

Primary Source

Chief Joseph's Plea for Justice

Chief Joseph was the political leader of the Nez Percés, who lived throughout eastern Oregon and Idaho. When they were defeated in a war, they were forced to settle in Oklahoma. His eloquent appeals to allow his people to return to their homeland in the Northwest won national attention to his cause. As you read, consider how he wants whites and Native Americans to treat each other.

If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian he can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it. You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases. If you tie a horse to a stake, do you expect he will grow fat? If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth, and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented, nor will he grow and prosper. I have asked some of the great white chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place, while he sees white men going where they please. They can not tell me.

I only ask of the Government to be treated as all other men are treated. If I can not go to my own home, let me have a home in some country where my people will not die so fast. I would like to go to Bitter Root Valley.¹ There my people would be healthy; where they are now they are dying. Three have died since I left my camp to come to Washington. . . .

I know that my race must change. We can not hold our own with the white men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If the Indian breaks the law, punish by the law. If the white man breaks the law, punish him also.

Let me be a free man—free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty.

Whenever the white man treats the Indian as they treat each other, then we will have no more wars. We shall all be alike—brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us and one country around us, and one government for all. Then the Great Spirit Chief who rules above will smile upon this land, and send rain to wash out the bloody spots made by brothers' hands from the face of the earth. For this time the Indian race are waiting and praying. I hope that no more groans of wounded men and women will ever go to the ear of the Great Spirit Chief above, and that all people may be one people.

from Chief Joseph, *North American Review*, April, 1879.
Reprinted in Wayne Moquin, ed., *Great Documents in American Indian History*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 237–251.

1. **Bitter Root Valley:** a region in Idaho.

Main Ideas

1. According to Chief Joseph, what must happen to bring peace between whites and Indians?
2. How does Chief Joseph respond to the requirement that Native Americans live on reservations?

Critical Thinking

3. **Analyzing Points of View** In this excerpt, do you think Chief Joseph is speaking for all Native Americans? Explain.
4. **Identifying Facts and Opinions** Does Chief Joseph use facts or opinions to support his point? Explain.

Reteaching Activity

Finding Main Ideas

Listed below are main ideas relating to life in the West. Read each main idea. Then fill in details from the section that support it. Some details have already been included.

1. Women played an important role in settling the West.
 - a. _____
 - b. Women held a variety of jobs in the West.
 - c. _____
2. Cities seemed to grow overnight in the West.
 - a. Gold and silver strikes spurred the growth of cities like Denver and San Francisco.
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
3. The Southwest came under control of the United States in the 1840s.
 - a. Spanish-speaking people called Mexicanos lived in the Southwest.
 - b. _____
4. The Old West has fascinated Americans since the late 1800s.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody brought the West to the rest of the world through his Wild West show.
 - d. _____