



*Judah and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

Judah and the Sons of Joseph  
Joshua 14-17  
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The Fellowship of Ailbe  
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## Joshua 14-17: Introduction

The tribes of Judah and the sons of Joseph – Ephraim and the half-tribe of Manasseh – are the largest and most powerful of the tribes. To them are granted the first and largest allotments of the land of promise.

The allotment to Caleb features in this narrative with extensive focus. He is a template for all the remaining tribes, showing how they must continue to work hard gain the land God has promised them and to ensure that it is available for the generations to follow.

As we shall see in this section, however, the tribes did not follow Caleb's example. Thus the established a tendency of compromise within the soul of the nation, and that would ultimately be the undoing of Israel.

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## 1 An Inheritance for Caleb

*Read Joshua 14.1-15.*

*Reflect.*

1. Chapters 14-17 detail the allotments to Judah and the sons of Joseph, west of the Jordan River. It is the longest and most detailed part of this section of the book. Any thoughts about why that might be so?
2. Two different sub-sections of this part deal with Caleb, demonstrating his primacy and faithfulness. Why?

*Think about it.*

Chapters 14-17 lay the foundation for an historic animosity, which will eventually rend the nation of Israel in two. Great detail is provided in describing the allotments to the tribes of Judah and Ephraim/half-Manasseh. They are the most powerful tribes in Israel, and they will be in perpetual competition with one another.

Part of the reason for this is that God chose the tribe of Judah – Caleb’s tribe (Num. 13.6) – to be the line from which kings would descend, and not the tribe of Ephraim (Ps. 78.67, 68) – Joshua’s tribe (Num. 13.8). And even though this had been prophesied from of old (Gen. 49.8-11), the sons of Joseph never quite reconciled to this decision, especially in view of Joshua’s role in the conquest of Canaan. At the first opportunity, Ephraim hived off ten tribes to form their own nation (1 Kgs. 11, 12).

But even this was an act of God, Who judged His people for the sins of Solomon, and promised blessings to those who followed Jeroboam into the northern kingdom, if they would obey Him. They never did.

The land was divided by lot on the west side of the Jordan, which doesn’t mean that parcels were assigned willy-nilly. It simply means that the order in which the lands were assigned – the borders of which were determined according to the size and other characteristics of each tribe – was random, by the casting of lots.

But we can see the work of God in this, since even the casting of lots is according to His sovereign good pleasure (Prov. 16.33).

Perhaps as a kind of foreshadowing of the ascent of Judah, Caleb comes into focus in chapter 14. We see him both as the man who has been faithful (vv. 6-15) and as the faithful warrior, carrying on the conquest of the lands given to him (15.13-19). He is thus a reminder of, and spur for, continued covenant obedience for all the children of Israel.

Once again, the Levites are to be scattered throughout the lands and cities of all the tribes.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. What was the inheritance of the Levites? What does that mean? Was God using their widespread dissemination throughout the land to remind His people of their true and ultimate inheritance?
2. We recall that Joshua and Caleb, many years earlier, had been the only two faithful spies urging Israel to take up the conquest of Canaan (Num. 13, 14). In that context, Caleb is the more prominent of the two. Why do you suppose God chose Joshua to lead Israel, rather than Caleb? Why is He bringing Caleb back to prominence here again?
3. What is your impression of Caleb from these verses? Why do you suppose the writer felt it necessary to

*Judah and the Sons of Joseph  
Joshua 14-17*

include Caleb's reminiscences in verses 6-12? What significance should we attach to the fact of Joshua's blessing Caleb (v. 13)?

*“And so, let us see who it is who first receives the inheritance from Jesus [Joshua]: ‘Caleb,’ it says, ‘the son of Jephunneh.’ For he requests first with certain fixed reasons and words that are described, words that are also able to instruct us for salvation. First of all, Caleb is interpreted ‘as a heart.’ Who, therefore, is ‘as a heart’ if not the one who in all things has devoted effort to discernment, who is not said to be just any member of the body of the church but that one that is the more admirable in us, the heart? That is, he is the one who bears all things with reason and prudence and so arranges all things as if being none other than the heart.” Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)*

*Lord, let my heart be like the heart of Caleb, and lead me today to...*

*Pray Psalm 78.65-72*

Use these verses to seek the Lord for revival, that He might raise up leaders to follow Jesus and build the Lord's house and shepherd His people with integrity of heart.

**Psalm 78.65-72** (*Foundation: How Firm a Foundation*)

While they were still suffering, God rose in His strength  
And fought for His people and saved them at length.  
From Judah a king He set for Israel,  
A temple He built with His people to dwell.

Now Jesus, God's servant, is King evermore,  
And we are His people, and He is our Lord.  
His heart is upright as He leads by His hand  
And causes us ever before Him to stand.

## 2 Judah

*Read Joshua 15.1-12*

*Reflect.*

1. How many different geological features can you identify as markers for the borders of Judah? Why is this a good way to establish borders?
2. Judah was not first in birth order among the tribes remaining on the west side of the Jordan. Simeon held that distinction. They were, however, the most numerous of the tribes (cf. Num. 26. 22). Why did it make sense to deal with their allotment first?

*Think about it.*

The focus is on the tribe of Judah, a focus which began in the last chapter with Caleb's inheritance, and which will conclude in this chapter with more detail about Caleb, followed by a detailed catalog of the cities taken by the tribe of Judah.

Judah's is geographically the largest parcel on the west side of the Jordan, probably because theirs was the largest tribe numerically. The practice of fixing borders by geological markers is common sense. Towns and cities in those days came and went, or sometimes changed names. Using towns or cities as the primary markers for a border would have invited future disputes. Fixed geological points are more reliable and less changeable. The spiritual point is clear: Set your spiritual and moral parameters on fixed and unchanging points of reference, as in the Word and promises of God, and not in the changeable schemes of men.

This lengthy report on Judah and Caleb sets the stage for the emergence of David and the Judaic dynasty which descended from him. We're not sure when the book of Joshua was written, or by whom; but we know the Spirit of God superintended the writing, and He uses these two chapters to emphasize the primacy of Judah in securing the promises of God. Would that have made David's ascendancy easier? Perhaps. But the significance is larger still: What the tribe of Judah began, Jesus would finish, albeit with a different kind of victory.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. Good borders were established by fixed entities – like mountains, lakes, and rivers – rather than fleeting entities like towns. How should you apply the spiritual principle hinted at here?
2. Why did the tribes of Israel need borders? Why couldn't they just all move about the land as they saw fit? Why was it important to God to keep, as much as possible, the tribal identities intact?
3. All these lands, together with the cities to be named at the end of the chapter, were assigned to Judah. But they were not all yet in Judah's hands. Judah's vision of what God had promised was becoming clearer, but there was still a lot of work to do. In some ways, this is a lot like our own experience with the promises of God. Explain.

*“‘And the borders,’ it says, ‘are all the way to Kadesh.’ Kadesh means ‘holy’ or ‘sanctification.’ Therefore, the borders of Judah reach all the way to sanctification.” Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)*

*Lord, You promise that You are at work in me, to will and do of Your good pleasure; but I must be at work, too, by...*

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

*Pray Psalm 26.*

As the Lord examines you, listen for any areas where you need to work harder at your salvation, and seek mercy and grace to help you in this.

**Psalm 26** (*Aberystwyth: Jesus, Lover of My Soul*)

Vindicate me, Lord on high; I have walked within Your Word.  
Never wav'ring, though I sigh, I have trusted You, O Lord!  
Prove me, Lord, prove even me! Test my heart and try my mind.  
Let Your steadfast mercy be in the path for me to find.

Men of falsehood will not sit in my presence, nor will I  
suffer any hypocrite to find favor in my eye.  
All the wicked I abhor; 'round Your altar let me stand,  
loudly singing evermore of Your gracious, mighty hand.

Lord, I love Your dwelling-place, there where all Your glory shines,  
Keep my soul before Your face, lest for sinful ways it pine.  
As for me, in righteousness, I shall walk on level ground;  
Save me, Lord, renew and bless! Let me with Your Church be found!

### 3 Caleb Claims His Inheritance

*Read Joshua 15.13-19*

*Reflect.*

1. The writer returns to Caleb and gives more detail about his inheritance. Why?
2. Joshua made a promise to whoever was willing to claim it. Can you see in his actions a reflection of how God led His people?

*Think about it.*

This is the second mention of Caleb and his inheritance. One more will follow, as these verses are repeated in Judges 1.11-15. The writer sets forth Caleb as an example, from within the tribe of Judah, of what all the tribes of Israel need to do. They have received their inheritances, but they still have work to do in securing them. Caleb is a study in continuing faithfulness for himself and his children.

I find Caleb's method of enlisting help analogous to God's way of motivating His people. Caleb makes a promise: Whoever takes Kirjath Sepher can have his daughter, Achsah, as wife. God had said, in effect, "Whoever displaces the Canaanites can have their cities and farms and My blessing." God leads His people by promise. Promises give people a vision of things to hope for, and such visions can motivate them to faith and obedience until they gain that for which they hoped (Heb. 11.1). People are motivated by vision, by what they see or hope for or desire. Most visions are shallow, material, fleeting, and disappointing. When God and His Kingdom are our vision, everything else we need falls nicely into place (Matt. 6.33).

Kudos, too, to Caleb's daughter, who was bold to ask for even more blessings than Caleb had originally granted. She asked for a field and springs of water; Caleb gave it to her, and more. Just so, we cannot out-ask our Father's ability to bless us. Exceedingly abundantly more is available to us than we ever dare to ask or think (Eph. 3.20). Perhaps we should take a lesson from Achsah?

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. What vision and promises motivate your daily life? What are you most hoping for in life? How does this vision affect the way you use your time?
2. Do you dare to think or ask for exceedingly abundantly more of God's blessings in your walk with and work for Him? Can you give an example?
3. What can we learn from Caleb about how to lay hold on God's precious and very great promises (2 Pet. 1.4)?

*"And it appears, that when he held out this rare prize to his fellow-soldiers for taking the city, no small achievement was required. This confirms what formerly seemed to be the case, that it was a dangerous and difficult task which had been assigned him, when he obtained his conditional grant. Accordingly, with the view of urging the bravest to exert themselves, he promises his daughter in marriage as a reward to the valor of the man who should first scale the wall." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)*

*Lord, make Your promises clear to my mind, and help me to desire them more, so that I...*

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

*Pray Psalm 111.*

As you pray, thank God for His works and for the promises of His covenant. Seek His help in learning His works and Word, and in laying hold on His promises for your life.

**Psalm 111** (*Manoah: When All Your Mercies, O My God*)

Praise the Lord! O let my heart give thanks here amid His chosen race!  
Your works are great, O Lord, and sought by all who know their grace.

For Your work is full of splendor, Lord, and of majesty most pure;  
Your righteousness, O glorious God, forever will endure!

You have caused Your many wondrous works to remain before our face.  
For You are full of mercy, Lord, and abounding all in grace.

For all who fear You, You provide; Your covenant endures.  
Your pow'r You show Your people, Lord, and make the nations theirs.

The works of Your all-sovereign hands are faithful, Lord, and just.  
Your precepts ever more are true and worthy of our trust.

You have sent redemption, to us, Lord, in Christ of cov'nant fame,  
And we in wonder, grace, and awe adore Your holy Name.

All they who would true wisdom know must learn to fear You, Lord,  
And in that wisdom daily live and praise You evermore.

## 4 Cities of Judah

*Read Joshua 15.20-63*

*Reflect.*

1. These are a lot of cities! What must have been involved in dividing them among the people of Judah? How do you suppose they decided who would live where?
2. What might have been involved in settling one of these cities? That is, what would the people of Judah have to do to make these erstwhile pagan cities places of God's *shalom*?

*Think about it.*

The names of these cities are dizzying. We note the mention of "cities" and "towns" with their outlying "villages." This suggests a structure of larger communities surrounded by what today we would call suburbs. So many cities and towns and villages! Which was a good thing, since the tribe of Judah consisted of somewhere around 80,000 people at this time (Num. 26.22).

Many of these places were still occupied by pagan peoples. They would have to be removed. We can assume that, as Caleb had set the pace, so the rest of the people of Judah followed suit in driving out the Canaanites. The mention that the people of Judah could not extract the Canaanites from Jerusalem is presented as an exception. It's also an ominous bit of foreshadowing. In all the rest of these cities, towns, and villages, they must have done as Caleb did at Hebron.

But as dizzying as this list is, even more dizzying is thinking about how the leaders of Judah determined who would live where, and how the people would "set up shop" as they moved into these places. How did they decide who would receive which homes or fields? What did it take to make these places livable according to the Law of God (Deut. 6.9)?

Claiming the promises of God takes a lot of work.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. It does take a lot of work to claim the promises of God. Such as?
2. God is a God of order, not chaos. What are the implications of this for our daily lives as His people?
3. Should we be content, as the people of Judah were (v. 63), to have remnants of our old life continuing in our soul? Explain.

*But now, even though we make great progress and improve ourselves with the utmost zeal, nevertheless I do not think anyone turns out to be so pure of heart that he is never defiled by the contamination of a contrary thought. Therefore, it is still certain that Jebusites dwell with the sons of Judah in Jerusalem. Yet we do not say these things so that we may neglect to cast them out as far as it may be done. On the contrary, we must be amply concerned and must attempt daily to cast them from Jerusalem; but, just as it is written, we cannot cast all out at the same time." Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)*

*Lord, grant me grace to do the hard work of claiming Your promises each day, beginning with...*

*Pray Psalm 126.*

What kind of "crop" should we be seeking in our lives? What sort of "sowing" does that require? Commit

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

your daily sowing to the Lord, and seek Him for a clearer vision of the harvest He has promised.

**Psalm 126** (*Truro: Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*)

When God restored our fortunes all,  
We were like those who sweetly dream.  
Our mouths with joy and laughter filled,  
Made Him our constant song and theme.

Then the astonished nations said,  
“The Lord has done great things for them!”  
Indeed, great things our God has done,  
Whose Name we praise, Amen, Amen!

Restore our fortunes, Lord our King!  
Let grace like flowing streams prevail.  
All they with tears of joy shall sing  
Who sow while yet they weep and wail.

They who in tears of sorrow sow  
And cast their seed on every hand,  
With joy shall reach their heav’nly home,  
And bring the harvest of their land.

## 5 Joseph's Sons (1)

*Read Joshua 16.1-10.*

*Reflect.*

1. The focus turns now to the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. These tribes were large and powerful (17.17). Joshua was from the tribe of Ephraim. Why do you suppose his tribe wasn't mentioned first?
2. Did the Ephraimites follow the example of Caleb?

*Think about it.*

We recall the "wilderness that goes up from Jericho through the mountains to Bethel" from the earlier account of Israel's destruction of Ai and Bethel. The tribe of Ephraim had led the way in that battle; now they will settle that land, a belt stretching across the land of promise just north of Judah's possession, and just below that of the half-tribe of Manasseh, west of the Jordan.

We wince a bit at verse 10. We've already noted that driving out the Canaanites would be a lengthy process. But God commanded it, and He would give His people success. Apart from the Gibeonites, God did not approve making treaties with any of the Canaanite peoples, but this is just what we see the people of Ephraim doing here. The people of Judah continued to struggle with the Jebusites (15.63), and would until the days of David. But they made no treaty with them. The Ephraimites must have reckoned that if the Gibeonites could be put to forced labor, so could the Canaanites of Gezer.

But an exception is just that. What was done with the Gibeonites was not intended to become a norm for other circumstances.

This attitude of compromising on God's Word would haunt the people of Ephraim and Manasseh, and would ultimately be their undoing.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. How can you guard against compromising on what God has spoken in His Word?
2. What are some areas where Christians are most inclined to compromise on the Word of God? How can believers help one another to stand firm on Scripture in these areas?
3. How would you counsel a new believer about the dangers of compromising the Word of God and how to keep from falling into that snare?

*"Seeing, then, God had distinctly forbidden his people to transact business of any kind with those nations, and least of all to enter into pactions with them, stipulating for their pardon and safety, the Ephraimites sinned much more grievously in exacting tribute than if they had tolerated them without paction." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)*

*Keep me from any compromises with Your Word, O Lord, and help me always to...*

*Pray Psalm 79.*

This psalm of Asaph was written during Solomon's reign, a time of great prosperity and peace. Did Asaph see something in Solomon and the soul of Israel against which he felt the need to warn them? Does this psalm speak to anything like this in you?

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

**Psalm 79** (*Passion Chorale: O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*)

O God the nations all Your inheritance have spoiled!  
Your City have they ruined, Your temple they have soiled!  
Your servants' bodies all to the birds of heav'n are thrown;  
The flesh of all Your faithful the jaws of beasts now own.

The blood of faithful servants like water flows around;  
And none are there Your saints to commit into the ground.  
Our neighbors mock and scorn us: How long, O Lord, how long?  
How long will You be angry and scorn our mournful song?

Pour out, O Lord, Your wrath on all who deny Your Name;  
Who trust You not nor seek You, bring down to deepest shame!  
For they have with great rancor Your precious saints devoured;  
Lay waste their habitation at this late dreadful hour.

Why should the nations mock and say, "Where now is their God?"  
Let there be known among them harsh vengeance for our blood!  
Hear, Lord, our groans and sighing; preserve us by Your pow'r.  
For we are fairly dying each day and hour by hour.

Reproach those who reproach us with judgment sevenfold!  
Let thanks and praise to You by Your precious flock be told.  
We are Your sheep, O Savior, we thank You all our days.  
Look on us with Your favor as we declare Your praise.

## 6 Joseph's Sons (2)

*Read Joshua 17.1-17.*

*Reflect.*

1. Review Numbers 27.1-11. What insight does this situation provide into how to interpret the Law of God?
2. Do you see anything troubling in this allotment of land to the people of Manasseh?

*Think about it.*

The Law of God – the commandments and statutes – did not cover a situation such as Israel confronted in Numbers 2.1-11. The *letter* of the Law was silent here. The daughters of Zelophehad, appealing to the *spirit* of the Law, claimed a place in the promised inheritance of God. Moses took their case to the Lord, and the Lord concurred. In our passage today, the people of Manasseh are called to honor the decision taken so many years prior, and, to their credit, they do (vv. 3-6).

The allotment to Manasseh, lying north of Ephraim and stretching between the Jordan River and the sea, was the largest of the tribal territories. Did the people become weary of subduing all the remnants of the Canaanite peoples who inhabited the towns within this territory? We read that they “could not” drive these people out. Could not? Was not God on their side? Of course, He was. But they took a cue from their brother, Ephraim, gave up on God and His will, and settled into a mode of compromise with the stubborn pagans within their territory, even though they were strong enough to “drive them out.”

Compromise with paganism will become a hallmark of the northern tribes of Israel. It all began here, with what must have seemed to everybody like a harmless expedient for ending the fighting and getting on with the settling. But compromise with unbelief and sin is never harmless.

Not content with the allotment assigned them, the children of Manasseh press for more, arguing that they were “a great people” (vv. 14-17). Joshua put that claim back at them: If you’re such a great people, subdue and develop the ample land assigned you. Verse 18 seems to suggest that Joshua caved in to their demand. But he was merely directing them to do their due diligence in the portion of the land allotted to them. In so doing he spoke indirectly to their unwillingness to drive out the Canaanites. They’d rather have some vacant portion assigned than have to do the hard work involved in claiming the promises of God. Joshua said, No deal.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. What principles or guidelines should we keep in mind as we’re trying to discern the *spirit* of the Law from the *letter* of the Law?
2. How can you tell when a church has compromised the Word of God? What are the signs?
3. We have said that laying hold on the promises of God is hard work, and we must not try to avoid it. What do you find to be the hardest things to do in claiming God’s promises?

*“You see what is being said to us in the spiritual interpretation, to clear the woodland that is in us and, cutting useless and unfruitful trees out of us, to make fallow lands there that we would always renew and from which we would reap fruit ‘thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.’” Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)*

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph  
Joshua 14-17*

*Strengthen me for this day, O Lord, and keep Your promises before my mind, so that I...*

*Pray Psalm 90.12-17.*

How do these words guide you to pray for the promise-claiming ahead of you today?

**Psalm 90.12-17** (*Landas: My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*)

Lord, teach us all our days to note that wisdom may be ours.  
Return, O Lord, have pity on those servants who are Yours.  
Each morning let Your love appear that we for joy may sing.  
And make us glad for every day You us affliction bring.

Now let Your work to us appear; our children show Your might.  
And let Your favor rest on us; show mercy in Your sight.  
The work that You have given us, confirm, and to us show,  
That we Your chosen path may walk and in Your precepts go.

## 7 Judah and Joseph

*Read Joshua 14-17.*

*Reflect.*

1. The writer's lengthy focus on the tribes of Judah and Joseph (his sons) suggests that these two tribes will feature large in Israel's subsequent history, and they do. How can you see in this focus an indication of the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring this writing?
2. The book of Joshua provides counsel for us in the work of sanctification – becoming more like Christ. How do these four chapters add to that counsel?

*Think about it.*

Several important themes are implicit in these chapters. First is the faithfulness of God. Just as God had promised, His people were able to drive out the Canaanites and gain possession of their cities and lands. The people should have learned that God's Word is reliable, true, and unchanging. He is faithful.

Second, we learn that claiming the promises is hard work. Many small details and tasks would have been required for the families of Israel to move into new homes and begin making a living. God holds out precious and very great promises for us, that by gaining them we might become more like Jesus (2 Pet. 1.4; 2 Cor. 1.20); but we must work hard to realize those promises by concentrating on the work of sanctification (2 Pet. 3.18; Phil. 2.12).

Finally, and ominously, we see how easy it is to become complacent and content merely to have gained *some* of God's promises, and to begin compromising on His commandments and making room for unbelief in our lives. Even the biggest, strongest tribes of Israel – Judah and the sons of Joseph – failed to eradicate pagan peoples from their midst, but made accommodation for them. This tendency to compromise would be Israel's undoing.

These are three important lessons for us as God's covenant people today. We need to reflect on them deeply.

*Meditate and discuss.*

1. How have these chapters encouraged you to see more of God's faithfulness in your own life?
2. Are you gaining a better appreciation of the many daily details and tasks that go into the work of sanctification? Explain.
3. What are you doing to guard yourself more diligently from compromising the Word of God in your walk with and work for Him?

*"The reason, therefore, why they could not expel the inhabitants was, because they were not fully persuaded in their minds that God is true, and stifled his agency by their own sluggishness."* John Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)*

*O God, thank You for being so faithful! Help me also to be faithful as I...*

*Pray Psalm 103.1-14.*

Celebrate the faithfulness of God as you pray, both as you see it in Scripture and as you experience it in your own life. Ask Him to show you more evidence of His faithfulness throughout the day ahead.

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph  
Joshua 14-17*

**Psalm 103.1-14** (*Old 100<sup>th</sup>: All Creatures That on Earth Do Dwell*)

O my soul, bless the Lord's great Name! His many benefits proclaim:  
He pardons sins and heals disease, and from the pit grants us release.

With mercy rich and steadfast love He satisfies us from above,  
Revives our youth, works righteousness, and justice serves for the oppressed.

His ways to Moses He made known; to Israel His great works were shown.  
The Lord is full of mercy sweet, and with His favor does us meet.

To anger He but slowly goes; abounding love to us He shows.  
He will not always scold nor chide; His anger will not e'er abide.

Our sins He casts from us away; He shows compassion every day.  
He knows our frame, that we are dust, so on His goodness let us trust.

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What do we mean when we say that God is faithful? Faithful to what? How should God's faithfulness guide us as we seek to lay hold on His promises?
2. Why does it require so much work to lay hold on God's promises? Why doesn't He just give them to us, full and free?
3. What temptations to compromise on God's Word do you face each day? How can you prepare for these, so that you will not succumb?
4. These chapters spent a good bit of time with Caleb. Why? What can we learn from the example of Caleb?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Joshua 14-17? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*For prayer:*

*Judab and the Sons of Joseph*  
*Joshua 14-17*

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