

PROMISED LAND 1: Introduction

Subject: The Israelites did not receive all God wanted to give them in the Promised Land.

Main Idea: God offers His children abundant life.

Principles:

1. *We experience abundant life to the degree that we submit to God's authority.*
2. *Submitting to God's authority involves trusting His goodness.*

Introduction

A 35-year-old man named “John” (a fictitious name) came to know Christ five years ago. Formerly, his life had been a mess: drinking, drugs, and broken relationships. A downward spiral eventually landed him in a “rehab” facility, where he met and surrendered himself to the Lord. John was a changed man. But this year, John has struggled more than ever with temptations. As old habits have returned, his church attendance has dropped off, and John says he feels disillusioned. “Mary” (also a fictitious name) received Christ as a child and has always been the epitome of faithfulness. However, at sixty-five, Mary says she’s that the disciplines she has long kept have begun to feel draining. She’s increasingly replaced fasting, visitation of the elderly, and reading of helpful Christian books for more self-indulgent pursuits. Inwardly, Mary is restless, discontent, and wondering how she got to a place of spiritually barrenness.

Have *you* ever felt as though you aren’t really experiencing the abundant life that Jesus offers (John 10:10)? Is there a part of you that feels that way right now? Although the phrase “promised land” only occurs once in the Scriptures (Hebrews 11:9), the concept can be traced throughout. God promised Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan in the very first book of the Bible and the remainder of the Old Testament is essentially about the Israelites’ journey, conquering, and possession of this Promised Land. In some cultures, the expression “promised land” has been borrowed to mean a station in life that is ideal: a situation in which a person has reached his or her goals and is prosperous and happy. Actually, that is a good description of what God intended the Israelites to experience. In His words, Canaan was, “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8), images meant to convey abundance.

Israel’s Promised Land is more than just a geographical location and their occupation of it is more than just a piece of history. The Promised Land is also a symbol of what God wants His children to experience: fullness of life; an abundant life in Christ! Unfortunately, some well-meaning Christians have misunderstood the kind of prosperity and happiness that God promises. Not many of us will be financial wealthy, and none of us will be completely free from pain and sorrow in this life. The abundant life is not always what we desire for ourselves. Indeed, it is far better! God wants to give us a permanent inheritance, one that culminates in heaven, but begins *here and now!* Sadly, in this life, few professing believers take possession of it. This study explores the reasons Israel failed to enjoy fullness of life in the land of Canaan and what we can learn from their mistakes. Before we begin, we need to review the plan and goals of our study, and where we are in the Biblical narrative.

I. Background to *Promised Land 1*

A. General Review of *GOD of the WORD* Studies

i. Our Goals

1. The Bible's sixty-six books were written over a 1600-year period of time by about forty individuals, each with their own distinct personality and background. Ultimately God is the author. His Spirit superintended the writing to ensure that the original documents are without error. Despite of the number and diversity of the individuals who wrote it, it tells one unified story from beginning to end. One of the goals of the *GOD of the WORD* studies is to show how the books and stories of the Bible fit together. The *GOD of the WORD* studies move slowly in the beginning, devoting two entire studies to the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Understanding the beginning of the story and the foundational Bible doctrines of God, man, sin, and salvation is essential to appreciating the Bible's remaining books. The study called *Exodus* picks up speed, covering the other four "books of Moses": Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In our *Promised Land 1* study, we will cover the three-and-a-half books of the Bible that follow. The book of Joshua is covered in three lessons, the book of Judges in two lessons, Ruth in one lesson, and 1 Samuel 1 – 12 in four lessons. The *Promised Land 2* study covers the rest of the Old Testament, focusing on the storyline and weaving the Old Testament prophetic books into their place in the narrative. The last three *GOD of the WORD* studies are New Testament studies. The four gospels are covered in one study and the remaining books of the New Testament in the final two.
2. The second goal is to increase our thirst for God's word, so that once we are all the way through the Bible, we will be eager to dig into its sixty-six books more deeply throughout our lifetime. This is a work of the Holy Spirit. However, regular exposure and meditation on His word will place us in the stream of grace in which He does this work.
3. The third and most important goal is personal transformation. Although the Bible is completely accurate (scientifically, historically and philosophically), it was not written as a treatise on these subjects but as a guide to experiencing the Promised Land, the abundant life for which we were created! The *GOD of the WORD* lessons and Closing Summaries are intended to help us apply the Bible to our present lives.

ii. Our Method

1. *Instructions*: Ideally, you will read through the *GOD of the WORD* Instructions before you begin your first lesson. Perhaps you've participated in Bible studies in which the personalities or relationships of the members are eventually strained by the way the discussion is conducted. Little by little, some individuals grow frustrated and stop coming. Although the *GOD of the WORD* Instructions may be difficult for you to appreciate right away, they are designed to make you and your discussion group successful.
2. *The Lesson Questions*: The fifteen questions in each lesson are a guide to help you study the Bible for yourself. Of course, reading study books and hearing Christian teaching is very important, but you will never really come to know the Bible until you study *if for yourself*. The lesson title usually summarizes the content of the covered chapters (don't skip to the first question and forget to look at the title!), and occasionally, there are explanatory statements.
3. *Discussion and Summary*: Although some people have chosen to complete a *GOD of the WORD* study entirely on their own, the best method is to follow up with a group discussion. The "Closing Summary" is a lecture that's given last. In this way, you've covered the passage three times, and hopefully your understanding has increased with each repetition.

B. Review of Biblical Material: Before we introduce the material covered in the *Promised Land 1* study, we need to review the story that has unfolded.

- i. Primeval Biblical Events: The first part of Genesis (chapters 1 – 11) tells us of four significant events: Creation, the Fall, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel incident.
 1. *Creation and Fall*: These first two events are critical to understanding the entire Bible, for they tell us who God is, who we are, and why life is as it is. These chapters reveal that God created human beings as His image-bearers, but when the first man and woman sinned, our fellowship with Him was broken. While pain in life is one of the reasons some deny God's existence or goodness, Genesis teaches that difficulties are not a reflection of God but the result of man's fallen condition. The resolution of this problem is the essence of the Biblical narrative. While Adam and Eve's sin resulted in pain and ultimately, in death, *God promised a Deliverer, the "seed of the woman," who would crush the Enemy* (Genesis 3:15). The hope of this "Messiah" and His deliverance is the undercurrent of the entire Old Testament.

2. *The Flood and Babel*: The events surrounding the great Flood and the Tower of Babel prove the destructive nature of sin. God purged the earth by flood and dispersed mankind after Babel to *slow* the effects of sin, but these were not God's solution to mankind's sin problem. The Deliverer was His solution.

ii. Israel's Early History

1. *The Patriarchs*

- a. While the first part of Genesis tells of four events, the last part of the book (chapters 12 – 50) tells of lives of four characters, Israel's patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Jacob had twelve sons whose descendants comprised the twelve tribes of Israel. God chose to announce and accomplish His plan of salvation through this family.
- b. God's promises continue to be central to the story. In addition to assurance of a Deliverer, God gave the Patriarchs other specific promises: the land known as Canaan, a great number of descendants, and blessing to them and through them to the rest of the world. Today, we can look back and see that this last promise was fulfilled in the writing and preservation of the Scriptures and, even more importantly, in the coming of the Deliverer, who descended through their lineage.

2. *Egypt to Canaan*

- a. *The Exodus*: At the opening of Exodus, we find the Israelites were not living in Canaan, the "good and spacious land, flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8), enjoying a rich, satisfying, and full life. Rather, they were enslaved in Egypt. In order to keep His promise, God called Moses and worked through him to deliver Israel and lead them to the Promised Land. The Exodus is often considered the central historical event of the Old Testament, since it foreshadows the greater rescue that would occur centuries later when Jesus came to earth to pay the penalty for sin and become our Deliverer.
- b. *Sinai*: The Israelites spent most of their first full year outside Egypt at Mount Sinai. There, God forged them into a fledgling nation. They covenanted to make God their King and He gave them a body of laws to govern their moral, civil, and religious (ceremonial) lives. He taught the Israelites how He, a holy God, could be approached. He gave them instructions for building the Tabernacle and symbolically dwelt within. Everything about the Tabernacle and the work performed in it was a picture of the coming Messiah and His

work. God appointed the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron to serve at the Tabernacle as Israel's high priests. Later, He appointed the tribe of Levi, from which the Aaronic priests came, to assist them. The sacrifices, overseen by the priests, were unending and, significantly, no sacrifice for sin was available for those whose sin was intentional! The Israelites needed a permanent sacrifice, a permanent solution to sin. They needed a Savior!

- c. *Wilderness Wanderings*: Two especially important events occurred after Israel left Sinai. The first was the Israelites' disbelief that God would give them the Promised Land, once they arrived at its border (Numbers 13-14). As a result, God judged them with forty years of desert wandering, until the last of those who were adult-age when they had left Egypt died. The only exceptions were two faith-filled individuals: Joshua and Caleb. The second important event involved Moses' disobedience with regard to speaking to the rock (Numbers 20). Since Moses had had so much privilege with God, God judged him harshly, and he too was prevented from entering the Promised Land.
- d. *The Conclusion of the Pentateuch*: However faithless we are, God remains faithful to His promises. He intended to keep His promises, assuring those who died in the desert that their children would enter the Promised Land in their place. At the end of Moses' life, he gave several sermons that reminded the younger Israelite generation of the importance of obeying the Lord: enjoyment of the Land of Promise was conditional upon it!

Summary Statement: In summary, the first five books of the Bible tell of our sinful condition but also of God's promise of deliverance and His offer of abundant life.

Principle: *We experience abundant life to the degree that we submit to God's authority.*

Like Mary, John, and the Israelites, every believer faces the challenge of remaining submitted to Christ's lordship.

Illustration: During the months my husband and I were engaged, I had an office job. For some reason, two of the women I worked with disliked me. They spread lies about me around the office. They even lied to our supervisor, claiming I was making wedding arrangements during office hours. A number of the women in the office finally apologized for giving me the cold shoulder, but the two instigators never did. A few months later, I was married and

joined my new husband in another city. For years, whenever I thought of these two women, I could not muster loving feelings. A part of me believed I had forgiven them and let go, but another part of me felt justified indignation. Nearly forty years went by and I never encountered either of the women. Then one day, I discovered that one of them was going to be a co-speaker at the Christian camp where I live. I would be her host! The thought of it made me worried and tense. I clearly hadn't truly forgiven her, as I knew the Lord wanted. I finally submitted to the Lord's authority and fully forgave. It's hard to describe the release I felt! Until that moment, I didn't realize what a burden I'd been carrying.

Application: When we haven't yielded our will to God's, we will find ourselves increasingly restless, frustrated, fearful, bitter, and tense. On the other hand, when we live in complete submission to the Lord and dependence on Him, our lives are relaxed and joyful, as God intended them to be. The sin nature within us will protest against God's authority and demand autonomy, but yielding is the most freeing thing one can do. It removes the burdens of self-sufficiency, self-promotion, and self-defense. And it is essential to experiencing fullness of life!

Is it possible that you aren't enjoying all the benefits God has for you in the spacious, Promised Land of salvation? In what way do you need to submit to His authority? If you're not experiencing an abundant life and don't know why, will you ask the Lord to show you? Sometimes, we justify and mask sin for so long that we no longer recognize it for what it is.

Transition: God offered the Israelites many blessings in the "land of milk and honey." Sadly, as we will discover, once they entered the land, they (like John and Mary) grew lazy about their spiritual lives and fell far short of experiencing all God offered. Let's take a broad look at the part of the Biblical story we will be covering.

II. Overview of *Promised Land 1*

A. Place in Old Testament Canon: The "canon" of the Old Testament are the books that have been recognized/authorized as genuine. The Hebrew Bible, known as the *Tanak*, has the book arranged differently than ours in three main categories: The Law (the Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. The books of our Old Testament fall into four main categories. Like the Hebrew Bible, our first five books are the books of the Law (the Pentateuch or books of Moses). Next, we have the twelve historical books. They are followed by five books of wisdom literature and seventeen books of prophecy (five of which are called "major," because of their length, and twelve shorter works, which are called "minor.") The books we will cover in this study, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and a portion of 1 Samuel, are the first of the historical books.

B. Scope of the Books: You will notice that the cover page for this study illustrates the richness of the Promised Land with a cluster of grapes. The subtitle describes the place of these books in Israel's history: the *Israelites' Conquest and Settlement* (or acquisition) of Canaan. This historical span of roughly 350 years includes the period of the Judges (covered by the books of Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel 1-12).

C. Summary of Joshua 1 – 1 Samuel 12: A Pattern of Decline

- i. The Book of Joshua: The book of Joshua records the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan and division of the land so that each tribe received an inheritance. It begins as a story of great spiritual and military victory, but as the story progresses, we find the Israelites increasingly lazy. By chapter 13, Joshua is near the end of his life and Israel still has not overtaken large portions of their inheritance. Like John and Mary, they were on their way to spiritual maturity when laziness about their habits and "small sins" reaped a toll.
- ii. The Book of Judges
 1. *Political Disunity*: The book of Judges opens with a statement of Joshua's death. As we read further into the book, we realize that much disunity developed between the twelve tribes of Israel, possibly explaining why no one was appointed to lead Israel immediately after Joshua's death. The situation was so bad that, according to the end of the book, a civil war broke out between the tribes and one tribe was almost entirely lost.
 2. *Moral Decay*: The spiritual climate of Israel plummeted to a new low as the Israelites intermarried with the local Canaanites and began incorporating their idolatrous practices into their worship. The Lord disciplined Israel by allowing foreigners to raid the land and oppress them. Each time the Israelites cried out to the Lord, He sent a military deliverer, or "Judge," to rescue them. But no sooner did they experience deliverance than they fell back into their sinful practices.
 3. *Individualism*: In the time of the Judges, the Israelites had become confused about what God actually required. Rather than consulting their Bible, the Law of Moses, they acted in ignorance, each person doing whatever he or she "saw fit" (21:25). The writer indicates that this tolerance for individualism characterized Israel for several hundred years. Consider how this pattern has been reflected in modern, western culture. Laziness about spiritual habits has led to less and less Bible reading and familiarity. Unintentionally, parents have shown their children that God's ways have little value. Without knowledge of God's word or much confidence in its value,

the younger generation has no basis for making moral judgments and simply do “as they see fit.”

- iii. The Book of Ruth: Ruth is a short but powerful story set in the period of the Judges. Ruth was a foreigner who clung to the God of her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi and honored her selflessly. While Judges mostly gives commentary on the spiritual condition of the nation of Israel, Ruth gives us insight into the spirituality of one particular family. The book encourages us that no matter how far a culture wanders from true worship, God still has faithful people.
- iv. 1 Samuel 1 – 12: Promised Land I only covers the first 12 chapters of 1 Samuel, which describe the end of the period of the Judges and a political transition from theocracy to monarchy. According to the Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, *theocracy* is a “form of government which acknowledges God alone as the highest political authority, whether or not he is represented by a human ruler such as a king.”ⁱ God had been Israel’s acknowledged King since the time of Moses. However, the more idolatrous and morally perverted the Israelites became, the more their political strength declined and the less they put their confidence in God’s leadership. By the time of Samuel, Israel’s last Judge, the Israelites were convinced that the only way they could survive as a nation was to appoint a human king over them, like the other nations.
- v. Summary: What we find in these books of the Bible then, is the story of a victorious, God-honoring people sliding into compromise and spiritual laziness. Their laziness led them down a path of moral confusion, degeneration, and political crisis. The further the Israelites wandered from loving and obeying the Lord, *the less they enjoyed the freedom and pleasure God intended them to experience in the Land of Promise.*

D. A Handful of Heroes: Thankfully, we do find a few models to follow in these biblical books, a handful of heroes of the faith.

- i. Joshua: In the period of the Conquest, Joshua lived an exemplary life. Following in the footsteps of a leader like Moses must have been quite intimidating for him. He obviously could not have been a perfect man or a perfect leader but, to his credit, the Bible does not record a single one of his faults or sins. Joshua listened carefully to the Lord and followed all His instructions.
- ii. Ruth and Samuel: In the time of the Judges and transition to monarchy, Ruth and Samuel were models of faithfulness. Ruth showed humility, faithfulness, and determination to do what was right at a time when everyone in Israel was doing whatever they saw fit. Samuel modeled obedience and intimacy in his relationship with God at a time when those he served insisted on rejecting His lordship.

Summary Statement: We can summarize by saying that the books we are going to study tell how God’s people largely failed to enjoy the good, full, blessed life He offered them. Israel did not want God to rule them as King.

How do you feel about the idea of God’s rulership? The Bible offers some encouragement regarding the struggle to submit our will to His. Philippians 2:13 tells us that God not only wants our will conformed to His but that *He is working in us* to “will and act” according to His good purpose. We are not alone! We cannot live the Christian life on our own any more than we can get ourselves to Heaven. The Holy Spirit will create within us a desire to obey and will give us His power to follow through. This does not mean we don’t need human accountability but, if we are true followers of Christ, the *will* to obey and the *power* to act will come from Him.

However, once again, we can put ourselves in the stream of grace in which this work of God readily takes place by simply remembering and acknowledging God’s *goodness*. One very simple reason that so few believers experience fullness of life is that they do not truly believe that God is good.

Principle: *Submitting to God’s authority involves trusting His goodness.*

If He *is* good, as the Bible tells us, then He is trustworthy and we can be certain that His ways are always in our very best interest. As Romans says, “He works all things for the good of those who love Him” (8:28).

Conclusion

Do you really believe that God is completely good? That He is good *to you*? Let me ask the question a different way: Do you believe the hard things God asks of you – the habits, the behaviors and ways of thinking He wants submitted to His lordship – are baggage that is keeping you from a more abundant life, and that He wants something better for you? Have you been tempted to believe that trials are God’s way of making your life as difficult as possible, or do you see them as opportunities to possess one more piece of your inheritance?

Just as God did with Joshua, the Judges, Ruth and Samuel, He is equipping you, as His ambassador, for critical missions of eternal consequence. *Because He is good*, He intends to build in us such strength of character that we can bear heavy loads and intense pressures with fortitude to endure.ⁱⁱ He is determined to finish the good work He began (Philippians 1:6) and enable us to possess our full inheritance. He is making us into people of great courage, faith, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and love. And He will never stop working to that end *because He is good*. He has plans for us: an abundant life in Christ – a Promised Land – fully possessed.

ⁱ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

ⁱⁱ Roberts, Frances J. (2002). *Come Away My Beloved* (p. 170). Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Books.