

# Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 16

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## Content & Intent

### **This Text — Content:**

Joshua 16 records the allotment of territory to the tribe of Ephraim (and by extension the broader Joseph tribes, whose boundary is introduced in vv. 1–4 before Ephraim’s specific inheritance is detailed in vv. 5–10). The passage opens with the southern boundary of Joseph’s collective territory, running from the Jordan near Jericho westward to the wilderness of Bethel, then on to Gezer and down to the sea. Verses 5–9 delineate Ephraim’s specific allotment with its towns and villages, noting that certain towns within Manasseh’s territory were designated for Ephraim. The chapter closes with a significant and sobering note in verse 10: the Ephraimites did not drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer; instead, the Canaanites continued to live among them and were subjected to forced labor. The chapter is brief but not inconsequential — it presents both the gift of the inheritance and the failure to possess it fully.

### **This Text — Intent:**

God intends this passage to surface the tension between inherited promise and actualized obedience. The allotment is real and legitimate — the land is genuinely given. But Ephraim’s failure at Gezer reveals that receiving a promise does not automatically translate into living in the full reality of that promise. The intent is to produce in the reader a sober awareness that incomplete obedience is not neutral — it is a compromise with what was specifically forbidden, and it carries forward consequences. God is pressing His people to close the gap between what they have been given and what they are actually living in.

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## Subject Sentence

**Subject Sentence:** Ephraim receives its allotted inheritance but fails to fully dispossess the Canaanites within it.

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## Primary Claim

**Primary Claim:** God gives His people a real inheritance, but incomplete obedience — tolerating what should be displaced — leaves the gift only partially occupied and sows the seeds of future compromise.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

The most significant interpretive question in Joshua 16 is the weight and meaning of the closing notice in verse 10: *“But they did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites have lived in the midst of Ephraim to this day but have been made to do forced labor.”* How severely should this be read? Is it a mild administrative note, a theological indictment, or something in between?

**Minimizing readings** (common in survey preaching and popular commentary) treat verse 10 as a practical concession — the Canaanites were subdued enough, reduced to vassalage, and the mission was largely accomplished. This reading acknowledges the failure but domesticates it, treating the forced labor arrangement as an adequate substitute for the commanded dispossession. This must be *refuted*: the Mosaic commands (Deuteronomy 7:1–5; 20:16–18) did not permit a forced-labor arrangement with the Canaanites of the land — they required their removal. The pattern of Judges (especially Judges 1–2) demonstrates that exactly this kind of “near enough” compromise became the seedbed of Israel’s later spiritual catastrophe. Verse 10 is not a footnote — it is a warning.

**Dispensational readings** sometimes treat passages like this primarily as historical-typological material, with the spiritual application residing chiefly in the typological level (Canaan as a type of spiritual enemies; dispossession as a type of sanctification). While the typological dimension is legitimate and illuminating — and the New Testament writers draw on this material — it must be *qualified*: the typological application does not evacuate the historical-theological claim. The passage is first a real historical account of real failure with real consequences. The typological reading enriches but does not replace the primary theological movement.

**Reformed readings** correctly situate verse 10 within the broader Joshua-Judges-Samuel trajectory, where partial obedience consistently functions as disobedience. The Canaanites who remain become precisely the snares God warned against (Deuteronomy 7:16). The Reformed reading is preferred because it accounts for the canonical shape of the material and treats the text’s conclusion as theologically intentional — not accidental — within Joshua’s overall structure, which repeatedly surfaces the gap between allotment and actual possession as a crisis of covenant faithfulness.

A Wesleyan contribution worth retaining: the emphasis that the commands of God are genuinely actionable — that “you shall drive them out” is a real obligation, not merely an ideal. This guards against a fatalism that treats partial obedience as inevitable rather than culpable.

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## Key Canonical Support

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- **Deuteronomy 7:1–5** — The explicit Mosaic command not to make covenants with or show mercy to the Canaanite nations; the theological ground for verse 10's failure is established here. Ephraim's forced-labor compromise is precisely what this passage forbade.
- **Judges 1:27–36** — The Judges catalog of incomplete dispossessions mirrors Joshua 16:10 across multiple tribes; the pattern confirms that Ephraim's failure is not isolated but representative of a broader covenant crisis that produces the downward spiral of the Judges era.
- **Judges 2:1–3** — The Angel of the LORD's indictment at Bokim names the consequence of not driving out the Canaanites: "they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." This is the interpretive key to what verse 10 means theologically.
- **1 Kings 9:20–21** — Solomon's forced-labor policy toward the remaining Canaanites echoes and fulfills the pattern begun here — the descendants of those not driven out become the labor conscripts of later Israel, demonstrating the long shadow of incomplete obedience.
- **Hebrews 3:7–4:11** — The New Testament's sustained meditation on Israel's failure to enter the "rest" God prepared provides the canonical framework for reading Joshua's allotment accounts eschatologically: there remains a rest to be entered, and the failure to press in — through unbelief and incomplete obedience — is the great warning to the church.

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## Aim

**Aim:** To confront the reader with the spiritual seriousness of tolerating what God has called them to displace, and to press them toward the gap between the inheritance they have been given in Christ and the degree to which they are actually living in it.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                               | Notes                                                                                              |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1–4      | The southern boundary of the combined Joseph allotment is traced: from the Jordan at Jericho, through | Sets the Joseph tribes together before Ephraim and Manasseh are treated individually. The boundary |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                              | Notes                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          | the wilderness of Bethel, to Gezer, to the sea.                                                                                      | runs west to east in reverse as a border description.                                                                                                                    |
| 5        | The boundary of the Ephraimites is introduced — their eastern border is specified.                                                   | The formula “according to their clans” signals this is official tribal allotment, not informal settlement.                                                               |
| 6–8      | The northern boundary of Ephraim is traced through Michmethath, Taanath-shiloh, Janoah, Ataroth, Naarah, Jericho, and to the Jordan. | Geographic precision: these details mark real territory with real surveyed boundaries.                                                                                   |
| 9        | The separate towns belonging to Ephraim within the allotment of Manasseh are noted, with their villages.                             | An unusual arrangement — towns within one tribe’s territory belonging to another — foreshadowing the complexity of tribal land relationships.                            |
| 10       | The Ephraimites did not drive out the Canaanites at Gezer; the Canaanites lived among them and were subjected to forced labor.       | Theologically decisive. The chapter ends not with completion but with compromise. The forced-labor arrangement is a substitution for obedience, not a fulfillment of it. |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                   |
|----------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 1–4    | The Joseph Inheritance Defined: The Collective Boundary |
| 2        | 5–9    | The Ephraim Inheritance Detailed: Borders and Towns     |
| 3        | 10     | The Failure Named: Incomplete Obedience at Gezer        |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** Ephraim receives its allotted inheritance but fails to fully dispossess the Canaanites within it.

**Primary Claim:** God gives His people a real inheritance, but incomplete obedience — tolerating what should be displaced — leaves the gift only partially occupied and sows the seeds of future compromise.

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## Applications (Five)

**1. (Mind/Belief) — Recognize that receiving a promise and living fully in a promise are not the same thing.** Ephraim had the allotment on the map, the boundary lines surveyed, the inheritance legally granted — and still left Gezer occupied. There is a version of the Christian life that knows the doctrine of grace, has the inheritance defined, and yet lives at a significant remove from its reality. This passage calls the reader to distinguish between having been given something and actually possessing it. The question is not “do you have the inheritance?” but “are you living as though you do?”

**2. (Affections/Worship) — Feel the weight of the gap between what God has given and what you are settling for.** The Ephraimites apparently felt sufficient about the Gezer arrangement — it was productive, the Canaanites were manageable, and the forced labor was economically useful. They had made peace with a compromise God had never authorized. The reader is called to grieve the places where they have similarly made productive use of what should have been displaced — where sin or unbelief or idolatry has been managed and monetized rather than mortified. The passage invites a genuine dis-ease with “near enough.”

**3. (Will/Behavior) — Identify by name the Canaanite you have not driven out.** The passage is specific: Gezer. Not “some towns,” not “certain enemies” — Gezer. The application does not land until it is equally specific. What is the named thing in your life that God has called you to displace, that you have instead subjected to a management arrangement? What have you made peace with that He has not? Name it. The first act of obedience is refusal to leave it nameless.

**4. (Mind/Belief) — Understand that incomplete obedience is not partial credit — it is the beginning of a different story.** The narrator’s phrase “to this day” in verse 10 signals that this compromise had lasting consequences — what began as a pragmatic arrangement became a permanent feature. The reader must grasp that tolerating what should be displaced does not stay static. It grows, it integrates, it becomes “the way things are.” Israel’s Judges-era catastrophe did not arise from a single dramatic apostasy but from the accumulated weight of these small, productive, seemingly manageable Canaanite arrangements.

**5. (Will/Behavior) — Press into the inheritance rather than administering the gap.** The Ephraimites moved from active pursuit to administrative management — the Canaanites became labor assets. This is a precise description of a spiritual settling: the thing that should be fought becomes something that is used. The application is to press actively into what God has given rather than find ways to make the incompleteness work. This may

mean returning to a discipline abandoned, a relationship requiring difficult obedience, a sin that has been managed rather than mortified. The inheritance is real. Press into it.

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## Theological Importance

### **Theological Importance:**

This passage teaches that God's gifts are genuinely given but not automatically inhabited. The allotment of the land to Ephraim is real — it is covenantal, surveyed, and legally binding. God does not give fictitious inheritances. But the chapter also reveals that God holds His people responsible for the gap between gift and possession. The failure at Gezer is not God's failure to provide — the inheritance was complete — but Ephraim's failure to obey the terms of possessing it. This establishes a pattern woven throughout Scripture: God gives freely by grace, and His people are called to respond with the full obedience that takes the gift seriously. Incomplete obedience is not met with resignation by God but with warning and consequence. The theological weight of this chapter is that grace does not eliminate obligation — it grounds it.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

### **Reformed Theological Significance:**

Reformed theology insists that justification and sanctification, while distinct, are never separated — the one who is declared righteous is the one who is being made righteous, and that process involves real, costly, Spirit-empowered mortification of what remains. Joshua 16:10 is the Old Testament's concrete picture of the failure that Hebrews 12:1 warns against: the sin that "clings closely," that has not been laid aside but merely accommodated. The Reformed doctrine of progressive sanctification is not merely a growth model — it is a dispossession model. What does not belong must be removed, not managed. Furthermore, this chapter guards against a passive reading of covenant blessing: the inheritance is given by grace, but it is possessed through obedience, and the gap between them is not theologically neutral. The gospel does not produce passive recipients — it produces people who, having been freed, press the freedom into every corner of their lives rather than leaving pockets of the old captivity comfortably in place.

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## Main Takeaway

### **Main Takeaway:**

God gave Ephraim the land — every border surveyed, every town listed, the inheritance fully and legally theirs. And they still left Gezer occupied. The inheritance was real; the

obedience was incomplete. That gap is not just Israel's problem — it is the perennial condition of God's people who know what they have been given and still tolerate what should be displaced. You have been given a real inheritance in Christ. The question the Holy Spirit is asking through this passage is not whether it is yours — it is. The question is what you are still leaving in place that does not belong there.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

### Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the passage as merely historical geography and bypassing its theological conclusion.** Verses 1–9 are boundary descriptions, and the temptation is to spend the entire exposition in geographic detail or Israel's land settlement policy without arriving at verse 10, which is the chapter's theological payload. The geography serves the narrative; the narrative serves the theology. Verse 10 is the point.
- **Softening verse 10 as a pragmatic accommodation rather than a covenantal failure.** The forced-labor arrangement sounds reasonable and productive — and that is precisely what makes it dangerous. Preaching that reads the chapter charitably toward Ephraim (“they did what they could”) misses the canonical context in which this note functions as the beginning of a downward trajectory, not a satisfactory resolution.
- **Applying the passage moralistically without grounding it in the gospel.** The application “you need to drive out your Canaanites” can easily become law without gospel — a call to self-improvement effort disconnected from the Spirit's work and the reality of union with Christ. The Reformed application must root the call to dispossession in what Christ has already accomplished: the enemy is a defeated enemy; the land is already given; the Spirit who raised Christ empowers the possession. The “press in” is a response to grace, not a substitute for it.
- **Typologizing the passage to the point of losing its historical force.** While the Canaan-as-spiritual-enemy typology is legitimate, preaching that moves immediately and exclusively to “your Canaanites are pride, lust, and anxiety” may lose what is most sobering about the text: this is a real historical failure with real historical consequences. The typology should deepen and specify the application, not replace the historical-theological claim.
- **Failing to name specificity as part of the application.** The passage names Gezer — not “some strongholds” or “certain enemy territories.” A sermon that concludes with “leave no Canaanite in your life” at the level of abstraction has not completed the work the text is doing. The preacher must model and press for specificity in the application: name the Gezer. Nameless application is a near-miss.

- **Missing the “to this day” trajectory.** The narrator’s closing phrase signals that this is not a momentary failure but a permanent fixture. A sermon that presents Ephraim’s compromise as a single isolated mistake misses the point that incomplete obedience doesn’t stabilize — it institutionalizes. The application must communicate that what is tolerated today is what is inherited tomorrow.

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