

Heirs of Promises, Prisoners of Hope



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 3:17–24; Deut. 6:3; Josh. 13:1–7; Heb. 12:28; Lev. 25:1–5, 8–13; Ezek. 37:14, 25.*

Memory Text: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double” (*Zechariah 9:12, ESV*).

Joshua 13–21 contains long lists of geographical boundary markers that delineate portions of land allocated to the tribes of Israel. For the modern reader, these lists might seem irrelevant, but they are based on a theological understanding of the Promised Land that is significant for us today. Through these concrete lists, God wanted to teach the Israelites that the land was not a dream. It was promised to them in a very tangible, measurable way. But they had to make that promise a reality by acting on it.

That is, yes, God was going to give land to them as an inheritance; it was going to be a gift, made in fulfillment of what He promised their fathers. “ ‘ ‘See, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to give to them and their descendants after them” ’ ’ (*Deut. 1:8, NKJV*). But yes, they too had their part to play.

This week we will look at some theological concepts related to the Promised Land and their spiritual implications for those who claim all the promises found in Jesus.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 29.

Eden and Canaan

Read Genesis 2:15 and Genesis 3:17–24. What were the consequences of the Fall, as far as the living space of the first human couple was concerned?

At Creation, God placed Adam and Eve in a perfect environment that embodied abundance and beauty. The first human couple met their Creator in the setting of a lovely living space that could provide for all their physical needs. In addition to the spoken word of God, the Garden of Eden served as a learning center where Adam and Eve gained significant insight into God's character and the life He intended for them. Therefore, when they broke the trusting relationship with their Creator, their relationship with the Garden of Eden changed as well, and as a sign of the broken relationship, they had to leave the garden. They lost the territory that God had given to them. Thus, the Garden of Eden became the symbol of abundant life, and we will rediscover its motifs in the theme of the Promised Land.

How did the patriarchs perceive the promise of the land? (See Gen. 13:14, 15; Gen. 26:3, 24; Gen. 28:13.) What do you think it means to us, as Adventists, to live as heirs of the promises (Heb. 6:11–15)?

As Abraham entered the land God had shown him, by faith that land became the Land of Promise to him and his descendants. It remained the Land of Promise for 400 years. The patriarchs did not really own the land; it was not theirs in such a way that they were able to give it to their children as an inheritance. Rather, it belonged to God, as the Garden of Eden had belonged to Him. As Adam and Eve did not do anything that entitled them to the Garden of Eden, Israel had not contributed anything to deserve the land either. The Promised Land was a gift of God based on His initiative. Israel had no inherent right or claim to own the land (*Deut.* 9:4–6); it was only by God's grace that the Israelites could possess it.

The patriarchs were heirs of the promises until they were fulfilled. We, as Christ's followers, have inherited even better promises (*Heb.* 8:6) that will be fulfilled if we become "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (*Heb.* 6:12, *RSV*).

The Land as a Gift

Read Exodus 3:8; Leviticus 20:22; Leviticus 25:23; Numbers 13:27; Deuteronomy 4:1, 25, 26; Deuteronomy 6:3; and Psalm 24:1. What was the special relationship between God, Israel, and the Promised Land?

At a very basic level, land offers physical identity to a nation. By locating the nation, it also determines the occupation and lifestyle of the nation. Slaves were rootless and belonged nowhere; someone else enjoyed the results of their work. Having land meant freedom. The identity of the chosen people was linked strongly to their dwelling in the land.

There was a special relationship among God, Israel, and the land. Israel received the land from God as a gift, not as an inalienable right. The chosen people could own the land as long as they were in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh and respected the precepts of the covenant. In other words, they could not have the land and its blessings without the blessing of God.

At the same time, it is true that the land provided a lens through which the Israelites could better understand God. Living in the land would always remind them of a faithful, promise-keeping, and trustworthy God. Neither the land nor Israel would have existed without the initiative of God, who was the Source and foundation of their existence. While the Israelites were in Egypt, the Nile and the irrigation system, coupled with hard work, provided the crops that they needed for subsistence. Canaan was different. They depended on rain for the abundance of their harvests, and it was only God who could control the weather. Thus, the land reminded the people of their constant dependence on God.

Even if Israel received the land as a gift from Yahweh, in the ultimate sense, God Himself remained the owner. As the true owner of the whole earth (*Ps. 24:1*), Yahweh has the right to assign the land to Israel or to take it away. If God is the owner of the land, the Israelites and, by extension, all humans are strangers and sojourners, or in modern terminology, we are all God's long-term guests on His land/earth.

In the light of 1 Peter 2:11 and Hebrews 11:9–13, what does it mean to you personally to live as a stranger and sojourner looking forward to the city whose designer and builder is God Himself?

The Challenge of the Land

Read Joshua 13:1–7. Even though the land of Canaan was a gift from God, what were some of the challenges that came with possessing it?

Given that for centuries the Israelites had been living as slaves, their military skills were inadequate to conquer the land. Not even their slave masters, the Egyptians, with their skilled and well-equipped armies, were able to occupy it permanently. The Egyptians never conquered Canaan completely because of the impregnability of the walled cities. Now a nation of former slaves is told to conquer a land that their former masters were unable to subdue. If they are ever to possess the land, it will be through God's grace alone, not through their own effort.

Joshua 13 through 21 deals with the division of the land to the various tribes of Israel. This allotment tells the Israelites not only what has been apportioned to them but also what still must be occupied within that territory. The Israelites can securely live in the land that God has given to them as an inheritance. They are the rightful and legitimate tenants of the land under God's ownership. Yet, God's initiative must be matched by human response. The first half of the book shows how God gave the land by dispossessing the Canaanites; the second half reports on how Israel took the land by settling it.

This complexity of the conquest illustrates the dynamics of our salvation. Similar to Israel, we cannot do anything to earn our salvation (*Eph. 2:8, 9*). It is a gift, just as the land was God's gift to the Israelites based on their covenantal relationship with Him. It certainly wasn't based on their merits (*see Deut. 9:5*).

However, for the Israelites to enjoy God's gift, they had to assume all the responsibilities that came with living in the land, just as we have to go through the process of our sanctification in loving obedience to the requirements of being citizens of God's kingdom. Though not the same thing, the parallel between their being given the land by grace and our being given salvation by grace are close enough. We have been given a wonderful gift, but it is something that we can forfeit if we are not careful.

How do Christians today encounter similar challenges to those related to occupying the Promised Land? See *Phil. 2:12*, *Heb. 12:28*.

The Jubilee

The land was so central to the existence of Israel as God's people that it could not be apportioned as a whole. It had to be divided by tribes, clans, and families (*Num. 34:13–18*) in order to prevent it from becoming the possession of a few leading elites.

Read Leviticus 25:1–5, 8–13. What was the purpose of the sabbatical year and of the year of jubilee?

By contrast with Egypt, where citizens regularly lost their land and became Pharaoh's serfs, the purpose of God for the Israelites was that they would never become indefinitely disenfranchised. Nobody, outside the clan and family to whom it had been originally allotted, could own the land. In fact, according to God's plan, the land could literally never be sold; it could only be leased according to its value established by the number of years left until the next jubilee. Therefore, the relatives of a person who was obliged to "sell" his ancestral land had the duty to redeem it even before the jubilee (*Lev. 25:25*).

The allotment of the land becomes a window into God's heart. As our heavenly Father, He wants His children to be generous with those who are less fortunate and to allow their lands to feed them every seventh year. The sabbatical year applied the principle of the Sabbath commandment on a larger scale. Besides valuing and encouraging hard work, ownership of the land also calls for respect and kindness to those facing financial challenges.

Land ownership legislation provided every Israelite with the opportunity to be freed from inherited or self-induced oppressive circumstances and to have a fresh start in life.

In essence, this is the main purpose of the gospel: to erase the distinction between rich and poor, employer and employee, privileged and underprivileged, putting us all on equal footing by recognizing our complete need of God's grace.

Unfortunately, Israel neglected to keep the standard set by God and, after centuries, the warnings of dispossession were fulfilled (*2 Chron. 36:20, 21*).

How can the principles of the Israelite land allotment and the Sabbath remind us that, in God's eyes, we are all equal? How can the Sabbath help us say "no" to the exploitative, vicious cycles of consumerism that plague many societies?

The Land Restored

Read Jeremiah 24:6; Jeremiah 31:16; Ezekiel 11:17; Ezekiel 28:25; and Ezekiel 37:14, 25. What was the promise of God concerning the return of Israel to the Promised Land, and how was it fulfilled?

During the Babylonian exile, the Israelites experienced not only the sad reality of being rootless but also the promise that their relationship with God, though made concrete through the promise of the land, was not conditioned on, and limited to, possessing the land. When the Israelites confessed their sins, repented, and looked for the Lord with all their hearts, God fulfilled His promise again, and He brought them back to their land as a sign of their restoration. That is, He was still their God, even while they were not in the land.

However, as the promise that Israel would possess the land forever was conditional (*Deut. 28:63, 64; Josh. 23:13, 15; 1 Kings 9:7; 2 Kings 17:23; Jer. 12:10–12*), so was the promise to resettle and make Israel prosper in the land after the exile. At the same time, prophets of the Old Testament pointed to a restoration that a future Davidic king would bring (*Isa. 9:6, 7; Zech. 9:9, 16*). This promise was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises to ancient Israel would have their fulfillment.

In the New Testament, the Promised Land is not mentioned directly, but we are told that the promises of God have been fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ (*2 Cor. 1:20, Rom. 15:8*). Thus, in the light of Christ, the land is reinterpreted, and it becomes the symbol of the spiritual blessings that God plans to give to His faithful people here and now (*Eph. 2:6*) and in the hereafter.

The ultimate fulfillment of the divine promise of rest, abundance, and well-being in the land will take place on the new earth, liberated from sin and its consequences. In that sense, as Christians, our hope is based on Christ's promise that He will return and, after a 1,000-year period in heaven, establish His eternal kingdom on the earth made new. This will be the ultimate fulfillment of all the promises about the land.

Read John 14:1–3, Titus 2:13, and Revelation 21:1–3. What ultimate hope is found for us here in these verses, and why does the death of Jesus guarantee us the fulfillment of this hope?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Controversy Ended,” pp. 672–678, in *The Great Controversy*.

“We shall be saved eternally when we enter in through the gates into the city. Then we may rejoice that we are saved, eternally saved. But until then we need to heed the injunction of the apostle, and to ‘fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of us should seem to come short of it’ [Hebrews 4:1]. Having a knowledge of Canaan, singing the songs of Canaan, rejoicing in the prospect of entering into Canaan, did not bring the children of Israel into the vineyards and olive-groves of the promised land. They could make it theirs in truth only by occupation, by complying with the conditions, by exercising living faith in God, by appropriating his promises to themselves.” —Ellen G. White, *Youth’s Instructor*, February 17, 1898.

“In the Bible the inheritance of the saved is called ‘a country.’ Hebrews 11:14–16. There the heavenly Shepherd leads His flock to fountains of living waters. The tree of life yields its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree are for the service of the nations. There are ever-flowing streams, clear as crystal, and beside them waving trees cast their shadows upon the paths prepared for the ransomed of the Lord. There the wide-spreading plains swell into hills of beauty, and the mountains of God rear their lofty summits. On those peaceful plains, beside those living streams, God’s people, so long pilgrims and wanderers, shall find a home.” —Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 675.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about the Promised Land as a symbol of the abundant life that Christ promised to His followers in John 10:10. How do the benefits of living in an abundant land portray the blessings of salvation?
- 2 What is the relationship between being citizens of a land and living a certain lifestyle? How does one affect the other? What are some of the implications of being citizens of God’s kingdom?
- 3 As humans, we are constantly disappointed by the promises of others and sometimes by promises we make to ourselves. Why can you trust God’s promises?
- 4 How can we make the promise of the new earth part of our future in a real and concrete way, even now?

Not Winsome Witnessing

Kim Sun, a South Korean teen studying at the Adventist University of the Philippines, wondered if he could make a career out of going door-to-door after a man whom he had invited to evangelistic meetings got baptized. He wasn't Adventist, and it had been his first time going door-to-door.

"What's this that we were doing?" he asked a pastor who had accompanied the students going door-to-door. "Is it called community service?"

The pastor smiled. "No," he said. "It's called mission."

"Is there a full-time job like this?" Sun said.

"Yes," the pastor said. "It's called being a missionary."

"Can I have this job, too?"

"Yes. The income isn't so much, but you can do it."

"How can I do it?"

"You'll have to change your studies from nursing to theology."

"Oh. I'll need to ask my mom."

Sun was studying in the Philippines because his parents had wanted him to make something of his life. Before, he had been living for himself.

When Sun spoke to his mother, he asked if he could change his major.

Mother was confused. "What is theology?" she said.

"Theology is serving the church," he said, adding that the pay may be low.

Mother said he could take theology if he also finished his nursing studies.

"But nursing isn't meaningful to me," Sun said.

Then Mother had an idea. Her goal wasn't for him to be rich but to be a good person. "If you take theology, can you drink or smoke?" she said.

When he said no, she exclaimed, "Then please change your studies!"

Sun loved theology. He learned the biblical basis for the seventh-day Sabbath. He read the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. He got baptized.

When he returned home for vacations, he tried to persuade his parents to accept his new beliefs. "Mom and Dad, sit down and let me talk to you," he said. "Sunday is not the Sabbath day. Saturday is the Sabbath. Do you know Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream?"

He couldn't understand why his parents weren't open-minded. He was dismayed when Mother finally asked him to stop, saying, "You take your God, and I'll take my God," she said.

"But they're the same God!" he said. "We have to follow God's Word."



Kim Sun is associate director of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.