

# God goes ahead of Us

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it seems that people have started traveling again, even overseas. Is that your impressions? That seems to be my impressions.

And for those traveling, some people really like to use those travel guides. You know the ones I'm talking about? They go ahead of you to check out what's good and what's not, where to go, and so on.

Kind of like these guys who are actually from Canada, but they've developed what they call the ultimate travel guide to Australia. And this one, the ultimate guide to Italy, although that does look good, doesn't it?

And because they go ahead and check things out, do the investigation for you, it encourages you to listen to their instructions, doesn't it?

But the thing is, you still have to do the hard work of booking everything and then finding everything. And of course, paying for everything. And not to mention, things have changed since they've all written their books.

[ 1 : 02 ] Namely, we've had COVID and so restrictions and all that sort of stuff has changed. So you'll also have to deal with any obstacles that may arise. But imagine you had a travel guide who promised to go ahead of you personally, not just as a book, but as a person, and do all the work for you and even pay for the trip.

How good would that be? I did say imagine, right? So imagine. And imagine they were actually able to deal with every obstacle that might arise so that you would have the perfect holiday.

That would encourage you to listen to them even more, wouldn't it? To, when they said, go to this place, you go, oh yeah, yeah, you're paying, you know, you've done all the work. You'd go there, you'd follow their instructions.

Well, today God promises to be Israel's ultimate travel guide, if you like. He promises to go ahead of them personally, being with them as well, and do everything to bring them, not on holiday, of course, but home to their promised land.

And the purpose of this is to encourage them to listen to him and to worship him above all else. Just let me put it in the context.

[ 2 : 19 ] This is just a very simple outline. In chapter 19, God reminded them that they were rescued from Egypt for relationship with him. And then he offered to make a covenant, that is an agreement to formalize that relationship, where they would be his holy people who obeyed him, and he would be their holy God who would bless them.

Israel agreed. And so then in chapter 20, God outlined what it involved. Chapter 20, he gave them the Ten Commandments, or as it's also called elsewhere, the tablets of the covenant, the agreement.

And when he did that, he actually spoke directly to the people. The sound of his voice was too overwhelming. And so the people said, we can't do that anymore. So in chapters 21 to 23, God spoke just to Moses, who would then go to tell the people.

And in chapters 21 to 23, God gave more specific laws for different situations. That was the case law that we saw last week. And all these laws were really about loving God and loving others, and it would help them to be set apart as distinct, as holy.

But this week, God now tells Moses what he will do for the people. And it comes at the end of the book of the covenant, at the end of chapter 23, to encourage them to obey everything else that God has said in those previous few chapters, all the laws and instructions.

[ 3 : 50 ] For God promises he will go ahead of them, do everything for them to bring them home to their land. The phrase ahead of you, or literally before you, it comes up seven times in our passage,

although not all of them are translated by the English Bible here.

But the first is in the first line of our passage. So have a look at verse 20, chapter 23, verse 20. God says, See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and bring you to the place I have prepared.

You see what God promises here? To guard them along the way, their personal travel guide, if you like, and then bring them home into their land. Although like before, God will do this through an angel, he says.

And as we'll see, it's not any old angel, but it seems to be someone who acts as God themselves.

But either way, notice that this place is already prepared for them.

It's God's gracious gift to them. Yet to receive God's help to get there, they must obey and not rebel.

[ 5 : 03 ] They must listen to him. Verse 21. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him.

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 and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites and I will wipe them out. Now notice here firstly that this angel acts a bit like God, doesn't he?

In verse 21, we're told that God's name is in him. And so to rebel against him is like rebelling against God. It kind of comes with punishment. And in verse 22, it says that they are to listen to what the angel says and do all that God says.

Did you see how the angel's words are now equated with God's words? It's as though this angel is God himself, which I wonder is a little hint of the Trinity that we see unpacked in the New Testament.

[ 6 : 20 ] Anyway, Israel is to listen to him and not rebel. And if they do rebel, we're told he will not forgive your rebellion. Now this doesn't mean God will wipe them out as a nation.

As we'll see in a few weeks, God relents from doing that. 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 believe that it's that serious. But here we see that it is. As so much so that God cannot let it slide.

Indeed, he's forced to punish if they rebel. It's also one reason why God will wipe out the nations. I know that's also hard for us to hear. And there's a lot of things we can say about that.

[ 7 : 26 ] We don't have time to unpack that. But a couple of things. One is, it's because of their sin and evil that has become so great. In fact, God has waited 400 years to do that, that it would be just.

Though God will still give those nations a chance to repent and join Israel, be saved. Just like Rahab did, if you remember that story. But here the focus is Israel.

And they're not to rebel. Instead, verse 22, they're to listen carefully. And if they do pay attention, if they do listen, then God promises to fight for them, doesn't he?

He says, I will be an enemy to their enemies. I will oppose those who oppose you. To defeat every nation. And verse 23, to bring them into their land.

Here is great encouragement for them to listen, isn't it? Of course, it may sound like now that their obedience came, or rather, their obedience earns their way into the land.

[ 8 : 30 ] But remember, God has already prepared it for them. It's God's gracious gift to them. And so they obey not to earn their way home, but to benefit from God's work that will bring them home.

I know that's a bit tricky to understand, so let me see if I can illustrate it for you. It's kind of like parents at dinner time who call out to their kids, dinner's ready, come to the table now, please. Is that happening in your house?

No? Oh, it happens in our house anyway. And the parent, though, has done all the work. They've bought the food. They've cooked the meal. Sometimes they even set the table. Dinner is already prepared for the kids.

It's the parent's gracious 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.

Wasn't they? It would be nice if they also said, wow, this looks great. Thanks so much. Fat chance. But their obedience doesn't earn their dinner, does it?

[ 9 : 28 ] It's just the way to receive it, to benefit from all the parent's work that made it. This is like Israel's obedience here.

Although it does still require their obedience to receive it, doesn't it? Because if they disobey, if they rebel, then just like the kids who disobey and stay on their screens and refuse to listen to their parents, well, there's punishment, isn't there?

They miss out on dinner or something else. Or so too with Israel. If they rebel instead, then God is forced to punish them.

But their obedience is just their way of receiving what God wants to give them. And in a similar way, once they're in the land, they're to worship God alone to enable God to bless them.

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

[ 10 : 30 ] You must demolish the gods and break their sacred stones to pieces. Worship the Lord your God and his blessings 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 life span.

Before they were not to rebel, but listen, here they're not to worship other gods, but God. In fact, when they get into the land, they're told to get rid of all the sacred stones and all the idols and statues and so on.

We'll see the reason why later, but here God gives the motivation to do it, to obey. First, verse 25. Worship God alone and he'll bless you with no more sickness.

Verse 26. No premature death like miscarriage. Instead, he'll give a full life span for everyone. How good would that be? No more vaccines, no more hospital visits, no more colds and flus.

[ 11 : 39 ] Be brilliant. A long life without ever getting sick. That'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.

You see, if they don't worship God alone, then again, he'll be forced to punish them and he can't give them what he wants to give. But if they do worship God alone, then he can give these blessings that he's already got prepared for them.

Of course, they're not home in the land yet, so God returns to the main theme of the passage, going ahead of them, at this time to drive out the nation.

So 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 and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year because the land will become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you.

[ 12 : 49 ] 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 into your hands the people who live in this land and you will drive them out before you.

You see, God will go ahead of them this time to drive out the nations though not all at once.

But little by little until Israel grows strong enough to take control. But did you notice all the I's in the passage? I will, I will, I will. This is a passage full of I wills from God because God will do it all.

Whether by sending the nations into confusion or filling them with fear so they flee or by giving them into Israel's hands to drive out, whatever way God does it, it's still ultimately all God's work.

But because He'll do it little by little, then there'll still be people in the land. Which not only means more time for those nations to realize that Israel's God is a true God and so turn and be saved, but also more time for Israel to turn away and worship other gods.

[ 14 : 09 ] And so God reiterates His warning in verse 32. 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 for you.

See, unless they join Israel like Rahab did, Israel is to drive them out. Not just because verse 32, it's actually your land, Israel. I think we sometimes forget that Israel is actually claiming what's already theirs, but also because their gods will cause Israel to sin and to be a snare or a trap for them.

After all, they've just come out of Egypt where they've lived 400 years surrounded by multiple gods and statues and idols. It's what they're familiar with and so it'll be really easy for them to go back to that way and worship these other gods.

And so here is the reason to smash those idols and get rid of those sacred stones. But again, the big idea here is that God promises to go ahead of them and to do everything like an ultimate personal travel guide and not to bring them on holidays, of course, but to bring them home into their land.

And the purpose of this is to encourage Israel to pay attention and 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.

[15:50] But sadly, if you know the history of Israel, they did not listen to God much at all, did they? And instead, they did worship lots of other gods.

And so, not many, not more, a whole generation, almost a whole generation, didn't make it into the promised land, and they never quite got to enjoy all God's blessings in the land.

And so, God needed another covenant, another agreement, where it wouldn't depend on their obedience, even to benefit from his work or enable him to bless.

He needed a new covenant, covenant, where it would depend on someone else, which is, of course, Jesus. So, we're at point four. God doesn't promise to go ahead of us through his angel, depending on our obedience, like he did with Israel.

Rather, God has already gone ahead of us through his son, depending on his obedience for us. And because God has already gone ahead of us through his son, then he's already opened the way for us to bring us home.

[17:04] It's already been secured, if you like. Our promised land, of course, is not Canaan, 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, no more premature death, in fact, there'll be no death at all in the new creation, just life to the full.

And our enemies are obviously not the Canaanites and the other ites, but sin, death, and the devil, those baddies we saw before, the things that stop us from entering heaven and the new creation.

But by his death and resurrection, as we heard in the kids talk, Jesus paid for our sins, had defeated death, and driven out the devil's power to accuse us of deserving judgment.

And now he sits at God's right hand in heaven, and by doing this, Jesus has cleared the way for us to come home, secured a channel, if you like, for us to come home.

[18:09] This is the idea we saw in our second reading, the verse that we saw in the kids talk. Our hope is the hope of that new creation, our promised land.

And it's like an anchor, the writer says here, because it's firm and secure. It's certain. Why? Well, not only because God keeps his promises, which was the first part of the reading we heard, but also because of verse 20.

Our forerunner Jesus has already gone ahead of us to secure a way for us. He's cleared the path for us by defeating those enemies that stood against us.

To use a different illustration, one that's been popping in my head all week in light of this. Those snow plows over in the States, this is a front view where you've got the bucket at the front and it's spitting snow out.

But the point of connection is what it does. It clears a path for cars to follow, doesn't it? And that's what God has already done for us through Christ.

[19:15] He's already opened a way for us to follow, secured it for us if we believe in him. After all, Jesus is the one who's gone ahead of us.

So Jesus is the one we're to believe in. And so have you. And for us who have, then we also get full forgiveness.

So unlike Israel, we won't miss out even if we sometimes fail to listen to God or fail to worship God alone. In fact, Jesus has also given us his spirit so that he's always with us to help us listen to him and worship God alone.

He's given us his word and each other as well to help us. And so that's what we're to do. Not so that we can, we're to listen to him, not so that we can benefit from God's work in bringing us home like Israel, but out of gratitude for already securing our path home in Christ.

And so out of gratitude for that, we are to listen to Christ in life. And so are we doing that? Are we paying attention to his word? Are we obeying it even when it's hard?

[ 20 : 38 ] I know the church family who is finding coming to church quite hard at the moment. I think like a lot of people, they're still feeling tired from the last two years, but despite it being hard, they choose to listen to God's word that actually Vijay read at the beginning of the service about meeting together to encourage one another.

And so they still come, and not for themselves, but for others. And I know others here like that. How encouraging is that? Here is someone out of gratitude for Christ seeking to pay attention to his word.

I know of a teenager whose friends were pressuring him to sleep with his girlfriend. After all, they loved each other. But despite how hard the pressure was, he chose to listen to God's word that said, wait for marriage.

For your own good, actually. Here are some examples of people choosing to pay attention and listen to Christ's word, even when it's hard.

And they do it out of gratitude for Christ who has saved them and guaranteed that way home to our promised land. And we're to worship God alone.

[ 21 : 54 ] Again, not to enable God to give us blessings in our land like Israel did, but out of gratitude for guaranteeing even better blessings in the world to come, our promised land.

And just though, as Israel as to get rid of any temptation to worship false gods, we may have to sometimes do the same, that we may worship God alone.

I remember a guy at uni some years ago now, but it's kind of seared into my mind. He was studying PE, but the culture of that course at this particular uni anyway, was constant partying and getting drunk.

Parties and drunkenness were their gods, if you like, which is ironic given they were studying physical health and education, right? But during his degree, he became a Christian.

Yet he found it was just too easy to go back to those gods, just too tempting. And so do you know what he did? He changed degrees. Can you believe that? He got rid of that temptation altogether and said, nah, I'm not even going to go near it.

[ 23 : 03 ] I'm going to change degrees so I can be helped to worship God alone. Now, we can't always do that. I mean, a lot of things that we might be tempted to worship are actually good things, like family or money or jobs or health.

They're all good things, aren't they? 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 and perhaps even do some periodic health checks on ourselves, to see whom we're really serving, whether we're serving that good thing, whether that's taking priority in our life or whether it's still God and Christ.

In Christ, we have the ultimate personal tool guide, travel guide, if you like, for he's gone ahead of us as the forerunner and secured the path for us, guaranteeing to bring us home to heaven and the new creation, to enjoy all God's better blessings.

And so, out of gratitude, let's 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 in life and we thank you so much that you've already gone ahead of us through Christ to secure our eternal home in heaven and the new creation.

And so, out of gratitude, help us, we pray, to keep listening to him in his word and to keep worshipping you alone. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.