

The Lord goes before His People

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[0 : 00] Well, don't you just love it when all the work has been done for you, and all you needed to do was turn up and reap the rewards? I'm sure many of you are feeling that right now with exams.

If only all the studying had been done for you already, the model answers written out, and you just had to turn up and transcribe it onto the exam paper.

That would be fantastic, wouldn't it? Well, for me, I wish that every time I returned from holidays, all the work of unpacking and the laundry were done for me. The clothes dried, ironed, and folded, and all I needed to do was just go to the wardrobe when I needed it next.

Just like the Queen, did you know that every time she moves residences, a group of private servants and her valet would travel ahead and get things done first?

If you've watched a Downton Abbey movie, you certainly know what that looks like. They would make sure the pantry is restocked, the linen and the sheets are cleaned, check the heating maybe.

[1 : 11] In this modern age, the TV and the internet are all working. If only I had my own valet service at home. Well, tonight, as we move on from God's laws, God promises, surprisingly, a similar thing for Israel, to go ahead of them into the promised land.

Remember, Moses and the people are still at Mount Sinai when they left Egypt. Rather than head straight to the promised land, God brings them here instead. He appears to them and gives them His laws to prepare them for life in the land.

But there's also the fact that the promised land is occupied by nations that are stronger and more numerous. How will Israel occupy the land?

They didn't even leave Egypt with armies and chariots, did they? Why, even their daily meal of manna and quail has to be supplied to them by God.

So you can understand how they might have reacted if they had just fronted up at the edge of Canaan. God knows this, and so He's reassuring them now that He'll go before them and prepare the way.

[2 : 26] So if you look at the Bible, in verses 20, He says, and I've got it on the slide as well, See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the land I have prepared.

Now if you skip down to verse 23, we see what the angel will do. My angel will go on ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out.

And then further on in verse 27, God spells it out even more vividly. I will send you my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter.

I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the Hornet ahead of you to drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and Hittites out of your way.

Now we'll look at this in more detail shortly, but first off, there's no doubt, is there, that God promises to deliver the land to Israel. This angel is an agent of God, acting with His authority.

[3 : 28] For it says there in verse 22 that God's name is in Him. And again and again, God promises the angel will go ahead of them. His job is to clear the path for Israel.

If Israel had to face these enemies alone, then yes, they would overwhelm her. But because God is going ahead of them, these nations will be terrified instead.

God will throw them into confusion. They'll turn tail and run away. God likens this angel to a Hornet, which is the largest of the wasps.

So fearsome is the Hornet that he even has a reputation for killing other bees. Now how many of you, I wonder, are afraid of bees?

I'll ask you to put up your hands, but I can't see you. But anyway, look at the next slide and you actually see the relative sizes of the bee versus the Hornet. The one I picked there, of course, is the biggest, the Asian giant Hornet.

[4 : 33] So if you're afraid of bees, wait till you see the Hornet. So imagine these other nations are like the bees. They may be numerous and fearsome, but when the Hornet swoops in, it sends the bees scurrying from their hives.

Now incidentally, in case you're wondering, there's no connection between the Hivites or the Hivites and bees or hives. But this Hornet really is an image of speed and power, isn't it?

And that's probably why the U.S. Army calls one of its jets the F-A-18 Hornet. And there you go, aviation buffs. I've got a slide, a picture of that plane for you, just so you can enjoy.

You see, notwithstanding the fearsome Hornet, I think God is giving them a picture of His grace. He knows they cannot defeat the enemies otherwise. Just as God had to rescue them from Egypt, so now He'll conquer the enemies in the land as well.

And the extent of His grace is seen even in verse 29. He says that God will not drive out the enemies in one single year. Why?

[5 : 50] Because the land will become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Rather, little by little, I will drive them out before you until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.

I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and from the desert to the Euphrates River. I will give you into your hands the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you.

Now that last verse there is very important, isn't it? Because even though God is doing all the work, Israel has a part to play also. They don't just turn up and relax, do they?

Instead, even as God will give them into their hand, give the enemies to their hands, Israel will have to drive them out too. But they do it with God's assurance of His power.

They do it with a sure knowledge of success. But let me go back to the start of the passage now because intertwined with all of God's promises to do the work which we've already seen, we now see also God's commands for what Israel has to do.

[7 : 02] How they're to respond as God works for them. Both of them go hand in hand, you see. So in verse 21, God starts off by saying, pay attention to him, the angel, and listen to what he says.

Do not rebel against him. He will not forgive your rebellion since my name is in him. Now here, it could refer to the laws which we spent the last few weeks talking about, but I think it might refer more specifically to the angels' battle instructions.

And we actually see that when we see them finally enter the land in Joshua, that there's actually an evidence of just such an angel in chapter 5. There, there's a commander of the Lord's army that appears to Joshua.

And then it's presumed that from there on, Joshua's commands in the book are in accordance with the commands of this commander or angel. And then in the very next chapter of Joshua, chapter 6, we see exactly how God is true to his promises there.

When Israel failed to obey God at the fall of Jericho, they kept some of the possessions when God told them not to, they were punished. By being defeated at I in the next battle.

[8 : 17] So the instructions here are important. They are to listen to it. God goes on to say, if you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, notice the equivalence there, listening to the angel means listening to God, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you.

God will drive out their enemies, but they need to obey. Again, as I said already, both go hand in hand. God works as they obey.

Now, what's the motivation for driving out the enemies? Well, it's not, as some might think, a straight matter of conquest, as though there's only room for one nation in Canaan.

No, God wants to drive the nations out because otherwise their gods and their idols will be a snare. So, this is actually really about maintaining true worship for Israel.

So, verse 24, do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.

[9 : 25] Worship the Lord your God and His blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full

lifespan.

You see, if the nations had remained in the land, they will be a temptation, a distraction. They'll pressure Israel to join with them in worshipping idols.

But God even says that after they are driven out, Israel is to demolish their sacred stones as well.

So, it's not to even have a reminder of these gods, let alone worship them.

You see, there's a certain discipline that comes with worshipping the true God, isn't there? Because unlike the other nations, Israel is not to make an image of God.

Instead, God is to be remembered in His words. He's remembered for His mighty deeds. That's how they worship when they gather to offer sacrifices or during the festivals.

[10:29] None of these things are done with images of God present. And that's similar to our worship as Christians, isn't it? Our focus is on God's Word as we come each week and remembering His mighty deeds of salvation through our prayer, through our praise.

We don't venerate God with an image or bow down to a statue of Him. There's nothing tangible, is there, for us to touch. Rather, our assurance is in His Word, in His promises, in His commands.

And that's the same discipline required of Israel. If they obey Him, then God's blessing will follow in the abundance of the land, in good health, in having children.

Now, in the final verses, God brings them both together. The command not to worship other gods goes hand in hand with driving the nations from the land. And so, verse 31, which we've read before, He says, I will give into your hands the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before me.

But then, continuing, He says, do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land or they will cause you to sin against me because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare, as I said earlier, to you.

[11:50] Now, history tells us, of course, that Israel failed and God took no pleasure in having to punish them. Even though God had promised to drive out the nations for them, Israel failed to do it.

And eventually, just as God said, these gods became a snare to them. It's a warning that we should heed as well, shouldn't it?

That's a picture of a snare is very appropriate, isn't it? I picture it like a mouse trap. You see the bait put into it often and then the mouse goes in, they're tempted and then when they snatch at that cheese or whatever, the trap door shuts and then they find that they're stuck.

Well, that's the same with idolatry, isn't it? At first, whatever it is always looks tempting to us, doesn't it? Inviting almost. And we're just out for a good time.

What's the harm in that? It's just a bit of extra money. I could use that. I'm just going to get more recognition for all my work. Nothing wrong with that. We can't see the harm that might come from falling or chasing a particular idol.

[13:04] Now, we look at the Israelites and we often scoff, don't we? And we say, how easily are they seduced by these other gods? I mean, we think, who would ever fall for these primitive rituals or these sacred stones?

But you know, for them, at the time, it's very similar to us. Those who worshipped the idols would have vouched that these were the things that made their crops fertile.

These were the gods that gave them good health or the ability to have children. These were the gods were the reason why they were blessed. It all seems very plausible. And it's the same sort of messaging that we get today, isn't it?

Whether it's talk or reality shows on TV, they're always telling you what you should do to fulfill your dreams. If only you did this, you'll get ahead in life.

This is what you must do if you want to secure your nest egg or whatever. Idolatry is always enticing at first, isn't it? It looks harmless even.

[14:07] But then, it's a snare because once we're in it, it becomes a bit of a trap and then it's so hard to get out of, isn't it? That's why Paul warns in 1 Corinthians on the next slide to flee from idolatry.

It's as real in the New Testament times and now as it was back in Exodus. Well, we've come to the end of the passage but I guess before we conclude, we need to ask how the entire episode applies to us.

At various points, I've already touched on it but what is the big picture here for Christians? For instance, are we to assume that we've got an angel as well that's preparing the way for us?

Or is there a land that we're to conquer physically? Well, I think many of you would know how to do this but let's work through it together anyway. Well, first we know that as Christians, what we've been rescued from is slavery to sin, not from Egypt.

Our rescuer isn't an angel or Moses but Jesus. And as a result of his death on the cross, we're saved from sin and death. So again, as Paul says in Romans 6, for the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[15 : 27] And so, as a result of Jesus, God is now leading us to our eternal home, to a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus himself made this promise, didn't he, to his disciples in John, which is on the next slide, chapter 14, that in his Father's house there are many rooms and he's going to prepare a place for us, for them, for us, and then he will come back to take us there.

So that's our eternal resting place we can look forward to. But I guess there's also a sense that our Christian life now is a land of promise, isn't it?

Because as we live under God, we get to enjoy some of the blessings just like Israel in the promised land. We are urged to keep our eyes as we live for him now, worshipping God alone. And that our enemies now is sin and the devil. God's blessing in our lives follow the more we grow in holiness and our blessings aren't material like they were for Israel but spiritual.

But as we obey God and live under his will, we begin to experience more and more of his blessing. We have his blessings already, but we experience it as we obey him.

[16 : 46] The peace and the joy that he promises. The knowledge of his love for us, his care and the assurance that that brings. And that applies for us as a church and a community too, the more we live together under God's will, the more we will experience the peace and the harmony and the love that God promises.

We enjoy the blessing of encouraging one another, of mutually strengthening each other's faith. Now that's the ideal we're all working towards, but at the same time we still live with the reality of sin, don't we?

We still struggle with it. And that's why in our New Testament reading today, Paul says in Ephesians 6, that our Christian life is marked by spiritual warfare. So in verse 10, he calls us to be strong in the Lord and his mighty power.

Like Israel, God promises to do the work for us, to win the battle, so we just have to be strong in his power. But we have to do our part too as well of being strong in the Lord by putting on the armor of God, Paul says, against the devil's schemes.

For our struggle isn't against flesh and blood, but against rulers, authorities, powers of this dark war, and against the spiritual forces of evil. Now it's important to get this because unlike Israel, our enemies aren't human.

[18 : 10] It's not against flesh and blood. As Christians or as the church, we need to remember this, that our enemy is actually the devil and his spiritual forces of evil.

And that's important to keep remembering because often, whenever we have a hard time, whether as a church or individually, it's easy, isn't it, to see others as the enemy, whether it's the government, politicians, or people in our lives, whether it's our boss, our colleague, or someone in the family.

And then we like to draw lines in the sand, don't we? Those who are for us are the good guys, and those that are not are bad. It's funny, isn't it, how we never, ever associate ourselves with the bad guys.

We're always the good guys. But the reality is that even if these people are sinning and against you, and they're doing you wrong and harm, Paul says that they are not the real enemy.

They are slaves to sin just as we were, under the devil's skin. And rather, it's the devil who is using our sin, theirs and ours, to wreak havoc among humans.

[19 : 23] Sin like pride, lust, jealousy, hate. The devil entices us to evil with them. And he's so manipulative that he can even use what are good ends to perpetuate evil.

So for example, even the cause for justice, let's say, he can use to cause further divisions, as we've seen, haven't we? People with good intentions try and achieve good their way and end up sinning rather than doing it God's way.

So how do we drive out this real enemy then? Because we can't use swords and chariots and armies, can we? Well, Paul's description of the armor of God tells us how. by standing firm with the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness.

He speaks of the shield of faith to extinguish the devil's arrows and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And then finally, he says, pray.

All these then are our weapons of spiritual warfare. I'd like to summarize them into two words, word and prayer. A word because truth, righteousness, and faith are all revealed to us when we listen, reflect on and obey God's word.

[20 : 38] Above these are the tools of God's spirit. It's his spirit that is working in us through his word, through prayer, even as we do our part.

Little by little, as we listen to his voice in his word, as we stand firm in faith and prayerfully depend on him, God's spirit changes us from within.

He drives out the sin that is in us. And so, we need to realize that the real enemy here is sin and the devil.

And if that is the truth, then our battle first and foremost is not being waged out there, but rather in us, in our hearts and our minds.

And so, let me suggest a really practical thing you can do to battle sin. And that is, whenever we encounter struggles in life, be they fears or doubts or conflicts or resistance from outside, the first thing we should do, actually, is to look inward.

[21 : 45] Our gut reaction often is to try and fix things, to externalize the problem, try and get rid of it, or the nasty people that's doing it. But before we go there, first, we ought to work on our own hearts.

Ask whether there's any sin in us that needs to be driven out by God's Spirit. Pray, meditate on His Word and ask God to search our hearts. So, if we're angry, ask, why are we angry?

What's really going on with our motivation and fears? If we're anxious or fearful, ask what desires may be prompting those feelings? Is it coming from a place of a sinful attitude in our own lives?

Or is there even an idol that we are afraid of losing that's controlling our lives? It's not that we're just passive, you know, just reflect and meditate, but rather that we only should act after we've discern what the truth is, and in particular, what the truth is that is going on within our own hearts.

And what I say for individuals is the same for us as a church. From time to time, things do go wrong. There's conflict. Leaders do things wrongly.

[23 : 04] That's when we need to humble ourselves and examine ourselves first. Ask whether there's sin within us, among us, that needs repenting. Changes we need to make in order to drive out a sinful culture.

And of course, those of us who are leaders need to set the example. Now, it may be that at the end of all that, after much reflection and soul searching, we conclude that, no, actually, we've done nothing wrong.

That may be true too, but we wouldn't have done that important first step, wouldn't we, of checking to see if there is sin in our lives so that it doesn't allow, we don't allow that sin to ensnare us.

But please remember, this isn't a salvation issue. We need to thank God that He's actually freed us from the penalty of sin through the gift of His Son on the cross.

So this isn't about whether we're saved or not. We're not driving out sin in order to be saved. So if you're a new Christian, please take comfort and assurance in that.

[24 : 13] But remember also that God didn't drive out the Canaanites in a single year, did He? And so for us, becoming holy, driving out sin from among us is also a ongoing and lifelong process.

But with God's Spirit, we will have the power, God gives us the power to overcome sin in His time. And so we ought to persevere in it because then God's blessing, the ones that He promises, flow from it.

We don't want to give the real enemy, the devil, a foothold into our lives, do we? Because neither He nor sin belongs in our lives, in our life of promise.

Let's pray. Father, thank You that You've done the work of freeing us from slavery to sin in Christ. Thank You that You have given us Your Spirit who will empower us to drive out sin in our lives.

Give us the persistence to keep doing that, being faithful in prayer, growing in truth and righteousness through the knowledge of Your Word. In Jesus' name we pray.

[25 : 25] Amen.