remind us that what we have we have from God and our lot that's what we have here each tribe was given a lot each tribe was given the lot that was given to them by God and their lot was given to them because he had a specific purpose for them to fulfill even if their circumstance was difficult even if it involved a lifetime of hardship and even if someone else 20 miles down the road didn't appear to suffer what they were suffering their lot was the lot that God gave them and your lot is what God has given you tonight my lot is what God has given me tonight and if there are areas of difficulty and pressure and stress if there are areas of hardship it's because God wants he has a purpose for us for each one of us we're all different every single one of us and it's quite wrong of you to think that because someone else appears to have an easier life than you or a more blessed life than you that somehow he does that's wrong you don't know what that person's life is you have no idea what's going on in that person's heart and the struggles that that person has when we sing psalm 16 and we sang it earlier on David he sang this unto me happily the lines in pleasant places fell you ever wondered what these words mean we sang them so it's one of the most popular psalms we think do you ever wonder what they mean unto me happily the lines in pleasant places fell do you know this is exactly what he's talking about the lines were the boundary lines that were that divided the different areas that were given to each tribe and David

recognizes that his life is the life that God has apportioned to him and no matter what he's still able to say unto me happily the lines in pleasant places fell and you're able to say that if you're a follower of Jesus Christ tonight you're able to say exactly the same thing that God has provided for you and will continue to provide for to you according to his riches in glory that's his promise to his people let's pray our father in heaven we once again want to rejoice in the fact that there is nothing random and there is nothing that happens by chance in the Christian life we give thanks oh lord for the plan and the purpose you have for your people that involves your people in every age involves it individually and collectively and we pray that tonight that even this chapter this relatively unknown chapter and your word will be a strength to us and it will be a source of comfort to us and a reminder to us that God keeps his word and that the life that you have given to us is your goodness and the blessing of God in every area we give we pray lord for where there is difficulty and where for some of us perhaps there are uncertain things ask lord that we will instinctively run to you and recognize oh lord that you have a purpose and a plan in every event and in every difficulty and lord give us to be closer to you than ever before in Jesus name amen