

Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 2, Introduction Part 2, Themes

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on Joshua through Ruth. This is session 2, Introduction to Joshua, part 2, Themes and Theology.

I want to talk now about the purpose of the book of Joshua.

Why was it written? And what I would see is the overarching theme in the book and then some subsidiary themes that go through. So, we'll be thinking more about the theology of the book. And so, in terms of the purpose, why was the book written? In one level it was written, or in general, it was written to provide an interpretive history, and that's significant, an interpretive history, one slice of Israel's life as a people.

It's not written just as history for history's sake. There are a lot of gaps in the life of Israel in the time of Joshua. There are some things we'd love to know that we don't.

There are kind of summarizing statements, and we don't learn about what God did to every part of the Canaanite territory and the land and the cities. So, it's giving us through the lens, a certain lens, and more specifically it refers to the period under Joshua when Israel is entering and settling in the land, and it's the land that had been promised centuries earlier to Abraham and his descendants. So, a big feature in the book is the idea of the promises being fulfilled here.

And throughout it's always God is the one who's in control of the events. So again, as we said in the first segment, often we think of the book as just these battles and conflict between Israelites and Canaanites, but really we should see it through the lens of God as the one that is directing, controlling, and overseeing what is happening here. There are dramatic miracles in the book for sure, and God is given credit for all of the victories in the book.

So, I've written on the board what I would see as the major theme in the book, and it is God's giving the promised land of Canaan to his people Israel as an inheritance. And I want to explain every part of this sentence because every part of this sentence is derived from the nitty gritty of portions of the text itself, kind of bubbling up into this. So, I've not written this as kind of imposing from the top down, but this is developed organically from clues in the text.

So let me say something about that. First of all, I've put God's name here because I would see God as the major actor, major character, and major protagonist in the

book, not Joshua or any other human character. God's the one that's doing everything in the book essentially.

And it's his gift of the land. When I first began teaching in my career, I would often try to get students to, I still do, try to get students to think of every book in the Bible essentially, but in the Old Testament, my field, to think maybe one word to characterize each book, Genesis, maybe Beginnings or something. And Joshua, the word that usually came to mind was the land.

And thinking of the land as the focus of a place to settle. But, and that's true in the book of Joshua, but it is also true that the land is seen as a gift from God's hand. And we'll see that as we go through the next segments in the book.

It's God's giving of the land, and it's the land that was promised. Notice that I have not capitalized the promised land. We often see that capitalized as sort of a title to a country.

But it's giving of the land that was promised years ago, way back when, to Abraham. We'll look in another segment about those promises. So, the book is about fulfilling promises.

And whose promises? They're God's promises. So, it brings us back to God as the main actor. And of course, it is the land.

That's the focus of conquering the land and then settling in the land. But which land is it? It's the land of Canaan. And we sort of know that.

It's pretty obvious. But I include that in my statement to remind myself that God did not change his mind in the interim. God promised Abraham the land hundreds of years earlier.

And despite conflicts and so on, God didn't say, you know, change my mind. Why don't I give you the land of Ethiopia or Moab? No, it's the same land. And he followed through on that promise to give him that land.

Who did he give it to? To the Israelites, of course. Who were the Israelites? They were God's people. So, this emphasizes the relationship that we see over and over again in the Old Testament.

I would say we often have; we think of sometimes what I would call false stereotypes or false dichotomies between the Testaments. Again, I learned through godly mentors, teachers, and pastors some of these dichotomies. And one was that the Old Testament God was a God of wrath.

The New Testament God of love. And there were rules and regulations and laws here. There was a relationship here and so on.

And there are reasons why people taught that and still think that today. But I would say that there's also, they're really false dichotomies. The Old Testament God is a God of relationship.

He's the one who loved his people. And so that's why I include this here to make sure that I understand that it's the God who's loving his people, fulfilling promises. And what was he doing this for? It was their inheritance.

There are several different words for inheritance in the book. And they're all focused on this as a gift from God and Israel's receiving this as their inheritance. As a matter of fact, one thing I do in my classes, you could try this as an exercise on your own, as an instructive exercise.

I require my classes to read the entire book of Joshua in one sitting. Then write an outline of the book in terms of two levels. The major level, is five, six, eight chapters long.

Then the second level, one chapter a piece through the book. And I require them to use the word inheritance or the verb inherit or inherits or inheriting at every point of the outline. And that's easy to do in the chapters that talk about the distribution of the land, chapters 12 to 21.

Or 13 to 21. But it's a little more difficult in the earlier chapters. But my point is that we think about not the events unfolding.

But we think, if we think about years later, the author of the book. What is the author trying to do? And the author is trying to talk about this land as an inheritance from God. So even the early chapters, looking ahead, what I would call the preparations for inheriting the land, chapters 1 to 5. Getting ready to cross the Jordan.

Purifying themselves. Memorializing things and so on. All of that is preparation for inheriting the land.

So, we can talk about the topic of chapter 1, chapter 2, or chapter 3 on their own terms. But in terms of the overall sweep of the book, if this is a valid point that we've gotten from the ground up. Then every part of the book should be able to point to that and see that as part of the overall sweep.

So, this would be my statement of what I see as the overall sweep of the book. Every part of the book would play into this in some way. There are different ways of saying it.

I'm not saying this is the only way. But in my own study, this is what I've arrived at this point. Next, we'll look at what I see as some of the themes.

Sort of underneath this overall overarching theme. Or we might call this the theology of the book of Joshua. And I would see seven major strands.

Seven major themes in the book. Some are more important than others. We will develop these as we go through the different segments.

But certainly, the theme of the land, of the promised land, is important. That is featured over and over again. It was promised to Abraham years ago.

It's reiterated through the generations. And now they're finally getting it. And then a second theme is the theme of God's promises.

So, I've mentioned that already. And we'll kind of highlight that. There is a reference back to the promises to Abraham, but also to Moses.

And then even within the book itself. God promised this, and then it happened. And the fulfillment of promises is an interesting little sub-theme as well.

A third would be the covenant. And the covenant that God made with Abraham. Again, including the promises.

But then also the covenant God made through Moses. The law that God gave to the people and how people were to obey and to follow. That forms the, it's kind of in the background to the book of Joshua.

It's not a major thing, but it's there. An interesting theme is, a fourth one would be the theme of obedience. Think about Israel through the time of Moses and the wilderness wanderings.

Israel was to a large degree a very rebellious people. I would see the book of Numbers, for example, in the historical narrative sections. Where the storyline is being told.

You see rebellions over and over again against the authority of Moses and Aaron. And against God himself. And Moses rebelled against God.

And a lot of those things. So here in the book of Joshua, we see a much different picture. We see a sense of, we're trying to do things differently now.

We're not going to try to repeat the errors of the past. And there's a sense of more everybody on the same page following the Lord. Now that's not always the case.

There are some significant exceptions there. But there is an important theme of obedience. God certainly urges obedience.

And the people, for the most part, follow it. A fifth theme I would see is the whole theme of purity of worship. The idea of holiness.

And the word holy itself is not used a whole lot of times in the book. But the idea is there. Basically, the idea of holiness in the Old Testament is the idea of separation out and away.

From that which is evil, that which is unclean, that which is unholy. And Israel is to keep separation from the ark at the beginning, from the Canaanites themselves. Included in this is the discussion about the destruction of the Canaanites which we will talk about in another segment.

But that idea of purity of worship, that Israel is to grow up in a new place, practicing their worship of the Lord in the right way, is an important part of the book. A sixth point I would see, a sixth theme, would be the theme of godly leadership. Joshua himself is given charge as a leader.

He is, for the most part in the books, pictured as an ideal leader with very few missteps. And we learn some good lessons about leadership there. And finally, the theme of rest.

We have the idea of the land having rest. And part of the gift of God, the promises, are the people are to rest and the land is to rest. So, in a sense, if we think about the flow of the Pentateuch, we'll talk about this in another segment about the literary context.

But the flow of the Pentateuch looks ahead toward entering and receiving the promised land. And the book of Joshua kind of looks back and says, we're here. And this is not the fulfillment of all of this.

We have rest. So that would be the seven major themes under the umbrella statement of theme that I've given you at this point.

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