

God goes ahead of Us

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[0 : 00] Well, it seems people have started travelling again, hasn't it? People have been going overseas and so on. And for some who travel to different destinations, they often use those travel guides.

You know the ones I'm talking about? Where someone goes ahead of you and does all the work of checking out where to go and visit and what's good and what's not good. Like these guys who claim to have the ultimate travel guide to Australia.

They're Canadians but they reckon they've got Australia worked out. Or this one, the ultimate guide to Italy. Although that does look rather nice, doesn't it? It does look very nice.

And because they've gone ahead of you and done some investigation for you, it encourages you to follow their instructions, doesn't it? To take their recommendations.

But the thing is, you still have to do the work of booking things and finding things and of course paying for things. Not to mention things have changed since they wrote that guide.

[1 : 11] Namely, COVID has happened and so there's all sorts of restrictions and so on. And so you also have to deal with any obstacles that arise that you don't yet know about. But imagine a travel guide who promises to go ahead of you and be your personal travel guide on the journey and do all the work for you, even paying everything for you.

How good would that be? I did say imagine, right? Imagine they were actually also able to deal with every obstacle that arose to guarantee a smooth holiday.

You'd be even more likely to listen to them, wouldn't you? To follow their instructions if they said go here or go there. Well, today God promises to be Israel's ultimate travel guide, if you like.

Personal. Going just ahead of them. He promises to go just ahead of them and do everything to bring them, and not on holidays of course, but home to their promised land.

And the purpose of this is to encourage them to listen to him, to pay attention to his instructions, and to worship him alone.

[2 : 31] You see, just to remind you of where we're at, in chapter 19 we saw that God reminded Israel how he rescued them from Egypt for relationship with him.

And so he offers to make a covenant, an agreement, a formal relationship, if you like, with them, where they would be his holy people who would obey him, and he would be their holy God who would bless them.

Israel agreed, and so God outlined what was involved for them. In chapter 20 we had the Ten Commandments, or as it's called elsewhere, the Tablet of the Covenant, where God spoke directly to Israel.

But God's voice was too much for them, and so in chapters 21 to 23, God then just spoke to Moses and gave him more specific laws for specific cases.

That's the case law that we saw last week. But all these laws were about loving God and loving others, and it would set them apart as God's holy people.

[3 : 36] But this week, God now tells Moses what he will do for them. And it comes at the end of the book of the government, at the end of chapter 23 today, to encourage them to obey all the instructions he's just given them.

For God promises he will go ahead of them to do everything for them and bring them home to their promised land. The phrase, ahead of you, actually comes up seven times in our passage.

It's not always translated like that in our English Bibles, but the first one is in the very first sentence of our passage. So at point one in verse 20 on your Bibles there, he says, See, I am sending an angel ahead of you.

There's that phrase. To guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. God here promises to guard them on the journey and bring them into their land.

Though like before, God says he will do this through his angel. And as we'll see, it's not just any old angel, but someone who acts as God himself. But notice here in verse 20 that this place is already prepared for them, it says.

[4 : 55] It's God's gracious gift to them. Yet to receive God's help to get there, they must obey and not rebel. So verse 21, Pay attention to him and listen to what he says.

Do not rebel against him and he will not forgive your rebellion since my name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you.

My angel will go ahead of you, there's that phrase again, and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, Jebusites, and I will wipe them out, says God. Did you notice here, by the way, how the angel acts as God here in verse 21? It says God's name is in him and so to rebel against him is to rebel against God himself.

And in verse 22, God says they are to listen to what the angel says and do all that God says. And so the angel's words are being equated with God's words.

[6 : 05] It's as though this angel acts as God himself. But Israel is to listen to him and not rebel. And if they do rebel, we're told he will not forgive their rebellion.

This doesn't mean that God will wipe them out as a nation, as we will see later on. God relents from doing this. But it does mean God will be forced to punish many in the nation.

So they'll miss out on the land. Now, I realize this is hard for us to hear because we know full forgiveness in Christ, don't we?

But I wonder if we're so familiar with our forgiveness that we sometimes forget how serious sin is, particularly against God.

Or perhaps we just don't want to believe that it's that serious. But it is. And so God cannot let it slide. Instead, he is forced to punish if they do rebel.

[7 : 11] It's also one reason why God will wipe out the other nations because their sin and evil has become so great. Though, you need to remember that God will still give those nations a chance to repent and be saved.

Like Rahab, if you remember. She heard about God and said, well, I'm changing sides and we're saved. There's more to say about that, but we don't have time.

You can ask me about it later. Either way, Israel is the focus here and they're not to rebel. Instead, verse 22, they are to listen carefully. And if they do pay attention, if they do listen, then God promises to fight for them, doesn't he?

To be an enemy to the enemies, to oppose those who oppose them, to defeat every nation and verse 23, bring them into the land.

Here is a great encouragement, is it not, for them to listen and obey. Of course, it may sound like then that their obedience earns their way into the land, but we need to remember God has already prepared it for them, verse 20.

[8 : 23] It's God's gift to them. And so they obey not to earn their way home, but to benefit from God's work which will bring them home.

I know that's a careful kind of distinction, so let me see if I can illustrate it for you. It's kind of like parents at dinner time when they call out to the kids, dinner's ready, come to the table now, please. Has that ever been called out in your house before? It still is in mine. But the parent has done all the work. You know, they bought all the food, they cooked the meal, and sometimes they even set the table.

Dinner is already prepared for the kids. It's the parent's gift to them, if you like. But to enjoy the food, to benefit from all the parent's work, the kids must obey.

They must come to the table, mustn't they? It would be nice if they also said, wow, this looks great, thank you so much. Fat chance. But their obedience doesn't earn their dinner, does it?

[9 : 25] It's just the way to receive it, to benefit from all the parent's work that has made it. But if they disobey, if they rebel and stay on their screens, or don't listen to their parents, then what happens?

Well, they're punished. They miss out, either on dinner or something else. Or so too for Israel. God has prepared a place for them and he promises to guard them and fight for them and to do all the

work needed to bring them home.

But to receive his help, to benefit from all his work, they must listen and obey, not rebel. Otherwise, God will be forced to punish them.

And in a similar way, once they're in the land, they're to worship God alone, to enable God to give the blessings he wants to give.

So point to verse 24. Do not bow down before their gods, presumably they're now in the land, or worship them or follow their practices.

[10:31] You must demolish them, that is the gods, and break their sacred stones to pieces.

Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water, and I will take away sickness from among you.

And none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span. Before they were not to rebel but listen, and here they're not to worship other gods but God alone.

In fact, when they get into the land, they're to get rid of all those sacred stones and idols. We'll see the reason why later, but here God gives them more motivation to obey, to do it.

Because in verse 25, worship the Lord your God and his blessing will be on your food and water.

He'll take away all sickness from among you. Verse 26, none will miscarry, there'll be no premature death.

In fact, he will give everyone a full life span. Can you imagine that? A full life without ever getting sick. No need for vaccines and hospitals and doctors' visits and the like.

[11:43] That would be pretty good, wouldn't it? It's great motivation for Israel to worship God alone, isn't it? Again, not to earn his blessings but to enable God to give them.

He's got them ready to give. And if they worship him, he can do it because if they don't, he'll be forced to punish them instead and he can't give them. Of course, they're not home in the land yet and so God returns to the main theme of the passage where he promises to go ahead of them and this time to drive out those nations, point three, verse 27.

He says, I will send my terror ahead of you, there's that phrase again, 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, Canaanites, Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year because the land will become desolate and wild animals too numerous for you.

Little by little, I will drive them out instead before you until you've increased enough to take possession of the land. I'll establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and from the desert to the Euphrates River.

[13:00] I will give you into your hands the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. Here God promises again to go ahead of them, doesn't he?

To drive the nations out, not all at once, but little by little so the land is not ruined by war and Israel can grow to take control. And I don't know if you noticed, but there's a whole stack of eyes in that passage.

I will, I will, I will, time and time again. This is all God's work, isn't it? Whether it's by sending the nations into confusion or filling them with fear so they flee or by giving them into Israel's hands, whatever way God does it, it's all his work.

But because he'll do it little by little, then there'll still be people in the land. Which not only means they have more time to repent and join Israel like Rahab, but it also means there's more time for Israel to go astray.

And so God reiterates his warning with the reason this time. Oops. Oops. Sorry, those online. Let me just read it from the Bible then.

[14:17] So verse 32 and 33. verse 32. Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods.

Do not let them live in your land or they will become, or they will cause you to sin against me because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.

You see, unless they join Israel, Israel is to drive them out. And not just because verse 32, it's actually Israel's land. Did you notice God says it's your land?

I think we sometimes forget that this is Israel claiming what's theirs. But also because their gods will cause Israel to sin. That's why to get rid of them.

In fact, in verse 33 says that there'll be a snare or a trap for Israel. You see, Israel's just come out of Egypt where they've lived 400 years surrounded by statues and a multitude of other gods.

[15 : 21] And it's so familiar to them that it would be just too easy to go back to. And so they're to get rid of them all, all those gods.

Here is the reason to get rid of those idols. But again, the big idea here is that God promises to go ahead of them, doesn't he? And to do everything like their personal ultimate travel guide.

And not to bring them on holidays, of course, but to bring them home into their land. And the purpose is to encourage Israel to pay attention to God, to listen to his instructions and to worship him alone.

That they might benefit from all his work and enable him to give them all his blessings. blessings. But sadly, as we know, they didn't always listen to God, did they?

And they didn't always worship God alone. And so, not all made it into the promised land, nor all enjoy God's blessings.

[16 : 29] And so, God needed another covenant, didn't he? one that would not depend on their obedience so that God could give them what he wanted to give them.

One that would depend on someone else's. Which brings us to point four. And so, for us, God doesn't promise to go ahead of us through an angel, depending on our obedience, like Israel. that God has already gone ahead of us through his son, depending on his obedience. And because God has already gone ahead of us through his son, then the way home has already been secured for us.

You see, our promised land is obviously not Canaan, is it? But it's heaven and the new creation, where life will be even better than it possibly could have been for Israel.

for not only will there be the blessing of no more sickness or premature death, in our promised land there'll be no death at all, will there? Just life to the full, life eternal.

[17 : 37] And our enemies are obviously not the Canaanites and the other ites, but sin, death, and the devil. The things that stop us from entering our promised land. But in Christ, God has already gone ahead and defeated them, hasn't he?

For by Christ's death and resurrection, Jesus has paid for our sins, defeated death, and driven out the devil's power to demand our judgment.

And now Jesus sits at God's right hand in heaven. By doing all this, Jesus has cleared the way home for us, secured our path for us, and doesn't rely on us always obeying.

This is the idea we saw in our second reading, actually. And so, in Hebrews chapter 6, at the end of the reading, we read that this hope of our promised land is like an anchor, that it's firm and secure.

In other words, it's certain. Why? Well, not only because God promises it, which is what we heard earlier in the passage, but also, verse 20, because Jesus is our forerunner, who has gone ahead and entered on our behalf.

[18 : 50] That is, he's run ahead of us, cleared a path for us by defeating those enemies that stood against us. The image that kept coming to my mind this week as I was thinking about it was of a snowplow.

This is a front-on view of the picture where you've got the kind of bucket at the front and it's spurting snow, but the connection is that it clears a path for the cars to follow, doesn't it?

I don't know why this image kept popping into my head, probably because this week has been so freezing cold, but anyway, that's what Jesus has done for us, hasn't he? God, through Christ, has cleared a way for us, secured our path so that we can follow him to heaven and then to our promised land, the new creation.

If we believe in him, of course, and so do you. After all, Jesus is the one who went ahead of us, he's the one who died for us, and so he's the one we're to believe in, and so do you.

And for those of us who do, then we've also given full forgiveness. So unlike Israel, we won't miss out if we don't always listen or worship God alone.

[20 : 08] In other words, when we sin from time to time, we can still be forgiven in Christ. In fact, Jesus even gave us his spirit so that he continues to be our personal travel guide, if you like, continues to go before us, along with giving us his word and each other, all so that we might be encouraged to listen to him and worship God alone.

And that's what we're to do. But for different reasons than Israel. Not so that we can benefit from God's work in bringing us home like Israel, but out of gratitude because we've already benefited from Christ's work, which has secured our path home, you see.

And so out of gratitude, are we listening to Christ? Are we paying attention to his word? Are we obeying it even when it's hard?

I know some people at our church who were really worried about some test results recently and it was really hard not to worry because it was serious. But they chose to listen to God's word which said things like not to worry, and Jesus said that, or to cast all our anxiety on him and so that's what they did, they just kept praying about it.

Although it was hard, they chose to listen and obey. I know another church family who is finding coming to church quite hard at the moment. I like a lot of people, I think they're just really exhausted from the last two years with kids and so on and COVID.

[21 : 52] But despite finding it hard, despite feeling flat even when they are here, they decided to listen to God's word and come to encourage others.

God's word that says let's not give up meeting together but encouraging one another and so they come not for themselves but for others. How good is that? Here are some examples of people choosing to listen to Jesus and his word even when it's hard and they do it out of gratitude for securing our path home.

What's more, we're to worship God alone too, aren't we? But again, different to Israel, not to enable God to give us his blessings as Israel was in the land but out of gratitude for guaranteeing even better blessings in Christ, in our promised land.

But it may mean, like Israel, getting rid of any temptation to worship false gods in order to help us worship the true God. I remember quite vividly when I was at uni, so a while ago, but there was a guy at university who was studying PE but the culture of that course was constant parties and getting drunk.

Parties and drunkenness were their gods, which is ironic given they were studying physical education and health, right? But anyway, during his degree he actually became a Christian and he joined our Christian union group at uni.

[23 : 32] But he found it just too easy to go back to those old gods, just too tempting, and so do you know what he did? He changed degrees.

Can you believe that? Got rid of that temptation in order to help him worship God alone. God's love. Now, we can't always do that, can we?

I mean, some things that we can turn into gods are actually good things we don't want to get rid of, like family or money or jobs or health.

They are all good things, but we must resist the temptation to turn those good things into God things. Instead, we're to pray for God's help to resist that temptation and perhaps even do a health check on ourselves to see whom we're really serving, who is our priority in life, that good thing or God himself.

In Christ, we have the ultimate personal tour guide, travel guide, if you like, for he's gone ahead of us and secured the path for us, guaranteeing to bring us not on a holiday, of course, but home to our promised land.

[24 : 56] And so out of gratitude, we're to keep listening to him and worshipping God alone. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder that you go ahead of us.

both in life, but also to secure for us a way to heaven and the new creation. Father, we thank you that you've done this through the Lord Jesus and his obedience, and that we have full forgiveness for the times we don't always listen to you or worship you alone.

But in light of what you have done for us, help us, we pray, in gratitude to keep listening to you and your word, even when it's hard, and to make sure we don't turn good things into God things, but worship you alone.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.