

“GOD’S PROMISE AND YOUR PROBLEM”

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 1:8; 3:7-8

To the Israelites, held captive in Egypt, the promised land was synonymous with every hope and dream of their hearts. First, it was a land of permanence in sharp contrast to the rootlessness which plagued them in the land of Egypt. Second, it was a land of freedom, a marked difference from the state of slavery they experienced under the Pharaohs. Most important of all, it was a land of self-realization. A place where, as individuals and as a nation, they could take on the image God had designed for them when he had set them apart and called them “my people.”

Whatever longings and desires, whatever aims and aspirations lay smoldering within the breasts of the Israelites, the promised land was the place those dreams would find fulfillment. For that reason, claiming the promised land became an obsession to the Jews.

It was the goal toward which this covenant people continually strived during the long years of captivity.

It was the prize from which they never took their eyes.

It was the theme of family talk about the table.

It was the central subject of conversation at every furtive meeting behind the backs of their hated oppressors.

As the weary years of captivity dragged on and on, the only thing that kept the Israelites going was the hope that one day they would set foot on the promised land. From father to son, generation after generation, the story was told of --

A land of milk and honey.

A land of peace and prosperity.

A land of hope and happiness where the heart could find rest.

Even the thought of it was food and drink for their troubled spirits. Every telling of the tale fired

the soul and nerved the arm for action. Every whispered mention of the name fanned the flames of determination to claim the land which God had promised to their father Abraham hundreds of year before.

The Story’s Beginning

The story has its beginning in the book of Genesis. There, in the twelfth chapter, we read of God’s covenant with Abram. We are told how God called Abram to leave his desert outpost and make his way to a new land where God would bless him and make his name great.

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee. I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

With amazing brevity the sacred writer telescopes the next several hundred years of history into just 38 chapters. And, in the remainder of Genesis, we read of the meanderings of the patriarchs as they fan out across the countryside, growing from a tiny band of herdsmen into a rather substantial family.

Finally, under the influence of Joseph who was raised to a position of power in the government of Pharaoh, the children of Israel migrated to Egypt where they survived a terrible famine. There, using the Biblical language,

“They waxed strong and multiplied (until) the land was filled with them.”

At first their relationship with the Egyptians was a happy one. But, as the first chapter of Exodus records, after awhile

“There arose a new king over Egypt which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, ‘Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we, come, let us deal wisely with them . . . therefore they did set over them

taskmaster’s to afflict them with their burdens . . . and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage . . .”

The length of Israel’s bondage to Egypt was about two hundred years according to most historians. But again, when marvelous brevity, the Bible telescopes that period of dark travail into thirty-seven verses.

Then, in the third chapter of Exodus, we come upon the awe-inspiring story of Moses’ confrontation with God in the burning bush. There, in what scripture calls a holy place, God promises deliverance to his people as he says,

“I have the seen the affliction of my people and have heard their cry, and am come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them unto a good land . . . a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:7-8).

From that point on the story moves swiftly. Because of his unwillingness to release the children of Israel, a series of deadly plagues descends upon Pharaoh (Ex. 7-11). Finally, as his firstborn son lies dead from the tenth plague, Pharaoh instructs Moses to take the children of Israel and their possessions and depart from Egypt.

The story of their flight from Egypt.

The crossing of the Red Sea.

The receiving of the Ten Commandments.

The building of the Tabernacle.

And, their ultimate arrival at the border of the promised land is well known.

At that point, only two years have passed since the time God promised to deliver them from tribulation and their arrival at Kadesh Barnea, just south of the promised land. You see, my friend, when we stay in God’s will and out of God’s way, he moves forward with irresistible speed in the keeping of his promises. But, when we reverse the process, and get in God’s way and out of God’s will, trouble inevitably ensues.

Such was the case with the Israelites. Although they were but a stone’s throw away from the fulfillment of their lifelong dream, because of the foibles of the flesh, they turned away from the promised land and, as a result, were subjected to forty tragic years of wandering in the wilderness.

The story of their failure to claim the promised land and the reasons for that failure, shall occupy our attention in the weeks to come.

Four Blocks

The Bible records four “blocks” which kept the children of Israel out of the promised land. They were inferiority feelings, fear, hate or resentment, and guilt resulting from their disobedience.

We are told that when the spies returned from “casing” the countryside, ten of the twelve said,

“We are as grasshoppers in their sight.”

They felt inferior.

The people picked this up and, instead of feeding their faith, they fed their fears.

“We are not able to go up against these people for they are stronger
than we . . . would God we had died in Egypt.”

They were scared to death.

We are also told “the people murmured” against God, against their leaders, and against their circumstances.

They were filled with resentment and hostility.

It is further recorded, how repeatedly they disobeyed the Lord.

They were guilty before God.

It’s important to realize these four “blocks” -- inferiority feelings, fear, hate, and guilt -- are the same “blocks” which keep *us* from experiencing an abundant life. Just as surely as there was a

land for the Jews -- a land of plenty, of freedom, of self-realization -- so, too, there is a *life* for Christians. It is a life of joy, peace, victory and purpose.

For the Israelites these qualities were bound up with a particular piece of real estate which had certain geographical characteristics. For Christians, the abundant life is not confined to a specific time or place. It is an attitude of the heart which is not dependent upon the circumstances or surroundings which grip us at a particular moment in time.

Jesus said,

“In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

You see, it’s his purpose that each of us, with his help, should rise above the storms and stress of life to claim victory.

This’s not to say the Christian’s life is a bowl of cherries. Anyone who expects it to be trouble-free is in for a sad surprise. Jesus didn’t find it so, and neither shall we. Cardinal Mercier stumbled on this truth when, during the Great War, his little village of Lauvain was bombed and burned. The nave of his cathedral was blasted away. His home was left shambled. The whole village was a mass of debris. The priceless books in his library were reduced to smoke and ashes. Many of the quiet men who studied with him were shot down like rows of dominoes.

Cardinal Mercier was no psalm-singing saint who sat around with a Cheshire cat grin frozen on his face while the world about him was being blasted to bits. He had in him the same capacities for anger and resentment which often grip us. Those who were with him report that, in the first moments of his misery, the complaints rolled out of his wretchedness in a constant stream,

“Why all this sorrow, Lord?” he cried. “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken us?”

Then, they say, his eyes fell on the cross which still stood atop the steeple of the church and the

stormy man grew silent. It was almost as if Christ himself had once again stretched forth a hand to calm the raging tempest, and they heard Cardinal Mercier say,

“A disciple is not above his master, nor a servant above his Lord. We will rebuild!”

And they did. They discovered that Christ does not insulate us from the storms and stresses of life. But when they come, he *does* give strength to rise above them and claim the victory.

Edgar Dewitt Jones, the famous Disciples of Christ preacher, tells of a man in his congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. He was a rare soul. A pastor’s layman. The kind of man every preacher needs at times. A man strong in faith and character. A man capable of great friendship. A man to whom the pastor can go in his moments of discouragement to pray, and, if need be, to weep. According to Dr. Jones, such a man was Fletcher Sears.

Jones tells how, after a long life, singularly free from sickness, Mr. Sears was stricken with a painful ailment which brought him near death’s door. On one of his many visits to this faithful friend, Dr. Jones walked into the still white hospital room, stepped over to the bed upon which lay a man who had been closer than a brother, and taking him by the hand he said,

“Well, friend, how is it?”

Looking up through eyes filled with despair and dread, Mr. Sears replied,

“Oh, pastor, I’ve lost God! Through all of this illness and pain, I’ve lost God!”

Almost with the speed of angel-flight Dr. Jones came back with this inspired answer,

“Why, friend, that puts you in company with the saints! Job lost God when, amidst sackcloth and ashes, he cried, ‘Oh, that I knew where I might find him.’ Jeremiah lost God when, saddened by the sins of a wayward nation, he cried, ‘Thou hast covered thy face with a cloud that I might not break through.’ Our Lord lost God when, hanging on a cross in open naked shame, he cried, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ To be in such estate is to walk in company

with the saints.”

Make no mistake about it, my friend, the Christian’s life will have its storms. With appalling impartiality, death, sorrow, suffering and disease descend upon the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the saved and the lost, the prince and the peasant.

There is not an adult here this morning who has not felt the cutting, chilling, penetrating winds of adversity.

Every mother’s child here has had a “thorn in the flesh” which has driven him or her to near distraction at times.

Every soul among us has experienced those long and lonely moments when it seems as if God had gone away.

Trouble is common to us all. It is not restricted by class or clan, and the fact that we are Christians does not mean we are immune to it. Instead, as I have said, it is the purpose of Christ that, by his grace and power, we shall rise above the exigencies of life to claim the victory.

If we are to do that --

We must replace our feelings of inferiority with a true awareness of who we are as children of God.

We must root out the fear which sometimes grips us and supplant it with faith.

We must harness our hostility and remove our resentments by filling our lives with love.

We must get out from under our burden of guilt by fully accepting God’s gracious forgiveness.

It is only when we are rid of the rottenness within, that we shall possess the spiritual stability to stand against the storms without.

Someone has said it takes two things to blow over a giant tree. A heavy wind outside and decay inside. In the realm of everyday living, there isn’t much we can do about the howling winds

without, but there’s a great deal we can do about the spiritual decay within

Inferiority feelings, fear, hatred and guilt sapped the energy, undermined the strength, and caused many of the Israelites to miss out on the joy of claiming the promised land. So, too, these emotional and spiritual “blocks” *can* and *have* crippled many of us Christians and have made us easy marks for the high winds of life that come along. As a result we have not entered our promised land of abundant living.

For that reason these next few Sundays may well prove to be the most transforming weeks of your lifetime. On succeeding Sundays we shall talk about each of these four “blocks” and discuss ways and means of getting rid of them. If you want to, if you are dead-earnest about it, if more than anything else in all this world you long to claim the promised land and possess the abundant life which God promised, you shall have your hearts desire. God is not a reluctant giver. In fact, he’s more ready to give than most of us are ready to receive.

In “A Tale of Two Cities” Dickens tells of a doctor who was incarcerated in the French Bastille. As part of his confinement he was taught the art of shoemaking. After twenty years he was released, but he had been a prisoner of the darkness so long he could no longer stand the light of freedom. A former servant, to whom he was released, kept him under lock and key in a dingy garret so he might feel at home.

There, on days when the sky was blue and the sun shone cheerily, observers would peak through chinks in the wall and make out a form, bending in the twilight over his bench tapping with his shoemaker’s hammer. At any moment of the night or day the doctor could be free if he only wished it so, but he preferred his darkened garret to the sunlight of liberty.

Is that a picture of you? If so, you can be free.

You can be released from moral bondage and experience moral victory.

You can be liberated from the shackles of self-doubt and fear.

You can be healed of the cancerous diseases of hatred and guilt.

You can be strengthened with the very power of Almighty God.

You can be more than conqueror!

You can be . . . *if* . . . you really want to be.

The question you must answer for yourself this morning and in the weeks to come is --

Do I really want to be free? Do I really want something more than the milk and water, lukewarm, half-hearted, Sunday-go-to-meeting religion which I have at the moment? Do I really want a victorious, overcoming, abundant life? Or do I prefer to remain in the dark bastille of moral and spiritual mediocrity?

If you choose the latter, there is isn’t much God can do for you. But, if you decide to be done with all that, take courage! You will not strive alone.

“Sometime when my faith would falter,
And I almost lose my way,
I just lift my eyes to Jesus
And I always hear him say,

‘Fear thou not for I’ll be with thee.
I will still thy pilot be.
Never mind the tossing billows,
Here -- take my hand -- and trust in me.’”

Spiritual Prescription for Today

To aid in claiming the promised land of abundant living.

Repeat this PRAYER REMINDER every hour on the hour.

“I am a child of God. He loves me and has forgiven all my sins,
past, present and future! By his grace, ‘I can do all things through
Christ who strengthens me.’” (Phil. 4:13).