

# God Goes Before Us

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the book of Exodus, chapter 23. That's page 64 in the Pew Bible.

We're going to look at verses 20 through 33. Exodus 23, page 64. So it's high school graduation season.

Congrats, high school seniors. You know who you are. Graduation is a bit of a climactic experience, isn't it? You've come through to the other side of, in this case, high school.

In victory, you're done. And there's no going back. Praise the Lord. It feels like you're on top of the world. It's a good feeling. But then, as the excitement dies down, you realize that there's still a long road ahead.

College, work, dating, family, career, it all still looms out there, scary and big, and at times, overwhelming.

[ 1 : 15 ] Of course, that's not just for the high school graduates among us, right? That feeling hits us at a lot of moments in life. Retirement, birth of a child, taking a new job, moving to a new city.

Well, in our text today, we meet the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. And they, too, have come through a similarly climactic experience.

God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He's brought them through the Red Sea. He's now spoken to them at Sinai. They are on the top of the world. But there's still a long road ahead.

After all, they're still in the wilderness. And they're not home yet. Now, at the end of Exodus 23, our text today, God concludes the formal covenant at Sinai.

That is, here are the final terms of God's binding relationship, His covenant with His people. So, let's hear what God has to say to His people as they look out at the long road ahead.

[ 2 : 28 ] Exodus 23, starting in verse 20. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.

You shall serve the Lord your God and He will bless your bread and your water and I will take sickness away from you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land. I will fulfill the number of your days.

I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you and I will send hornets before you which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites and the Hittites from before you.

[ 3 : 42 ] I will not drive them out from before you in one year lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you until you have increased and possess the land and I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines and from the wilderness to the Euphrates for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand and you shall drive them out before you.

You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land lest they make you sin against me for if you serve their gods it will surely be a snare to you.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit this morning to understand and to hear what you are saying to us through this word this morning.

Lord, we want to understand this text in light of the big picture of what you've done for us in Christ. So help us to do that and help us not to be callous or feel fearful or hard-hearted as we come to you this morning but would you open up our minds and our ears and our hearts to be receptive to what you're saying to each of us this morning.

Thank you for speaking to us, God. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, the sum of the passage that we just read is that God is going to send an angel before his people Israel to settle them safely in the land of Canaan.

[ 5 : 23 ] And with this promise comes a warning. And the warning is don't worship their false gods. Serve me. Serve the Lord God alone. Now, the conquest of Canaan as it's sometimes called which eventually happens in the book of Joshua we have to keep in mind that that is a unique event in redemptive history in the Bible.

All Jewish and Christian commentators agree that the conquest was a one-time command not meant to be repeated in other times or places. And that means we have to be careful as we come to this text today not to draw the wrong conclusions from a passage like this as we think about what it's saying to us.

After all, we live in a different time in a different place in a different moment in redemptive history. With all that being said, however, that doesn't mean that there aren't some important lessons here to be learned for us.

And as a window into that, think about where Israel is at in the story of salvation. put yourself back in their shoes imaginatively. Where are they?

The Israelites are somewhere between Egypt and Canaan. Right? In other words, they've been redeemed but they're not yet home.

[ 6 : 44 ] They've been baptized through the Red Sea but they've not yet come to rest in the promised land. There are still, as God tells them here, many battles to come and many trials to face.

Now, spiritually speaking, is not that true of us, the church, today? Christians, too, have been redeemed.

We've been redeemed through Christ's death and resurrection. The church has been baptized through Christ's death and resurrection. But, brothers and sisters, we are not yet home. We are not yet glorified in the rest God has in store for us.

There are still many spiritual battles to come and many trials to face. So, what do we learn here then for this road ahead?

Well, the first resounding message that we hear here is that God goes before us, His people. Notice that in verse 20 and verse 23, God tells Israel twice that His angel will go before you.

[ 7 : 54 ] Now, briefly, what are we to make of this angel figure? We've actually encountered this angel a couple of times so far in the book of Exodus. We haven't spent a lot of time thinking or talking about this figure.

Back in chapter 3, the angel showed up at the call of Moses in the burning bush. And in chapter 14, when Israel was crossing the Red Sea, this angel of the Lord also shows up protecting them from the attacking Egyptian armies.

Now, here we're told that this angel once again will guard them and bring them into the promised land. Now, angels in the Bible are spiritual beings who serve God's purposes of redemption.

If you're a bit skeptical about this whole angel business, on the one hand, maybe you'll be comforted to know that the Bible's idea of angels couldn't be further from the popular imagination. You know, when you come to the Bible and you hear what angels are doing, you know, there's no fluffy wings. There's no fat, chubby little cherubs with bows and arrows. You know, there's no Victorian women in long flowing gowns looking like they might bring you some more milk to put you to bed.

[ 9 : 07 ] You know, it's not Michael Landon or that other lady from *Touched by an Angel*, you know, who looks like they might just be a really nice counselor, someone you'd want to knit a sweater with and share a cup of tea.

Um, no, actually, that's not the biblical picture of angels at all. Um, angels are actually beings of magnificent power and beauty and glory.

Um, and most people end up falling down and mistakenly worshiping them in the Bible. Now, what's more, if what the Bible says about angels is true, if you're wrestling with that, but think about it, if

what the Bible says about angels is true, consider what that means about God's love for us.

Um, and here's what I mean. If there is a God, and if that God has created not just a seen, but also an unseen world with creatures full of His beauty and power and joy and an overflow of His, of His creative expression, uh, consider that this God, according to the Bible, is willing to marshal even those highest, most glorious, heavenly beings to carry out His saving plan for you.

In other words, God doesn't withhold any part of His creation, seen or unseen, from working for the good for those He longs to save. Isn't that an incredible message?

[10:31] After all, is it so hard to believe that the God who created all the beauty that we see might also have even more in store, that there might be an unseen transcendent realm where this God also displays His beauty and power and majesty?

And is it not a wonder to believe that God in love commands even that transcendent part of His creation to minister to those who are to inherit salvation? Little folks like you and me.

Well, back to Exodus 23. Clearly, this particular angel has a special role to play in the story, right?

Notice how closely he's identified with God's presence and activity.

God tells Israel to obey His voice in verse 21. And then in verse 22, look at that verse with me.

What the angel says and what God says are almost interchangeable. God says, carefully obey His voice and do all I say.

That's a very interesting switch of pronouns. And this angel seems not just to convey God's own voice, but in verse 22, this angel seems to have God's own authority to pardon or not pardon transgression.

[11:42] And then to top it all off, God says, my name is in Him. That is God's revealed character and glory is somehow, somehow in this angel, whatever that means.

In other words, a closer identification with God couldn't be imagined. Is it any wonder that many have looked back at these Old Testament passages about the angel of the Lord?

They've looked back from the perspective of the New Testament and thought that perhaps we are dealing here with a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ Himself, God the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

Who else could be, on the one hand, distinguished from God? Yes, it's different. And yet at the same time, so closely identified with God. But whether the angel is actually the pre-incarnate Christ or not, surely what we see about this angel in Exodus 23 ultimately finds its fulfillment in Christ the Lord.

God says, my angel is going to be with you and go before you. And the risen Lord Jesus says to His disciples, all authority on heaven and earth belongs to me, has been given to me, and I'm with you always, even to the end of the age.

[13:04] If God was somehow present with His people through this angel, how much more present is God with us in His own Son, the risen Lord Jesus? What good news that is, that God is going to be with us in this personal, present way.

And not just with us. Notice what God says. God says, I'm not just going to be with you, but I'm going to go before you. And hasn't the Lord Jesus truly gone before us?

He's gone before us into the depths of our human condition when He took on flesh, did He not? And He went before us in His temptation in the wilderness to know what it's like to face trial and temptation and spiritual attack.

And He went before us in His earthly life as He ministered and loved God and loved others and as He faced rejection and as He faced challenge and as He faced persecution.

And Jesus went before us when He was arrested and when He was crucified. Jesus went before us even into the grave. And Christ went before us into the new life of resurrection.

[14:21] and He went before us into the heavenly places when He ascended on high. And we know that He will go before us one day when He returns to make all things new.

Friends, what good news that Jesus is not just with us. God is not just with us in His Son by His Spirit, but God is always before us. Blazing the trail ahead.

Clearing the way for us. Our buffer and our shield. Ultimately taking our sin, giving us His righteousness, filling us with His Spirit.

Now for the Israelites, God's angel going before them meant that God would ultimately drive out all their enemies and bring them safely home to the promised land. The victory against these warring tribes that they would face was assured.

The battle, God said, I would win it for you. God will terrify their enemies. He will throw them into confusion. He will make them turn their backs and run. Again and again, God says, I will drive them out.

[ 15 : 29 ] I will make sure that you make it safely all the way home. And friends, isn't that the nature, the real nature of the biblical message?

That God does something for us that we can't do. Our enemies are too strong and our guilt is too great for us to save ourselves.

We can't make things right with God. We can't bring ourselves into the rest God has for us all on our own. In fact, it has to be God's grace.

It has to be God's action on our behalf. That's the only thing that can assure us of final and complete salvation. And that's meant to give us hope and encouragement as we look at the long spiritual road ahead.

You know, maybe you sit here and you look ahead and you see some of the challenges ahead. Most of us can't see what challenges are ahead. And maybe as you look ahead you wonder, man, am I going to make it?

[ 16 : 39 ] But we don't go alone. God is before us. Every battle, every trial, He is there to guard us and to bring us in. But this promise also comes with a clarification here in this text.

Yes, God promises to go before His people. But the second thing we learn from this passage is that the battles are actually going to be won little by little. Look again at verses 29 and 30.

They tell us that when Israel enters the land, God won't drive out the people all at once. It's going to be gradual. Why? Otherwise, if all the people just sort of disappeared, the uninhabited land would become too much for them to handle.

They weren't strong enough. They weren't numerous enough to be able to manage that much. I think there's a really, really important analogy here to the Christian life.

How many of us have been frustrated by a besetting sin and wondered why God doesn't just take it away?

[ 17 : 55 ] But you know, that is rarely how God works in the Christian life. The process of sanctification, of growing in godliness and Christ-like character is gradual.

It's progressive. It happens little by little. God knew that if he drove out all the people from Canaan at once, the land would overwhelm the Israelites.

You see, God's wisdom was so much deeper than theirs. Perhaps God has his reasons for not removing all of your besetting sins all at once, of making sure that it's a process of little by little growth.

You see, there's a bigger story that you're a part of, and God is doing a much bigger work in your life than you can imagine. It's deeper and it's longer and it has a much greater end than most of us can conceive.

At the very least, the Lord is teaching you to depend on him each day, to take up the means of grace like prayer and worship and the Lord's supper and the filling of your mind with scripture through reading and meditation, to take up these means of Christ and to fight the good fight of the faith.

[ 19 : 15 ] He's teaching you to press on in obedience and trust, to not be passive in our spiritual growth, but active, to keep in step with the spirit, to keep taking off the old self and putting on the new self, as Paul said in Ephesians.

I sometimes think what sort of person I would be had God simply taken away some of my particular habitual sins all at once. And trust me, there are still many left in my life that God has taken care of. I don't stand before you a completely sanctified individual this morning, but, you know, I think had God just given me sort of instant victory over some of these things, I imagine that I would probably be very proud.

Don't you think? I wouldn't know what it's like to depend on the Lord each day. I would be probably a lot more ingrained in my natural self-reliance.

I wouldn't know what it's like to call out to Him in prayer, to wait on the Lord, to look to Him for daily grace. And I certainly wouldn't know half so well how to minister to others who struggle.

[ 20 : 37 ] I would probably be much more impatient and condescending. So, friends, God in His wisdom gives us the victory little by little so that the fields and the terrain of our uncultivated hearts don't come back to overwhelm us.

I think there's a special word here to the discouraged among us this morning. Brothers and sisters, don't be downhearted by the little by little nature of the Christian life. Don't be discouraged that it's a process of growth. And if you feel like you can't even see the little by little, if it feels like you're not growing at all, then I would encourage you to get with an older, more mature Christian who knows you well and ask them what they see in your life. Often, we aren't the best judge of our own spiritual state. Often, others can see the little by little growth much better than we can. So, friends, don't be discouraged that the Christian life is a process.

Expect it. Look at what God is teaching you through that little by little process of growth. And perhaps there's also a word here to the spiritually complacent.

[ 22 : 02 ] Friends, are you in the fight? Notice at the end of verse 31, after God says, I will drive them out, I will drive them out numerous times, then God says, I will give the inhabitants into your hand and you shall drive them out before you.

Yes, the victory ultimately belongs to the Lord, Lord, but you do have a responsibility, a role to play in your growth and holiness. So, ask yourself this morning, am I concerned at all to engage in this little by little growth?

Or have I become complacent? Friends, do you care at all for the growth of your fellow church members? believers? Are you praying and encouraging them in this battle to become more like Christ?

Here, the call of this passage is to get in the game, to fight the good fight, to wake up from your sleep. And this leads us to the third and last lesson of our passage, the main exhortation that God gives to the Israelites as they're poised to enter the promised land is that they must have nothing to do with the false gods of the people around them.

In very stark language, God says, when you encounter their idolatrous practices, here's what I want you to do. I want you to completely overthrow them and smash all their pillars into pieces and have nothing to do with their false worship.

[ 23 : 40 ] Verse 32 says, don't make any covenants with any of their gods. Don't compromise with them in any way. Otherwise, he says, it will be a snare to you.

Now, that's an interesting little word picture, isn't it? A snare. Most of us live in the city or in the suburbs, so we don't really go hunting a lot.

Some of you like to go hunting. I doubt many of you hunt with a snare, which is like a small little trap. For a small little animal. And doesn't a snare sort of seem like a harmless little thing, right? Something you can kind of easily avoid, easily handle, you just step over it, you watch out for it, until you get caught, until you get stuck.

Idolatry and sin are like that, God says. You think you can handle it. You tell yourself that you have it under control. So what if I indulge in a little compromise here or there?

[ 24 : 49 ] It's no big deal. I'm not really harming anyone. And then, it catches you. It traps you. That lustful look here and there becomes a consuming addiction.

Indulging in self-pity every once in a while becomes a deep-seated bitterness against God and others.

Bending the truth from time to time at work becomes a growing cover-up that spirals out of control. That hunger for whatever it might be, comfort or approval starts to dominate all of your relationships, your own view of yourself and others in the world.

What this passage teaches us is that if you see the sin in your life, if you see the idols in your own heart, those things that are taking the place of God in your life, the ultimate drivers of your motivation and your identity, those good things that have become ultimate things, if you see those things in your heart, the Lord is telling His people here, don't compromise.

Be unrelenting in your approach to get rid of them. Back in the fall, we walked very slowly through Romans chapter 8, which is a chapter of much beauty and power and glory and hope, and in the middle of that chapter, Paul says, here's what you should do with your sinful nature.

[ 26 : 39 ] Kill it. Put it to death. You know, no one ever finds a spot of skin cancer and says, no, melanoma.

It's no big deal. I can handle that. You know, I've got a lot of freckles. It's genetic. I don't tan. I freckle, and then I burn. No big deal. I can handle this.

No one says that. Why? Because that thing is going to spread before you know it to other parts of your body and it's going to kill you. Friends, it's the same with the idols of our hearts.

Whether they come from within or whether they seep in from the outside, they are a snare ready to trap and destroy us. And here's the stark thing about this passage.

God says if we persist in harboring sin and in refusing to heed God's voice, if we go on in unrepentant idolatry, thinking that we can have God's favor and blatantly disobey God at the same time, then what God says earlier in verse 21 will be true of us.

[ 28 : 04 ] He will not pardon your transgressions. That's a stark verse. But it's a very real warning.

If we go on refusing to heed God's voice, if we persist in unrepentant sin, if we never humble ourselves before Christ as our Savior and as our much needed Lord, if we never come to God and say, I will be done, Lord, then God will turn to us and say, I will be done.

Go. God will not pardon our transgressions. However, God will turn from self-reliance and self-direction and idolatry and sin and turn to Christ.

God is rich and abundant in mercy. God does not expect us to be sinless in this life. That is not what God requires.

God doesn't want perfect people because newsflash, they don't exist. God wants humble people who know they need a Savior and who surrender their lives to him in willing trust.

[ 29 : 30 ] And when we come to him with that posture, the mercy of God overflows beyond what we could ask or think. In verses 25 and 26, listen to how God woos Israel away from the worship of idols to serve him alone.

Look at those verses again. He says, you shall serve the Lord your God and he will bless your bread and your water and I will take sicknesses away from you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land.

I will fulfill the number of your days. It's a picture of total flourishing. Friends, what are you looking for in those idols of your heart or in those sins that you harbor?

When you're driven by a need for success, for example, what is you're really longing for? Acclaim, affirmation, a sense of identity and purpose, a feeling of worth?

What do you seek? When God says to Old Testament Israel that he's going to bless him in all these ways, he's trying to teach us something.

[ 30 : 47 ] He's trying to show us that in him we find real life and in him alone. The Old Testament promises of physical or material blessing for serving the Lord were pointers to something even greater.

God no longer promises us long life and material prosperity. What does God promise us?

Resurrection life. eternal life as heirs of a new creation.

You know, the Old Testament Israelites never did drive out the Canaanites completely. They persisted in being a snare to them. And they never did get free from the false gods and the idolatry around them.

But then Christ lost. Their king, our king came. And he went ahead of us and won an even greater victory and pioneered away into an even better land.

And he's defeated all of our enemies to bring us there. Through his own blood, Christ has defeated our sin and death and he commands everyone everywhere to turn to him and be saved.

[ 32 : 07 ] And he promises to go before us and to bring us all the way home. So brothers and sisters, as we look at the road ahead and all the daunting trials that may be in store, listen to what the book of Hebrews says.

It says, lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the one who goes before us, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, reigning in glory, coming one day to bring all things into fullness and to bring us home safely.

Let's pray. Father, perhaps as we've sat under this passage this morning, we realize that there are some areas of our lives where we have been too compromising with the idols of our world around us or the secret sins of our own hearts.

Father, we bring those sins before you now in the quiet of our hearts and we ask for your forgiveness. God, help us to see that in you and in you alone belongs a real blessing and purpose and joy.

God, for many of my brothers and sisters here this morning who are fearful of the road ahead or who may be discouraged, encouraged by their growth and holiness feeling that they've just not seen the victory or the conquest or the growth that they would like to see.

[ 34 : 14 ] Oh, Lord, by your spirit would you encourage them this morning. Help them to see that all is not lost, that even if they've stumbled for the 19th, for the 20th, for the 21st, for the 100th time, God, you never turn away the broken hearted and the contrite.

God, you are near to us and you promise to carry us through, to go before us. Lord, help us to remember that this week, that you are indeed before us in all of this earthly pilgrimage.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.