

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 17

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 17 records the allotment of territorial inheritance to the half-tribe of Manasseh west of the Jordan. The chapter opens with the clan-by-clan distribution to the male descendants of Manasseh's sons (vv. 1–6), interrupted by the remarkable case of Zelophehad's daughters, who appeal for and receive their father's inheritance in accordance with the LORD's earlier command to Moses (vv. 3–6; cf. Numbers 27). The chapter then describes the geographical boundaries of Manasseh's territory, its towns, and the complications arising from Canaanite populations that Israel failed to drive out, noting that the Canaanites remained but were subjected to forced labor when Israel grew strong (vv. 7–13). The chapter closes with the sons of Joseph — Ephraim and Manasseh together — approaching Joshua to complain that their single allotment is insufficient for their great numbers. Joshua's response is striking: he tells them to go up and clear the forested hill country and drive out the Canaanites, promising that the highlands are indeed theirs — but the taking of it requires action, and the Perizzites and Rephaim, though powerful, can be overcome (vv. 14–18).

This Text — Intent

God is pressing two interrelated claims through this chapter. First, He is demonstrating that His covenant promises are specific, personal, and sufficient — the inheritance is real and distributable, reaching even Zelophehad's daughters when the community might have overlooked them. Second, and with greater urgency in the chapter's closing movement, God is confronting the tendency of His people to treat inherited promise as an excuse for passivity rather than a mandate for courageous action. The sons of Joseph have received a large and rich inheritance, but they want it handed to them without the difficulty of clearing forests and dispossessing well-armed Canaanites. Joshua refuses to grant that wish — he calls them to rise and take what they have already been given. The intent is to confront complacency in the face of promised grace, to expose the gap between receiving a promise and inhabiting it, and to call God's people to active, trusting obedience.

Subject Sentence: Promised inheritance received, contested, and yet to be fully claimed by Manasseh.

Primary Claim: God’s covenant inheritance is real and sufficient — but its full possession requires God’s people to stop treating difficulty as proof the promise has failed and to go up, by faith, and take what they have already been given.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Zelophehad Daughters Interlude (vv. 3–6)

Some readers treat this episode as merely a legal footnote or a historical detail affirming the Numbers 27 precedent. This undersells its function. The daughters of Zelophehad appear here as a positive example embedded within the larger allotment narrative: they come forward, they name their claim, they receive their inheritance. Eleazar the priest, Joshua, and the leaders honor the LORD’s prior word. The Reformed reading rightly sees this as the text itself providing a contrast: here are people who *came forward and asked* for what they were promised — and received it. This stands in pointed relief against the sons of Joseph (vv. 14–18), who complain but resist the exertion required to take what they were given. The Zelophehad daughters model faithful claiming of promised inheritance; the sons of Joseph model entitled passivity. The contrast is structural and intentional.

The Canaanite Failure (vv. 12–13)

A significant interpretive issue arises with the statement that Manasseh could not dispossess the Canaanites (v. 12), followed by the qualification that when Israel grew strong, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out (v. 13). Dispensational readings sometimes treat this as a simple narrative of gradual progress without moral freight. This is too easy. The text’s framing — “could not” followed by the reality that Israel simply chose not to drive them out when they could — echoes the identical pattern in Judges 1, which the canonical narrative treats as disobedience. The Reformed reading evaluates this as a moral failure, not merely a military limitation: the inability language is softened by the subsequent capacity, and the choice of forced labor over expulsion is Israel settling for less than full obedience. This is not condemnation of Manasseh so much as honest narration of a pattern that will have consequences — a Deuteronomistic historian’s warning embedded in what looks like administrative geography.

Joshua’s Response as Model or Mere History

Some Baptist and evangelical expository traditions treat Joshua’s challenge to the sons of Joseph (vv. 14–18) as straightforwardly paradigmatic — “go take what God has promised you” — and apply it directly to spiritual boldness, career decisions, or church growth strategies. While the directional force of the application is correct, the application must be tethered to the text’s specific dynamics: the sons of Joseph have a legitimate inheritance, are given a real promise, and are being called to trust that promise against intimidating obstacles. The Reformed reading endorses the applicational thrust but insists the ground

of the call is not human potential (“you are many and great”) but the sufficiency of the granted inheritance (“the hill country shall be yours”). Joshua points them not to themselves but to the territory God has already given.

No significant Charismatic or Roman Catholic divergence arises on this passage.

Key Canonical Support

- **Numbers 27:1–11** — The original granting of Zelophehad’s daughters’ inheritance; this text fulfills that earlier divine word, demonstrating that the LORD’s specific promises are kept even across generations and even for those the community might overlook.
 - **Deuteronomy 31:6–8** — “Be strong and courageous... the LORD your God goes with you”; the divine command undergirding Joshua’s challenge to the sons of Joseph — the difficulty of the task is never grounds for refusing to enter what God has given.
 - **Judges 1:19–36** — The canonical continuation of the “could not dispossess” pattern from Joshua 17:12–13; what is narrated as incomplete in Joshua is judged as disobedience in Judges, confirming the moral weight the text already implies.
 - **Hebrews 3:7–4:11** — The New Testament’s most direct treatment of the “rest” motif — the warning that the generation in the wilderness did not enter because of unbelief, and that God’s people in every age face the temptation to refuse the effort and faith required to enter promised rest; Joshua 17’s sons of Joseph are a case study in the pattern Hebrews warns against.
 - **Ephesians 1:3; 2 Peter 1:3–4** — The New Covenant counterpart: believers have been granted every spiritual blessing, every provision needed for godliness — yet the gap between what has been granted and what is actually inhabited by faith remains the central challenge of the Christian life.
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Aim: To confront the tendency of God’s people to treat inherited promise as a substitute for faithful action, and to call them — on the ground of God’s sufficient provision — to rise and take possession of what they have already been given.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Allotment to Manasseh’s clans; Machir (firstborn) already received Gilead and Bashan because he was a man of war; remaining ten	Establishes that prior faithfulness (Machir) has already been honored; the western allotment is now being distributed

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3–4	portions to other clans Zelophehad’s daughters appear before Eleazar, Joshua, and the leaders to claim their inheritance per the LORD’s command to Moses	Positive example of faith-claiming the promise; they name what they were promised and receive it
5–6	Ten portions fall to Manasseh (plus Gilead and Bashan beyond Jordan); Zelophehad’s daughters receive inheritance among Manasseh’s sons	The LORD’s word to Moses is kept exactly; covenant specificity on display
7–10	Geographical boundaries of Manasseh’s territory described — from Asher to Michmethath, south to Tappuah, west to the brook Kanah	Administrative geography; establishes the legitimacy and sufficiency of the grant
11	Manasseh has towns within Issachar and Asher: Bethshean, Ibleam, Dor, Endor, Taanach, Megiddo, with their villages	Strategic towns in the valley — the very locations Manasseh will fail to take
12–13	Manasseh could not dispossess these Canaanite cities; when Israel grew strong, they subjected them to forced labor but did not drive them out	“Could not” followed by “subjected to forced labor” — the capacity grew but the obedience did not; Judges 1 pattern begins here
14	The sons of Joseph complain: “Why have you given me only one allotment and one portion? We are a numerous people.”	Complaint based on perceived insufficiency; entitlement dynamic — the promise is interrogated rather than inhabited
15	Joshua responds: “If you are a numerous people, go up to the forest and clear ground for yourselves in the land of the Perizzites and Rephaim.”	Joshua does not sympathize with the complaint — he redirects their numbers argument back at them as reason to act

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
16	The sons of Joseph object: the hill country is not enough, and the Canaanites in the valleys have iron chariots	The real issue surfaces: not size of allotment but intimidation; iron chariots = the obstacle that feels like disproof of the promise
17–18	Joshua insists: you are numerous and powerful — the hill country will be yours; you <i>will</i> drive out the Canaanites even though they have iron chariots	Joshua does not minimize the obstacle but refuses to let it negate the promise; the future tense “will be yours” is covenantal and assured

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Inheritance Distributed: Clans, Daughters, and a Promise Kept
2	7–13	The Inheritance Described and Incompletely Possessed
3	14–18	The Inheritance Contested: Complaint, Challenge, and Covenant Insistence

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Promised inheritance received, contested, and yet to be fully claimed by Manasseh.

Primary Claim: God’s covenant inheritance is real and sufficient — but its full possession requires God’s people to stop treating difficulty as proof the promise has failed and to go up, by faith, and take what they have already been given.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe difficulty as the terrain of promise, not evidence against it. The sons of Joseph interpret iron chariots as proof that the allotment is insufficient — that something is wrong, that they need more. This is an interpretive failure before it is a behavioral one: they have misread the obstacle as a theological problem. When God’s

people face genuine difficulty in living out what they have been promised — in sanctification, in faithfulness, in ministry — the presence of the obstacle does not mean the promise is inadequate. The iron chariots are in the territory God has already granted. Reframe difficulty as the terrain the promise must be walked out through, not as evidence the promise has broken down.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Grieve the gap between inherited grace and inhabited grace.

Manasseh has been given a real inheritance — specific, bounded, named, theirs by divine grant. They are living far below it. This should produce grief, not merely strategic adjustment. The New Covenant counterpart is the believer who has been granted every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), every provision for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), and who yet lives in a small fraction of what has been given. Let the gap between what you have been given and how you are actually living produce mourning before it produces planning. Worship that takes the full measure of inherited grace seriously will not be content with partial possession.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Name your inheritance specifically and go after it, as

Zelophehad's daughters did. The daughters of Zelophehad did not wait to be noticed or included — they came forward, named what they had been promised, and received it. The sons of Joseph, by contrast, complained without acting. The model the text commends is specific claiming: knowing what you have been promised, naming it before the community, and pursuing it. For the believer, this means identifying the specific areas of sanctification, calling, or kingdom work where you have been granted what you need but have not yet risen to take it — and moving toward it with the specificity these daughters modeled.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Reject the entitlement reflex that turns received grace into grounds for complaint.

The sons of Joseph's complaint is theologically perverse: they have received an inheritance from God, and they are using its apparent limitations as a grievance. This is the entitlement pattern — grace received becomes the baseline from which further demands are made. The spiritual form of this is the believer who receives forgiveness, adoption, and the Spirit, and then complains about the difficulty of the life into which those gifts call them. Joshua's response is not therapeutic — he does not validate the complaint. He redirects: you are numerous, you have the promise, the land is yours — go up. The antidote to entitlement is not rebuke alone but a clear-eyed recovery of what has actually been given.

5. [Will/Behavior] — Where partial obedience has produced partial possession, return to full obedience.

Manasseh's failure to drive out the Canaanites (vv. 12–13) is not narrated neutrally — it is a pattern the Deuteronomistic history will judge. The Canaanites who remain will be thorns. The half-obedience of subjecting them to forced labor rather than expelling them looks pragmatic but carries a cost. In the life of the believer, tolerated sin — managed, contained, made to serve — is not neutralized sin. Where you have stopped short of full obedience because the full obedience seemed too costly, the text presses for return: go back, clear the ground, do the harder work the compromise avoided.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 17 teaches that God’s covenant promises are specific, sufficient, and personal — distributed to named individuals, honored across generations (Zelophehad’s daughters), and calibrated to each tribe’s actual need. God is not a giver of vague blessings but of defined inheritances. At the same time, the chapter insists that the sufficiency of the gift does not eliminate the requirement of active, faith-driven possession. The territory is already granted — but the forest must be cleared, the iron chariots must be faced, the hill country must be occupied. This is not a contradiction but a consistent pattern of divine grace: God gives what He requires to be entered by trust and obedience. The gap between the gift and its full possession is not a failure of God’s provision but a standing invitation to walk by faith into what has already been secured.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage exhibits the covenant-of-grace pattern that runs from Genesis to Revelation: God gives, fully and freely, and the gift precedes and grounds all subsequent human action — but the gift is not received passively. Grace does not eliminate the call to strenuous, courageous obedience; it funds and enables it. The daughters of Zelophehad model what the Westminster Confession calls the means of grace operating through faith: they receive what God has promised by coming forward in trust and asking. The sons of Joseph model what Reformed theology identifies as the besetting sin of those who have received grace — treating the gift as sufficient to excuse the effort grace itself demands. Joshua’s challenge — “the hill country shall be yours, for though they have iron chariots and are strong, you can drive them out” — is the Reformed pastoral imperative: not “try harder” but “the promise is real and it is enough; now go.” The entire scene is a pre-figurement of the New Covenant call to work out one’s salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us — the indicative of divine gift demanding the imperative of human action, grounded in and energized by the gift itself.

Main Takeaway

God has given you a real inheritance — specific, sufficient, and already yours by covenant grant. The iron chariots in your valley are not proof the promise was wrong; they are the terrain through which the promise is possessed. Stop negotiating with your obstacles and stop living on a fraction of what you have been given. Go up and clear the ground. The hill country is yours.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as mere administrative geography with no homiletical claim.** Joshua 17 is easy to skip or summarize dismissively as a boundary list. But the chapter's closing movement (vv. 14–18) is among the sharpest pastoral exchanges in the entire book — a direct confrontation of entitled passivity from the mouth of Joshua himself. Preachers who treat the allotment lists as filler and skip to “the good parts” elsewhere will miss one of the book's most pointed charges to God's people. The geography is load-bearing: the specificity of the grant is precisely what makes the complaint of the sons of Joseph so egregious.
- **Moralizing the Zelophehad daughters episode as a gender-advocacy text.** The daughters' inheritance is a genuine and important precedent, and their inclusion is not incidental. But the text's primary function for this chapter is as a structural contrast: they model what claiming the promise looks like. Reducing this episode to a lesson on inclusion or equity — without connecting it to the sons of Joseph's failure — misses the structural argument the author is building. Honor the daughters' faith; don't extract the episode from its narrative context.
- **Psychologizing Joshua's challenge as motivational speech.** “You are a numerous people — you can do this!” is not the point. Joshua does not ground his challenge in the sons of Joseph's capacity or potential. He grounds it in the already-granted inheritance: “the hill country shall be yours” (v. 18). The motivation is covenantal, not psychological. Preaching this as “you have what it takes” or “believe in yourself” misreads the text's grounding entirely. The call is to take what has already been given, not to discover an inner resource.
- **Treating the iron chariots as a spiritualized enemy for general application.** The temptation in application is to say “your iron chariots are ____” and fill in various personal obstacles. This is not wrong directionally, but it must be controlled: the iron chariots in the text are a specific obstacle to possessing a specific divinely-granted inheritance. The application must preserve that structure — the obstacle stands between the person and something God has genuinely given them, not any generic challenge. “Iron chariots” as a metaphor for difficulty in general untethers the application from the text's specific covenantal claim.
- **Skipping the moral weight of the incomplete dispossession (vv. 12–13).** The “could not” / “subjected to forced labor” pattern is easy to read as neutral historical narration — a pragmatic arrangement that sort of worked out. But the Deuteronomistic history (and Judges 1) is clear that this is a failure pattern with coming consequences. Preaching this as morally neutral — or even as wise management — misses the text's honest accounting of disobedience. The incomplete possession of the land is not a neutral administrative fact; it is a spiritual compromise that the text records but does not endorse.

- **Applying the passage without grounding it in the gospel indicative.** The danger in a passage this charged with imperatives (“go up,” “clear ground,” “drive them out”) is preaching it as a call to strenuous effort without grounding the effort in what God has already done. Joshua’s challenge is not naked imperative — it is imperative grounded in prior grant (“I have given you this land,” v. 18 implied; cf. the entire allotment narrative). Any application that calls people to act without first landing the sufficiency of what they have been given in Christ will produce either anxiety or moralism. The effort the text demands is faith-energized entry into an already-secured inheritance, not striving toward something still in doubt.