

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 13

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 13 opens with a striking divine confrontation: the LORD addresses Joshua in his old age with the words “there remains yet very much land to be possessed” (v. 1). The chapter then pivots to an extended geographical survey, cataloguing the territories that remain unconquered — Philistia, Geshurites, the Avvites, Sidon, the Canaanites in Lebanon and beyond (vv. 2–6) — followed by Moses’ prior distribution of Transjordanian territories to Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (vv. 7–33). The Reubenite allotment occupies verses 15–23, the Gadite allotment verses 24–28, and the half-tribe of Manasseh verses 29–31. The chapter closes with a twice-stated summary concerning Levi: the tribe receives no territorial inheritance, because “the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance” (v. 33).

The chapter is dominated by lists — boundaries, towns, regional descriptions — material that modern readers find tedious and preachers routinely skip. But this formal quality is itself part of the content: the lists are acts of divine record-keeping, a covenant Lord documenting His distribution of a promised land to His covenant people. The incomplete conquest is not presented as failure; it is presented as unfinished business held in tension with a real and prior divine gift.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two things simultaneously through Joshua 13. First, He is calling His people to honest acknowledgment that the promise is not yet fully realized — there is land still to be taken, and the people of God must not settle for partial possession when complete inheritance is promised. Second, through the cataloguing of what has already been given and recorded, He is assuring His people that His word stands: what He promised to Abraham, what He gave through Moses in Transjordan, what He allotted to these tribes is *secured* — registered in the covenant record — whether or not every city has yet been subdued. The Levitical summary at the close seals the chapter’s intent: the ultimate inheritance is not geographical but personal — the LORD Himself.

Subject Sentence: The LORD acknowledges unfinished conquest while formally recording His prior covenant distributions as already secured.

Primary Claim: God never treats partial progress as complete possession, yet He also never withdraws what He has already given — the unfinished and the secured coexist in

His administration of promise, calling His people forward without abandoning them where they stand.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the unconquered land (vv. 1–6)

A common homiletical misreading treats “there remains yet very much land to be possessed” as a rebuke — evidence of Israel’s failure, God’s disappointment, or a warning about complacency. This reading is not without force, but it overreads the tone of the text. The divine address is not accusatory; it is instructive. The LORD is orienting Joshua for the work of *distribution*, not prosecuting Israel for failure. The primary movement of verse 1 is forward-looking — “now therefore, divide this land” — not backward-looking in condemnation. A Wesleyan reading might press this toward a perfectionist application: the unconquered territory as persistent sin requiring complete eradication. The Reformed reading prefers to see this as covenantal realism: God acknowledges genuine incompleteness while sustaining genuine promise, and He commands ongoing obedience even in the face of partial progress. The two are not in tension; they are the structure of sanctification itself.

The Transjordanian allotments and the earlier Mosaic distribution

A Dispensational reading may flag the Transjordanian territories as outside the traditional “Promised Land” boundaries and use this to distinguish between Mosaic and Davidic-era land promises. This is not without textual grounding — the Transjordanian allotments are indeed described as Mosaic distributions (v. 8, v. 32), and they are formally distinguished from the Cisjordanian allotments that follow in later chapters. However, the chapter does not treat this as a theological problem; it treats both allotments as equally legitimate covenant distributions under the same LORD. The Reformed reading does not need to press a hard Israel/Church hermeneutical distinction here — it can simply receive the chapter as part of the unified covenant history in which God is faithful to His people across varied circumstances and territories.

The Levitical non-inheritance and the phrase “the LORD is their inheritance” (v. 33)

This clause is the theological summit of the chapter, and it is frequently under-read. A common homiletical approach treats it as a logistical note — Levi had cities among the other tribes, so no territory was needed. This reading is not wrong but is theologically impoverished. The phrase echoes Numbers 18:20 (spoken directly to Aaron) and anticipates Psalm 16:5, Psalm 73:26, and ultimately the New Testament’s vision of the inheritance of Christ Himself. The Reformed reading presses hard here: the Levitical exception is not merely administrative; it is *typological*. It reveals that territorial possession is not the deepest level of the inheritance God gives — the LORD Himself is. Every believer in Christ is, in this sense, a Levite: their inheritance is not a piece of the world but the living

God. This typological reading does not require abandoning the historical-grammatical sense but *extends* it across the canon in a way the text itself invites.

Canonical allotment-lists as Scripture

A pervasive homiletical pitfall (addressed below) treats the boundary and town lists as inert filler — the “phone book” sections of Scripture that simply need to be endured. This reflects a canon-within-a-canon approach that implicitly treats narrative and theological discourse as “real” Scripture and geographical data as incidental. The Reformed doctrine of Scripture resists this. The lists are not illustrative material; they are themselves theological claims — evidence of a covenant LORD who cares about particulars, who names towns and boundaries, who registers specific people in specific places as recipients of specific promises. The proper Reformed response is not to find a way to “get through” the lists but to ask what God is asserting *by including* them.

Key Canonical Support

- **Numbers 18:20** — “*The LORD said to Aaron, ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.’*” — The direct antecedent to v. 33; establishes the Levitical non-inheritance as covenant design, not accident.
 - **Deuteronomy 3:12–17** — Moses’ own account of the Transjordanian distributions to Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh; establishes the prior covenantal grounding of Joshua 13’s allotments and confirms continuity between Mosaic and Josianic-era administration of the promise.
 - **Psalms 16:5–6** — “*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup... The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.*” — The psalmist appropriates the allotment-language of Joshua 13 and applies it personally: the LORD Himself as the believer’s measured portion. This is the inner logic of the Levitical clause made spiritually universal.
 - **Psalms 73:25–26** — “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*” — The ultimate application of the Levitical inheritance-principle: no earthly territory, however good, competes with God Himself as the final inheritance of His people.
 - **Hebrews 11:9–10, 13–16** — The patriarchs “died in faith, not having received the things promised... they were strangers and exiles on the earth... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” — Establishes the typological incompleteness of all earthly territorial inheritance and its fulfillment in Christ’s heavenly city; Joshua 13’s “land remaining” takes on eschatological resonance.
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Aim: To show that God’s faithful recording of His covenant distributions — including both what remains and what is already secured — is meant to sustain His people in honest, forward-moving obedience rather than either complacency or despair.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD addresses Joshua in old age: much land remains to be possessed	Divine initiative; not rebuke but reorientation; the command that follows is forward-looking
2–6	Catalogue of unconquered territories: Philistia, Geshurites, Avvites, Sidon, Canaanite regions	Specific geographic detail; five Philistine lords named; the incompleteness is documented, not glossed
7	Divine command: “Now therefore divide this land for an inheritance” to the nine and a half tribes	The pivot of the chapter — from what remains to what is to be given
8–14	Transition summary: the two and a half Transjordanian tribes already received their inheritance from Moses; catalogue of defeated Transjordanian kings; Levi receives no inheritance (first mention)	v. 13 notes Geshurites and Maacathites not driven out — incomplete conquest in Transjordan as well
15–23	Reuben’s allotment: Arnon border, Medeba plateau, cities including Heshbon, Dibon, Bamoth-baal; Balaam son of Beor noted as killed by Israel	Specific city lists; historical note about Balaam adds covenant-faithfulness dimension
24–28	Gad’s allotment: Jazer, Gilead, half of Ammon, Mahanaim, the Jordan border	Cities and regional boundaries; confirms prior Mosaic grant
29–31	Half-tribe of Manasseh’s allotment: half of Gilead, Bashan, kingdom of Og, sixty cities of Jair	Machir son of Manasseh receives Gilead; reflects Numbers 32 history

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
32	Summary: Moses distributed these inheritances in the plains of Moab	Grounds the Transjordanian allotments in Mosaic covenant action
33	Levi receives no inheritance: “the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance”	Theological summit of the chapter; Levitical exception as covenant design, with typological resonance

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Unfinished Land: What Remains to Be Possessed
2	7–14	The Command to Distribute and the Prior Grants
3	15–31	The Recorded Allotments: Reuben, Gad, and Half-Manasseh
4	32–33	The Levitical Exception: The LORD Himself as Inheritance

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD acknowledges unfinished conquest while formally recording His prior covenant distributions as already secured.

Primary Claim: God never treats partial progress as complete possession, yet He also never withdraws what He has already given — the unfinished and the secured coexist in His administration of promise, calling His people forward without abandoning them where they stand.

Applications (Five)

1. Refuse the false peace of partial possession. The LORD’s word to Joshua — “there remains yet very much land” — does not come as condemnation but as an honest corrective to settling. The people had taken much; they had not taken all. God does not accept our framing of “enough progress” when He has promised complete inheritance. The believer who has grown in some areas of obedience and holiness while tolerating persistent patterns of unbelief, unrepentance, or idolatry in others must hear this word: the incompleteness is not hidden from God, it is named by Him, and He calls His people forward into what remains. (*Affections/worship — redirecting the desire for spiritual comfort toward honest assessment of what has not yet been taken*)

2. Rest in what God has already recorded and secured. The chapter is not only about what remains — it is equally about what has been allotted, named, registered, and given. God does not just point toward the future; He documents the past. The believer's standing before God, the inheritance secured in Christ, the promises already ratified in His blood — these are not contingent on your performance of what remains. They are covenant record. When the “land remaining” feels overwhelming, the gospel answer is not to minimize the remaining but to stand on the secured: you are already known, already allotted, already His. *(Mind/belief — establishing assurance in the face of acknowledged incompleteness)*

3. Let the specificity of God's record-keeping deepen your confidence in His personal care. God names cities. God draws boundary lines. God records which tribe got which territory, which cities were included, which kings were defeated. The level of particularity in this chapter is not bureaucratic accident; it is a revelation of the character of the covenant LORD who cares about specific people in specific places. If God keeps records this precise about the distribution of Cisjordanian real estate, He keeps equally precise record of you — your name, your situation, your need, your inheritance. The one who catalogues God's cities does not forget His children's names. *(Mind/belief — reframing the character of God as particular, attentive, record-keeping covenant Lord)*

4. Examine whether your functional inheritance is the LORD or something He gives. The Levitical clause — “the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance” — stands as both exception and invitation. The Levites receive no land because they receive God Himself. This is not presented as a consolation prize; it is the deepest form of inheritance available. Every believer is called to this same posture: not to treat God as the means to earthly goods (healing, prosperity, stability, family, career) but to receive God Himself as the good. Ask honestly: if God gave you everything you currently want but withheld Himself, would that feel like gain or loss? The answer reveals whether your functional inheritance is the LORD or His gifts. *(Affections/worship — idol-diagnosis: is God the treasure or the vending machine?)*

5. Press into the unfinished areas of your obedience rather than defending why they remain. The chapter does not explain why the Geshurites and Maacathites remained in the land (v. 13) — it simply notes that they were not driven out and that Israel dwelt among them. The notation is not an accusation but a record. The Spirit keeps record of what remains — not to condemn the believer but to call the believer forward. Identify one specific area where you have settled for coexistence with what should be driven out — a pattern of thought, a relational posture, a habitual disobedience — and take a concrete step this week toward engaging what has been left unconquered. *(Will/behavior — concrete forward movement in specific, named area of unfinished obedience)*

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 13 reveals God as a covenant LORD who simultaneously holds His people in honest tension — acknowledging what is incomplete while securing

what has been given. This is not divine ambivalence; it is covenantal precision. God does not flatten the gap between promise and full possession; He names the gap and commands faithfulness within it. The chapter also discloses the hierarchy of inheritance: territorial allotment, however real and good, is subordinate to the deepest inheritance, which is the LORD Himself. The Levitical clause is not a theological footnote but a disclosure of the final end of all covenant promise — not land but the living God. This is consistent with the whole of Scripture's movement: all earthly inheritances are penultimate; the ultimate inheritance is the inheritance of God's own presence, secured definitively in Jesus Christ.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition's insistence on the *already/not-yet* structure of redemption finds one of its most concrete Old Testament expressions in Joshua 13. The land is genuinely given and genuinely incomplete at the same time — the covenant is secure, the possession is unfinished, and God commands forward movement from within a settled covenant identity rather than from anxiety about whether the covenant holds. This is the grammar of the Christian life as the Reformed tradition understands it: justified and being sanctified, elect and still striving, secured and still fighting. The Levitical inheritance clause further grounds the Reformed emphasis on God Himself — not His blessings, not His gifts, not even His covenant territory — as the ultimate end and satisfaction of His people. This is the Shorter Catechism's "chief end" embedded in the allotment lists of Joshua: the LORD God of Israel is the inheritance, now and forever, and all other inheritances are derivative participations in that one final good.

Main Takeaway

God has His eye on what remains unclaimed in your life — not to condemn you, but to call you forward. And He has already secured, already recorded, already guaranteed everything He has given you in Christ. You are not to settle where there is land remaining, and you are not to despair because the map is not yet fully yours. The LORD Himself is your inheritance — go forward on that ground.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as theologically inert filler.** The most common failure with Joshua 13 is apologizing for it — opening the sermon by acknowledging that "this chapter is mostly lists" and then rushing to the one or two theologically "interesting" verses. This implicitly tells the congregation that most of Scripture is not worth their careful attention, and it forfeits the theological weight carried by the lists

themselves. The boundary notations and city catalogues are not decorative; they are the covenant LORD's documentation of His faithfulness to specific people in specific places. Preach the lists as what they are: covenant evidence.

- **Reading verse 1 as divine rebuke rather than divine reorientation.** “There remains yet very much land” is frequently preached as an accusation — God confronting Israel's failure, warning against complacency, rebuking spiritual laziness. While the application to unfinished obedience is legitimate, the tone of the text is instructional and forward-looking, not prosecutorial. Reading it primarily as rebuke distorts the character of God as He appears in this passage and may produce shame-based application rather than grace-fueled obedience. The command is “now therefore, divide this land” — the movement is forward into promise, not backward in condemnation.
- **Spiritualizing the land completely and losing the historical-covenantal grounding.** The opposite error from treating the chapter as inert is dissolving its historical content entirely into spiritual allegory — the unconquered cities become “sins in your life,” the boundary lines become “the parameters of your calling,” and so on. This may generate applicational traction in the short term, but it cuts the applications loose from their covenantal grounding. The spiritual applications are real, but they are *extensions* of the historical-covenantal text, not replacements for it. The land is real land, the tribes are real tribes, the covenant is a historical covenant — and that historical reality is what grounds the spiritual application's weight.
- **Missing the Levitical clause as the chapter's theological summit.** Verse 33 — “the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance” — is routinely read as an administrative footnote and passed over. In fact, it is the most theologically dense statement in the chapter and the hermeneutical key to reading all the allotment material correctly. Every other inheritance in the chapter is penultimate; this verse names the ultimate. A sermon on Joshua 13 that does not press the Levitical clause toward its canonical and typological fullness has missed the best news in the passage.
- **Moralizing the “land remaining” without gospel grounding.** The application “there is still land to be taken in your life — unconquered sins, unfought battles, unsundered areas” is a legitimate and important application. But if it is preached without the prior assurance of what has already been secured and given, it becomes a burden rather than a call. The unconquered territory must be named inside the larger frame of the secured inheritance — you fight from a position of covenant standing, not toward it. Application 1 without Application 2 is moralism; both together is gospel-shaped obedience.
- **Neglecting the significance of Balaam's death noted in verse 23.** The incidental note that “Balaam the son of Beor, who practiced divination, was among those

killed by the people of Israel” (v. 23) is not truly incidental — it is a theological punctuation mark. Balaam represents the pagan seer who tried to curse Israel for hire (Numbers 22–24) and whose subsequent counsel led to Israel’s sin at Peor (Numbers 31:16). His death in the conquest is the covenant LORD’s judicial closure of that episode. Preachers who read the allotment lists carelessly will miss this note; those who press it will find a concrete display of God’s long covenantal memory and the ultimate futility of every scheme against His people.