

Recap: Joshua 12 in the Flow of the Biblical Narrative

We have finished the first half of Joshua, working our way through twelve of its twenty-four chapters, and the first of its two-part theme. We expect to return at the same time next year to finish the book. But before proceeding to the next book in the preaching roster – Revelation – we pause to survey the territory covered over the last quarter, and its place in the overall Bible story.

Day 1: Genesis 2-3 The story begins

The biblical story begins – appropriately enough – in Genesis 1-3. The story begins with the beauty of creation and the disaster of the fall. These two parameters set the agenda for the entirety of Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. The drama unfolds in three acts: what could have been, what is, what will one day be again.

What could have been: God created mankind and placed him in a garden, with all kinds of trees, fruits and vegetables, both beautiful to look at and tasty to eat. A river flowed through the garden, supplying water to man and crops, and adding to the beauty of the surroundings. God assigned man work without frustration, to bring meaning to his life and a sense of accomplishment. God provided a spouse, ideally suited to him. Together they cared for the environment and its other inhabitants. Every time we are drawn by the beauty of nature, the love of a spouse, or the meaningfulness of a job well done, we affirm the magnificence of God's creation.

What is: The idyllic world did not last long. Temptation came, and with it, sin. Sin disrupted everything. Soul mates? Wife hurt husband; husband blamed wife; and from that day forward the relationship has been characterized by power struggle. Nature? The source of man's nourishment became the source of his sin. God? Having sinned, the man and woman hid from him. Meaningful work? Now frustrating labor for the man, and painful labor for the woman. Eden? The man and woman are expelled from the garden.

What will one day be again: From that first dreadful day, God begins his work of restoration. His previous promises persist: Adam calls his wife 'Eve' ('living'), because she would become the mother of all the living. God also provides clothing for the naked, and now ashamed. Most of all, he pledges them a descendant who will crush the head of the serpent, Satan. They would have little understanding who that would be or when he would come. But we know his name. We have read of his coming. We have experienced the first stages of restoration that he has begun. And we eagerly wait for the full restoration which he promises upon his return.

Day 2: Genesis 12:1-8 The storyline narrows

Things go from bad to worse, reaching the point where “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time [and] the Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (Genesis 6:6). So God tries a second time, wiping away the old, and beginning afresh with a second creation to restore the world almost to its original pristine condition (the Noah story in Genesis 6-9). Before long, though, things are back to their previous broken state.

So God narrows his focus to one man, one clan, one nation. An ancient Iraqi moves to Canaan with barren wife. God makes Abraham three promises: (1) though currently childless, he will become ancestor to a vast nation; (2) though a nomad, his descendants will have a homeland of their own; and, eventually, (3) they will be a blessing to the rest of the world. God is, in effect, promising Abraham what was lost at Eden: family, land, and blessing.

Day 3: Exodus 1:1-22 The first promise fulfilled, then jeopardized

The promises of God (and their fulfillment) reflect both the glory of creation and the corruption of the fall. The glory is readily apparent: God makes three tremendous promises, grounded exclusively in grace, not in anything that Abraham has done. The corruption is evident in this: every time God fulfills one of his promises in this broken world, he puts the other promises at risk.

In fact, the fulfillment of the first promise – many descendants – comes at risk to all three promises. First, for Abraham’s descendants to increase, they must move out of the famine in Canaan and settle in a foreign nation. There they thrive to such an extent that their number intimidates the Egyptian authorities, who enslave them and plot genocide. Finally, God’s intervention saves the promised descendants, but brings destruction upon the Egyptians. One step forward, two-and-a-half back.

This reminds us to moderate our expectations. Even as God fulfills his promises to his people, their path is often rocky. They must emigrate to a new country, with its own language and culture. They prosper, but then are enslaved and their children are under threat. God rescues them, but through a process fraught with risk and danger. God is working powerfully to save and prosper them, but that is not always apparent. At the best of times, his blessing moves in fits and starts, sometimes through genuinely perilous events, and often through long periods of dull routine without much forward movement.

So it may be for us: even when we are under God’s watchful eye and active blessing, our lives may proceed through long periods of little outward progress, considerable disappointment, and occasional danger. In their day, God was active despite appearances. So he also is in our day.

Day 4: Joshua 12 The second promise fulfilled, part 1

The promise of land has two parts. Three, if you count the prequel.

Originally, God planned to bring the people out of Egypt straight into the new land. But they rebelled, trusting more in their sight than in his promise, more in their anxiety than in his faithfulness. At God's command, Moses sent spies to scout out the land of Canaan. They brought back a two-part report: the land is spectacular, but its inhabitants are fierce (Numbers 13). In a panic, the people rebel against both God and Moses, and discuss choosing a new leader to bring them back into Egyptian slavery. This was the breaking point for God. While Moses' intercession prevented him from destroying the nation, he swore that none of that generation – except for Joshua and Caleb – would ever enter the land (Numbers 14).

A generation later, the punishment completed, God again moves toward fulfillment of his promise of land. Fulfillment proceeds in two stages: conquest and land distribution. The middle of Joshua 12 captures the two-part process twice. Verse 6 notes that Moses and Israel conquered land east of the Jordan, and then Moses divided it among two-and-a-half tribes. Verse 7 records much the same, though on a bigger scale: Joshua and Israel conquered a wider swathe of land, which Joshua then assigned to the remaining nine-and-a-half tribes of Israel. So, conquest occupies Joshua 1-12; distribution is the focus of chapters 13-24.

Again we find that the fulfillment of one Abrahamic promise jeopardizes others. Since the land was inhabited, its conquest required war, and put either of the other two promises at risk: either Israel would lose and Abraham's descendants would die; or Israel would win and forfeit any opportunity to be a blessing to the nations. In the providence of God, the latter occurred, bringing short-term benefit to Israel, but raising a long-term question about the fate of the promised blessing to the nations.

Day 5: Ephesians 2:1-22 The third promise fulfilled in Christ

The third promise of God to Abraham explains why the conversion of gentiles features so prominently in the New Testament. For the first time, Abraham and his descendants have become a blessing to the nations, and in two respects. For one, Jesus is a descendant of Abraham, and he is the active agent whose death accomplishes the blessing of the nations. For the other: Jesus commissions his disciples to bring his message to the gentiles.

The incorporation of gentiles into the originally Jewish Church was not easily achieved. Jews despised gentiles as disgusting (they worshipped idols and their sexual standards were notoriously law). Gentiles despised Jews as religiously peculiar (circumcision and Sabbath, especially), and socially offensive (refusing

to participate socially with non-Jews). But Paul insists that they belong in the one Church, worshipping together and living in peace. This is a core aspect of the gospel: "He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace" (2:14-15).

As gentiles, we are evidence of God's faithfulness, and his fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. At the same time, we can learn something further from the Jew-gentile rapprochement in New Testament times. What separates races and cultures today is generally less than what divided Jew from gentile in the first-century. So if their worship and their communities could cross the divide, so should ours. In this way, we not only celebrate the gospel; we also embody it.

Day 6: Revelation 21 The restoration of Eden

By his death, resurrection, and establishment of the Church, Jesus fulfills the three Abrahamic promises from Genesis 12. All the same, he takes us further back than that. He takes us all the way back to Eden.

A garden with all kinds of trees, both beautiful to look at, and tasty to eat. A river running through, supplying water without limit. And, reflecting later developments in the Old Testament, with Jerusalem the proud capital city, the new Eden contains a holy city. But in a break with Old Testament developments, the new city holds no temple, because the Lord God dwells among his people. He is no longer separated from them for the sake of his purity or their safety. No sin and no curse; no death, mourning or pain. Everything is recreated, pristine as the first week. Revelation intentionally mirrors Genesis 1-3 to make the point that the drama here reaches its climax: sin is banished, God's creation is restored, pristine.

Revelation is relevant not only because it finishes the story begun in Genesis, and half-fulfilled by the mid-point of Joshua. It is relevant also because it is where, by decree of the preaching roster, the new sermon series heads. Here, speaking to a persecuted church in a life-and-death struggle for its own existence, the elder John paints a picture of the glorious future, when not only persecution and suffering would be distant memories, but when the original creation of God would be restored to splendor. This destination awaits us still, and can sustain and motivate us, as it sustained and motivated the persecuted ancient Church.