

The Promised Land
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Picture this: six hundred sixty thousand (660,000) warriors poised on the east side of the Jordan River, ready to cross and enter into the Promised Land. On the west side of the river the people of Canaan are trembling in fear. We have one quote from that era, from somebody on the west side. And she says that 'terror has fallen upon us.' See, they had heard about this people who had come out of Egypt some forty years before and had gone up into the Sinai wilderness. And after thirty-eight years of wandering in the Sinai wilderness they had come along the east side of the Dead Sea and up on the east side of the Jordan River, and they were now poised and ready to invade. And the people of the land had heard how this...how these Israelites had been brought across the Red Sea by God, and Pharaoh's army had been swallowed up after them. They had heard how He had defeated the great King Og and the great King Sihon on the east side as they came up through there. They were a massive wave of warriors coming with their women and their children in their wake. And the people of Canaan are in fear, and rightly so.

The army of Israel crosses that Jordan River, and they conquer the whole central area of Palestine. And after they establish control of that area they turn to the south. And they gain control of that area...not every place, but they establish themselves as the general controlling force in that region, taking it over slowly by slowly. And then they turn north and they take over the north. So after about twenty years under the leadership of Joshua we have the story told in the book by his name, the book of Joshua. After twenty years the Israelites have control of this whole area, the land of Palestine, the Promised Land. There's still pockets of resistance, there's still villages and towns they don't control, but they have established they are the power that rules in that land.

When you read the account in Joshua you recognize this wasn't a typical territorial war. For one, the dramatic, divine interventions that take place. For example, when they cross that Jordan River it was at flood stage. And we're told that God stopped the river upstream, the riverbed went dry, and the people of Israel walked across a dry riverbed. And then God released the waters and they flowed through again. When they took the city of Jericho, and you've all heard that story in Sunday school, how the people of Israel simply marched around the city day after day, and then finally on the seventh day they marched around it seven times, they shouted, and the walls just collapsed, and they had the fortified city of Jericho in their grasp. One of the most amazing, astounding miracles, one that you stop and say, 'Man, how can that be?' The one that the physicists still wonder and debate, and say 'How could that ever happen?' But in Joshua chapter ten we're told of how, in a great battle against a number of kings that were in a confederation against Israel, as the Israelites were winning the battle and pressing forward, and wanted to press the advantage, Joshua cries out to the heavens, and he calls upon God to stop the moon and the sun in its place, to extend the day, to literally stop time! We're told that God did it. I don't know how, but He stopped time and the Israelites were able to finish the battle. And the commentary written in the record is never before or since has such a thing happened, that God heard and answered a prayer in such a way. This was not a typical territorial war. God was powerfully involved. And that's because this conflict, this taking-of-the-land, was rooted in a promise, an ancient promise that had been given to the forefathers, the patriarchs, of the Israelites over four hundred years before.

And we'll put the lights back up and I'll take us to a text found in Genesis chapter 12, verse 7, where we go back and we find the first promise with respect to the land. God has called a wanderer named Abraham, and He has called him to go to a land called Canaan; and He's told him to go there and He's given him promises of blessing and descendants and everything else there. In the seventh verse of that chapter God says to Abraham, "*I am going to give this land to your descendants.*" 'I'm gonna give it to them. It's gonna be theirs. You, yourself, will not own it. You will not possess it. You will wander through it. But your descendants someday will own this land. It will be theirs.' That's four hundred years...over four hundred years before the invasion of Canaan by the Israelites, and the promise is the driving force behind that invasion.

We're told in Joshua chapter 1, verse 6...and if you have your Bibles there you can jump to that passage now...in chapter 1 verse 6 we have God, four hundred years later, calling Joshua, who was leading the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, the one who was given that promise...and God speaks to Joshua as he faces the challenges ahead, the conquest that he was called to, and he says

“Be strong and courageous...”

...this is the word to Joshua...

“Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.”

‘You’re gonna take possession of this land,’ God says to Joseph...I mean, to Joshua; ‘...this land which I promised to give to your forefathers, to Abraham.’

And when we come to the end, near twenty years later, and the conquest is for the most part accomplished and general control is established throughout the land, we have this statement at the end. It says

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and they lived in it.

It was their land. God had given it to them by promise, and now by possession.

You read the account, you read the story, and you recognize this is definitely not a typical territorial war. But it raises a couple questions as you read that account and as you go through it. And you recognize God was intimately involved in this war, fulfilling His promise. And that raises a couple questions. One question is ‘Why total annihilation?’ If you go read through this whole story in Joshua, it’s brutal warfare. The Israelites were told to leave no survivors and take no prisoners. In our modern day it would be called genocide—no prisoners, no survivors. And with our rather tame view of God we’re unsettled by that. There’s a couple indications in the story prior to this that give an indication why—not a full explanation, just more of an indication. For example, when Abraham was originally given the promise he was told it would not be fulfilled for more than four hundred years. And the reason why is the people of the land, the people who were then living in it, hadn’t filled up iniquity to the fullest. In other words, they hadn’t become as bad as they were gonna become. And then when Moses stood on the edge of the land, knowing he wasn’t gonna enter it, and he charged the Israelites to go in and take possession of it under Joshua, he did remind them. He said, ‘Listen, you’re not going in because you’re so good and righteous. God’s not taking you in there because you’re such a perfect people. He is removing those people because they are so wicked.’ Across that Jordan River in the land of Canaan was an evil, a horrendous evil, that God was gonna remove. Don’t fully understand it; takes more explanation. In fact, what we’re gonna do...Ashley and I are planning and put together a series of sermons. When we’re done walking through this story of that Old Testament we’re gonna go back and we’re gonna look at some of the ones...issues in the Old Testament that cause us to hesitate, ‘Whoa, what’s that about?’ And one of them is this episode—total annihilation of the people groups in Canaan. We’ll come back and address it more fully. But understand right now there was an evil in that land and it needed to be dealt with.

I wanna press on, though, because there’s another question that we wanna track with because it’s more central to our review of the story of God’s grace. And the question that comes as we look at this war and this...God’s involvement in taking this Promised Land...the question I have that is probably most practical is...the question is “Why this land?” Why this land? One historian, looking at the land of Canaan, he says, “It’s not a particularly inviting land.” It really isn’t. I mean, it was fruitful. It was a land of milk and honey for these Israelites coming out of the desert. But it wasn’t a particularly inviting land. I mean, for agriculture and productivity think of the fruited plains of America; for peace and prosperity the nestled richness of Switzerland; for commerce and trade the deep harbors and teeming markets of Asia; for seclusion and serenity the rugged isolation of Greenland; for recreation and fun I kinda like the sun and beaches of the Caribbean—never been there, but it sounds cool; for raw wealth the sands of Arabia and the oil that is there; for pure wilderness wonder give me Alaska any day; for exotic plants and animals South America and the rain forest. Israel? Nice, but... In fact, there’s an Israelite proverb that I kinda get a kick out of. When creation was in process—and it’s just a proverb, it didn’t happen this way, but just so you know—two storks are sent out with bags of rocks to spread around the world. And one stork, just as he’s flyin’ over Palestine, the old Jewish proverb says, the sack broke! And half the world’s rocks landed in Israel. Ok? So the question becomes “Why Israel? Why that place?”

Michael Williams, one writer, responds and he says “You know, what was most important about this particular piece of real estate was its geographic relationship to other lands. The land of Palestine was on the way to everywhere else.” If you look on a map it was the narrow road route, the road access between the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. It was the place on the way to everywhere else. And as a result, as Michael Williams continues to state, “It was the most traveled, most disputed, most fought-over and most conquered land in the history of the world.”

When I picture Israel I think of a yard that I grew up in, big green yard, but everybody ran across one section. And they had this... My dad loved his lawn; it was this big, beautiful, green lawn. But there was this worn, bare path through the grass. That was Israel. That was Israel. So we keep wondering, “Why that place? Why that place?” I mean, if God wanted a place where He could settle in with His people, and He could enjoy them and they could enjoy Him in security and peace and prosperity, unbothered by the busy world around us, Palestine was the last place to put it.

Let’s put it in a bigger context. This is how we begin to see something that I think is crucial for us to understand. God’s answer to all that is wrong with this world, as strange as it sounds, was a promise He made and He’s determined to keep. The promise was a promise made to Abraham, which God is determined to keep and is in the process of keeping even to this day. That promise had three key parts. We’ve been talking about one of ‘em, but there’s three. Number one was a promise to Abraham, found in Genesis 12:2, that He would make him into a great people, the people of Israel, that nation forged in the fiery furnace of the wilderness. God said, ‘I’m gonna make you into a great people.’

He also said ‘I’m gonna give you a special place. To your descendants,’ as we’ve already said, ‘I will give you this land.’ That’s the land we’ve been studying and looking at in terms of the center of this conflict.

But there is a third part to that promise, and that is this. He says, “*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*” ‘Every people group in the world is ultimately gonna be blessed through you.’ More specifically He develops that--‘They are going to be blessed through a descendant of yours, a person who will arise, through whom the whole world will be blessed.’ We know that person to be named Jesus, descended of Abraham, born of that people in that place to bless all the world.

Now the context of that covenant...and this is so crucial to catch...in the context of that three-part covenant, the place, Israel, was in a strategic location for extending the blessings promised to Abraham to the whole world. As one writer puts it, that place was the focused place of cultural exchange in the world at that day. It was a strategic choice that God made in order to extend the blessings that would come through Jesus to the whole world. It’s amazing! When Jesus did come, born of that people in that place, it had such a central location that within ten years, within ten years of His crucifixion and resurrection, people were complaining that His followers had turned the world upside down! Now, He hadn’t reached...His message hadn’t reached the whole world, but it had already spread through the known world. It was a strategic location for the spread of the blessing and the grace promised in Jesus, descendant of Abraham. You need to see that. The promise of the people and the promise of a place were not the ultimate grace and blessing of Abraham’s promise. The ultimate blessing of the promise given to Abraham was this person, Jesus, descendant of Abraham, through Whom all peoples will receive grace.

It’s important. See, our tendency as people who enjoy God’s grace is very much like what the ancient Israelites did; is we begin to think that the ultimate end of God’s promise through Abraham is our people in our place; that the ultimate goal of grace an enjoyment of grace; and the grip of grace in our lives is related to the people we call family and the place we call home, individually and congregationally. I mean, we plug into congregational life and if we find some good friends in that congregational life and a comfortable place to meet, we call that grace. Good enough. Those are only means to an end. They’re grace, but the people He puts us with in the church, and the place He puts us in our lives—those are only means to the ultimate end of extending His grace through the person of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a quick picture that will give you a sense of what I’m talking about. It makes such a powerful difference in how we approach our lives individually and congregationally. There’s an instance. It’s my favorite in the book of Joshua. It’s found in Joshua chapter 5, and it begins at verse 13 where Joshua...this is prior to the actual start of conflict. They’d crossed the river. They’re getting ready to take up arms. And Joshua’s out there kind of surveying the battle field, and he sees a person. And he sees this person; he’s not sure who he is. He’s a warrior, but he doesn’t recognize him. And Joshua’s question as he sees this person...he says

“Are you for us or for our adversaries?”

'Are you with us, or are you with them? Whose side are you on?'

And I love the response at this point. The person comes back and says, 'No, I'm not goin' there.' In essence, he says, 'Neither. I'm not with you and I'm not with them.' He says,

"I come as captain of the host of the LORD."

Theologians try to say 'Who was this? Was this a theophany? Was it God? Was this Jesus preincarnate? Or was this a Gabriel or some other commanding angel? Who was it?' I'm not sure. I think it was Jesus. That's my feeling. But the issue with Him is not 'whose side am I on?' It's 'Joshua, I know My side. Whose side are you on? The LORD's or yours?' And He goes on. Joshua falls on his face and bows down and says to Him

"What has my lord to say to his servant?"

'I realize You're the One I need to serve. You're the One I need to follow.' He falls on his knees. And listen to this response. This strange captain says

"Remove your sandals..."

'Take 'em off...'

"...for the place where you are standing is holy."

Now, we could explore this a long direction, but I'm gonna narrow it down to the very core of what it means when He says 'this land is holy.' What that term means and what He's sayin' to Joshua at this time is 'This land, this Promised Land that God has given to you, is holy. It is set apart for God's purposes. This place is set aside for God's purposes, not your pleasure, not your peace, not your prosperity. It is set aside for God's purposes. Take your sandals off.'

Listen. If the captain of the host of the LORD is standing in our midst today and we came back and said "Whose side are you on...ours or theirs? Are you an evangelical Christian or are you a liberal? Are you Republican or are you a Democrat? Do you shoot and eat moose or do you chew granola? Are you a sport fisherman or are you commercial? Are you pro-development or are you marching against the oil companies", He would look at us and He would say, 'I'm not goin' there.' My question is 'Are you in the LORD's army?' And by the way, take your shoes off. The place where God has put you in your life right now is a holy place. That job, that school, that neighborhood—you've been put there not for your peace, not for your pleasure, not for your prosperity. You've been put there so that ultimately the promise given to Abraham—that out of that people, through that place, there will come a person through whom all the world is blessed—that promise will go on and on and on and on. Grace does not end with your people and your place.

Let's stand.

What do you do? We can say this, but the next question, and I always ask myself this is "What is the next action step? What do I do? Do I go grab somebody on the street corner on the way home and say 'Love Jesus!' What do I do?" Answer, and I cannot say this strong enough—you pray this prayer. Not as a routine, not as habit, not as something Larry just insists we keep doing. You pray this prayer.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth and extend that grace, in Jesus' name. Amen.