

OVERVIEW OF GOD'S PLAN TO REEDEEM A LOST HUMANITY

More than 3,800 years ago, God spoke to his servant Abraham: "Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you" ([Gen. 13:17](#)). From the outset, God's choice of a Hebrew nomad to begin his plan of salvation (which is still unfolding) was linked to the selection of a specific land where his redemptive work would take place. The nature of God's covenant relationship with his people demanded a place where their faith could be exercised and displayed to all nations so that the world would know of *Yahweh*, the true and faithful God. God showed the same care in preparing a land for his chosen people as he did in preparing a people to live in that land. For us to fully understand God's plan and purpose for his people, we must also understand the nature of the place he selected for them.

In the Old Testament, God promised to protect and provide for the Hebrews. He began by giving them Canaan--a beautiful, fertile land where God would shower his blessings upon them. To continue to possess this land, however, the Israelites had to live obediently before God. The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly link Israel's obedience to God to the nation's possession of Canaan, just as they link its disobedience to the punishment of exile ([Lev. 18:24-28](#)). When the Israelites were exiled from the Promised Land ([2 Kings 18:11](#)), they did not experience God's blessings. Only when they possessed the land did they know the fullness of God's promises.

By New Testament times, the Jewish people had been removed from their Promised Land by the Babylonians due to their failure to live obediently before God ([Jer. 25:4-11](#)). The exile lasted 70 years, but its impact upon God's people was astounding. New patterns of worship developed, and scribes and experts in God's law shaped a new commitment to be faithful to him. The prophets predicted the appearance of a Messiah like King David who would revive the kingdom of the Hebrew people. But the Promised Land was now home to other cultural groups of people whose religious practices, moral values, and lifestyles conflicted with those of the Jews. Living as God's witnesses took on added difficulty as Greek, Roman, and Samaritan worldviews mingled with that of the Israelites. The Promised Land was divided between kings and governors usually under the authority of one foreign empire or another. But the mission of God's people did not change. They were still to live *so that the world may know that our God is the true God*. And the land continued to provide them opportunity to encounter the world that desperately needed to know this reality.

From the beginning God's plan was to reclaim his world. The Jewish people of the Bible had made God known to many of the nations of the world as people from those nations traveled through Israel. The Assyrian dispersion and the Babylonian exile spread God-fearing Jewish people around the known world. Many of them returned to Jerusalem for the yearly feasts which God had commanded. God had prepared carefully and well for the next stage in his great plan of salvation. His people must now live *so that the world may know* in all the world, not just in one small place. If the arena had changed, the mission had not. The people of God would reveal him to people in places like Rome,

Athens, and the cities of Roman provinces like Syria and Macedonia. The most pagan of all provinces, Asia, would become a stronghold for the followers of God and the Messiah Jesus. They would serve him while the nations of the world watched and listened.

The land God chose for his people was on the crossroads of the world. A major trade route, the Via Maris, ran through it. God intended for the Israelites to take control of the cities along this route and thereby exert influence on the nations around them. The Promised Land was the arena within which God's people would serve him faithfully as the world watched. Through their righteous living, the Hebrews would reveal the one true God, *Yahweh*, to the world. (They failed to accomplish this mission, however, because of their unfaithfulness).

Western Christianity tends to spiritualize the application of the Promised Land as it is presented in the Bible. Instead of hearing God's call to live publicly and passionately to influence the culture around them, modern Christians view the application of the Promised Land as a distant, heavenly city--a glorious "Canaan" toward which we are traveling as we ignore the world around us. We are focused on the destination, not the journey. We have unconsciously separated our walk with God from our responsibility toward the world in which he has placed us. In one sense, our earthly experience is simply preparation for an eternity in the "promised land." Preoccupation with this idea, however, distorts the mission God has set for us. That mission is the same one he gave to the Israelites. We are to live obediently *within* the world so that, through us, *it may know that our God is the one true God*.

Living by faith is not a vague, otherworldly experience; rather, it is being faithful to God right now, in the place and time he has put us. This truth is emphasized by God's choice of Canaan, a crossroads of the ancient world, as the Promised Land for the Israelites. God wants his people in the game, not on the bench.

The geography of Canaan shaped the culture of the people living there. Their settlements began near sources of water and food. Climate and raw materials shaped their choice of occupation, dress, weapons, diet, and even artistic expression. As their cities grew, they interacted politically. Trade developed, and trade routes were established.

Biblical writers assumed that their readers were familiar with Near Eastern geography. Today, unfortunately, many Christians do not have even a basic geographical knowledge of the region. By studying the people and events of the Bible in their geographical and historical contexts, we can learn the *who*, *what*, and *where* of a Bible story, and then, better understand the *why*. In deepening your understanding of God's Word, you will be able to strengthen your relationship with him.

TERMINOLOGY

The language of the Bible is bound by culture and time. Therefore, understanding the Scriptures involves more than knowing what the words mean. We need to understand those words from the perspective of the people who used them. The people God chose as

his instruments--the people to whom he revealed himself--were Hebrews living in the Near East. These people described their world and themselves in concrete terms. Their language was one of pictures, metaphors, and examples rather than ideas, definitions, and abstractions. Where we might describe God as omniscient or omnipresent (knowing everything and present everywhere), a Hebrew preferred: "The Lord is my Shepherd." Thus, the Bible is filled with concrete images from Hebrew culture: God is our Father and we are his children. God is the Potter and we are the clay; Jesus is the Lamb killed on Passover; Heaven is an oasis in the desert, and hell is the city sewage dump. The Last Judgment will be in the Eastern Gate of the heavenly Jerusalem and will include sheep and goats. If we are to understand the language God chose for the people of the Bible and for the text itself we must be familiar with the everyday images it employs.

Several terms are used to identify the land God promised to Abraham. The Old Testament refers to it as Canaan or Israel. The New Testament calls it Judea. After the Second Jewish Revolt (AD 132-135), it was known as Palestine. Each of these names resulted from historical events taking place in the land at the time they were coined.

Canaan is one of the earliest designations of the Promised Land. The word probably meant "purple," referring to the dye produced from the shells of murex shellfish along the coast of Phoenicia. In the ancient world, this famous dye was used to color garments worn by royalty. The word for the color eventually was used to refer to the people who produced the dye and purple cloth for trade. Hence, in the Bible, *Canaanite* refers to a "trader" or "merchant" ([Zech. 14:21](#)), as well as to a person from the "land of purple," or Canaan. Originally the word applied only to the coast of Phoenicia; later, however, it applied to the whole region of Canaan. The Canaanite's religious perspective was quite different than that of God's people; he commanded his people to totally reject the worldview of their neighbors.

The Old Testament designation for the Promised Land derives from the patriarch Jacob, whom God renamed Israel ([Gen. 32:28](#)). His descendants were known as the children of Israel. After the Israelites conquered Canaan in the time of Joshua, the name of the people became the designation for the land itself (in the same way it had with the Canaanites). When the nation split following the death of Solomon, the name *Israel* was applied to the northern kingdom and its territory, while the southern land was called Judah. After the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians in 722 BC, the entire land was again called Israel.

The word *Palestine* comes from the people of the coastal plain, the Philistines. Though the Egyptians used *Palestine* long before the Roman period to refer to the land where the Philistines lived, Philistia--it was the Roman emperor Hadrian who popularized the term as part of his campaign to eliminate Jewish influence in the area (about one hundred years after Jesus' death). During New Testament times, the Promised Land was called Judea. Judea (which means *Jewish* technically) referred to the land that had been the nation of Judah. Because of the influence the people of Judea had over the rest of the land, the land itself was called Judea. The Romans divided the land into several provinces, including Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (the three main divisions during Jesus'

time); Gaulanitis, the Decapolis, and Perea (east of the Jordan River); and Idumaea (Edom) and Nabatea (in the south). These further divisions of Israel only add to the rich historical and cultural background God prepared for the coming of Jesus and the beginning of his church.

Today the names *Israel* and *Palestine* are often used to designate the land God gave to Abraham. Both terms are politically charged. *Palestine* is used by the Arabs living in the central part of the country, while *Israel* is used by the Jews to indicate the modern political State of Israel. In this study *Israel* is used in the biblical sense. This choice does not indicate a political statement regarding the current struggle in the Middle East, but instead is chosen to best reflect the biblical designation for the land.

JOSEPHUS THE JEWISH HISTORIAN

The most important source of information about life at the time of Jesus comes from a Jewish historian who is known to history as Josephus Flavius. His extensive writings on first-century Israel's history, politics, culture, and religion are invaluable in helping us understand the setting in which God placed his people. Though Josephus' supposedly first-hand accounts, complete with commentary, are written by a man and therefore are subject to the bias any individual would have, archaeological and historical research have shown Josephus to be remarkably accurate in his descriptions of life during New Testament times.

Josephus was born into a wealthy family of priests shortly after Jesus was crucified about AD 38. Josephus's Hebrew name was Joseph Ben Mattathias. A brilliant young man, he studied under the leaders of several Jewish movements of his day, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. He was familiar with the Roman world, having spent time in Rome, and was impressed with the glory and might of the empire. He was fluent in Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew, the major languages of his day.

As the First Jewish Revolt began (AD 66), Josephus was placed in charge of the Jewish resistance in Galilee. He surrendered to Vespasian, the Roman general, and boldly predicted that Vespasian would become the next emperor based on Josephus's interpretation of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Since Vespasian was superstitious and Josephus was a priest, Josephus' life was spared. When Vespasian became emperor, Josephus became a personal scribe to the family even taking their name, Flavius, and receiving Roman citizenship. Josephus spent the rest of his life writing the history of the Jewish people, focusing on the crucial years from 168 BC to AD 100, the period of the New Testament. Because he was hated by the patriotic Jews for being a traitor, and was suspected by the Romans because of his role in the Jewish revolt, Josephus wrote to justify himself and to present the Jewish people in the best possible light. Given those biases, his major works, *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, are vital sources for any student of the New Testament.

Josephus rarely mentions Jesus or the early church (several passages about Jesus were probably added by Christian writers long after Josephus's death). He did write extensively

about the Herod family including descriptions of John the Baptist's execution, the death of Herod Agrippa, and other characters mentioned in the Bible. Ironically because they offer extensive background information, Josephus' writings are a key element in understanding the person of Jesus, as well as his message and ministry in first-century Israel. Josephus was another part of God's plan that everything should be complete for the coming of his Son.

Because God speaks to us through the Scriptures, studying them is a rewarding experience. The inspired human authors of the Bible, as well as those to whom the words were originally given, were Jews living in the Near East. God's words and actions spoke to them with such power, clarity, and purpose that they wrote them down and carefully preserved them as an authoritative body of literature.

God's use of human servants in revealing himself resulted in writings that clearly bear the stamp of time and place. The message of the Scriptures is, of course, eternal and unchanging--but the circumstances and conditions of the people of the Bible are unique to their times. Consequently we most clearly understand God's truth when we know the cultural context within which he spoke and acted and the perception of the people with whom he communicated. This does not mean that God's revelation is unclear if we don't know the cultural context. Rather, by learning how to think and approach life as Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, and Paul did, modern Christians will deepen their appreciation of God's Word. To fully apply the message of the Bible to our lives, we must enter the world of the Hebrews and familiarize ourselves with their culture.

That is the purpose of this ministry. The events and characters of the life of Jesus will be presented in their original settings. We will seek to better understand God's revealed mission for our lives hearing and seeing his words in their original context.

"GO INTO ALL THE WORLD"

From the beginning God's plan was to reclaim his world. The Jewish people of the Bible had made God known to many of the nations of the world as people from those nations traveled through Israel. The Assyrian dispersion and the Babylonian exile spread God fearing Jewish people around the known world. Many of them returned to Jerusalem for the yearly feasts which God had commanded. God had prepared carefully and well for the next stage in his great plan of salvation. His people must now live so that the world may know in all the world not just in one small place. If the arena had changed the mission had not. The people of God would reveal him to people in places like Rome, Athens, and the cities of Roman provinces like Syria and Macedonia. The most pagan of all provinces, Asia, would become a stronghold for the followers of God and the Messiah Jesus. They would serve him while the nations of the world watched and listened.

Western Christianity tends to spiritualize the faith of the people of the Bible. Modern Christians do not always do justice to God's desire that his people live faithfully for him in specific places influencing the cultures around them by their words and actions. Instead of seeing the places to which God called his people as crossroads from which to

influence the world, we focus on the glorious destination to which we are traveling as we ignore the world around us. We are focused on the destination, not the journey. We have unconsciously separated our walk with God from our responsibility toward the world in which he has placed us. In one sense, our earthly experience is simply preparation for an eternity in the new "promised land." Preoccupation with this idea, however, distorts the mission God has set for us. That mission is the same one he gave to the Israelites. We are to live obediently *within* the world so that through us, *it may know that our God is the one true God.*

The triumph of the Christian faith is nowhere more striking or unexpected than in the Roman Province of Asia Minor. Known for immorality in lifestyle and in religious practice, this region became Christian within 150 years of Jesus ministry in Israel. The early missionary, Paul, (Saul in Hebrew) spent a great deal of time here and wrote several letters to the followers of Jesus in this province. Peter wrote his letters to the believers here, and John wrote Revelation (and his letters) to the churches of this province. The effectiveness of the early believers is amazing and raises a host of questions with great implications for our own world. How did Jesus prepare his followers for such a mission? What empowered them? What kind of commitments did they have to make to their mission? What did they do that had such an impact on the people of Asia? Some answers to these questions become clear when we study the Biblical stories in the context in which they occurred.

PLINY

One of the most important sources of information about life in Asia Minor at the time of the early church comes from a Roman governor named Pliny. His letters, written to the emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) are a fascinating description of the relationship between the early believers and the pagan gentiles in the province of Asia Minor. Trajan had appointed Pliny to bring order to the area of Pontus (in Asia Minor) because of riots and unrest due to local corruption. Pliny proceeded to ban all social, political, and religious organizations which created great suffering for the Christians who were not considered one of the legal religions. He noted that the superstition had spread throughout the province leaving ancient temples deserted. Pliny made clear that being a Christian was a capital offense. Many were accused and charged of this offense. Pliny offered them several chances to renounce their faith and then they were executed. In one letter to Trajan he asked what should be done to those who renounced their faith. Were they still criminals for their actions while they were members of the sect or was their rejection of Jesus sufficient? Trajan replied by making adherence to Christianity a capital offense though the believers were not to be sought out. In addition, Pliny provides many insights into the view of the new faith held by the people of his time who were not Christians. Pliny's work provides helpful insights for understanding the stories and teaching of Scripture.

