

I enjoy going river rafting. I've rafted a lot in my lifetime, but one trip stands out. I was interning at PBC, and we had a staff bonding day by going river rafting. I was very excited! I've rafted the south fork of the American River many times, and on this trip, we were going to be rafting the middle fork, which I had never been on. As we were listening to the safety talk, they started handing out the life vest and helmets to wear. I thought this was odd as we didn't have to wear helmets on the South Fork. Then they started handing out wetsuits to wear because the water is so cold it can take your breath away! I was concerned because we didn't have all these precautions when rafting the South Fork. I became even more concerned about some of the office ladies who didn't know how to swim.

Then, our guide asked how many had ever rafted the South Fork. He said the South Fork part of the river was mostly Class 3 rapids and a few Class 4 rapids. But on that day, in the springtime on the middle fork, we would encounter mostly Class 4 rapids and a couple of Class 5 rapids. All our eyes got huge, and many of us wondered what we had gotten ourselves into. Our guide said that he would keep us safe, but we would have to be good listeners and always obey his commands. We all agreed, got in our boat, and went down the river.

Our passage today reminds me of that river rafting trip because, much like the river guide, we see God preparing, protecting, and providing for his people as they walk in obedience and trust.

### **God's Guidance Is Prepared For You.**

**"See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel**

**against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. Exodus 23:20-22.**

As a reminder, God has given his people the Ten Commandments and is in the process of giving Moses the Book of the Covenant. Moses is still on Mt. Sinai with the Lord at this point. God had the Israelites camped at the base of Mt. Sinai for a reason: to get Egypt out of them. He rescued them from Egypt, and during this time, he was forming them into the men and women he desired them to be through the Law. He taught them how to live with one another and himself, and God reminded them where they were headed.

God sends an angel to go ahead of his people to the promised land and to guard them along the way. This angel shows up in other areas of Exodus. We see the angel in Exodus 3:2 at the burning bush, Exodus 14:19-20 in the cloud, and the fire protecting them from the Egyptian army. And now this angel shows up in chapter 23. God's instructions to the Israelites are very clear.

**"Pay attention to him and listen to what he says,"**

God emphasizes the need for the Israelites to obey the angel. Like my river rafting guide, God is highlighting the seriousness of their journey and the angel's authority as God's representative. The Israelites are called to attentiveness and obedience, essential for experiencing God's protection and guidance.

**"Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion."**

The angel has the authority to enforce God's will. Rebelling against the angel would mean rebelling against God. This indicates the

seriousness of sin and rebellion and the consequences of disobedience. If you know the story of Exodus, you know the Israelites rebelled against God on many occasions. Did God forgive them? Yes! Over and over. God is reminding them that there would be real consequences for their rebellion and sin. Those consequences might be natural, and some might be imposed on them by God. It won't be long after this story that the Israelites will make a golden calf to worship and will have to face the consequences of their sin.

### **"Since my Name is in him"**

This signifies that the angel uniquely represents God's presence, authority, and character. God's "name" refers to his nature, power, and identity. The angel's role reflects God's commitment to preparing, guiding, and protecting his people, and also their responsibility to trust him and walk in obedience. Obedience and attentiveness to his voice are essential. The Israelites needed to trust that God had already prepared the way; they needed to align themselves to follow his guidance.

### **God's Protection Secures You.**

**My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces. Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span. Exodus 23:23-26.**

Those are some amazing promises. What I love about this section is that it's all about God. God is the one who will remove the current occupants of the land. God is the one who deals with the opposition on behalf of his people. The Israelites didn't have to fight the battle; God did. The Israelites had one job—destroy all the idols. God warned them against adopting the practices and idols of surrounding nations.

It's a reminder of the first two commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." Egypt had about 1500 gods they worshiped. The Israelites can rest knowing that the God who brought them out of Egypt will be the same God who protects them from their enemies and who will secure their future. He will not put up with idol worship.

His promise to them is incredible. When they worship only him, he will bless their food, lives, and families, and they will live long lives. This verse gives us an image of the land they will live in. It describes paradise, new heaven, and new earth language. The way this is expressed is this land will be the way that God intended life to be lived: heaven on earth.

I want to proceed with this passage with the understanding that God gave these promises for specific people at a specific time for a particular purpose. For you and me today, this does not mean that if we obey the 10 Commandments and all 613 Covenant laws, we, too, will receive those same promises. With the New Covenant, through Jesus, we know, as Jesus told us, we would suffer. He promised his followers that not only would they suffer, but his followers would also be hated. (John 15:18-20) Suffering will continue until heaven comes. That is when we are promised in Revelation 21:4 that "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Through Jesus, we also have many other promises, which I will get to shortly.

### **God's Process Involves Progression.**

**"I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you,**

**until you have increased enough to take possession of the land. Exodus 23:27-30.**

If you don't know this about God, he is a God who has a process. Look at the process laid out before us in this section. He will throw the nations into confusion, the enemies will turn and run. He will send hornets ahead of them. But all of this is going to take time. God knows what this will do to the promised land; he cares about the land, too. He knows the ecology and what the wild animals will do, so God has a plan and a process. He works in a progression, ensuring the safety of his people and the land.

I love that God works a process little by little. I'm a process person. If you need something done, I'm your gal. I'll put a process together and work the process over time. Processes often help us avoid chaos. God sent hornets to cause chaos. Think about when you see a bee. Most people do some crazy dance to get away from the bee. I don't know if you have ever experienced a swarm of bees, but it is total chaos.

One summer at our Jr. High houseboat trip, we experienced a swarm. I was up at our camp area while the kids were on the houseboats, getting ready for dinner and the campfire. All of a sudden, I heard the strangest noise. It sounded like a buzzing roar, and before I knew it, a great black cloud of bees was headed our way. I got on the bullhorn to warn Joe and Paula Osorio, who were cooking for us, to take cover. I told the kids to close all the doors and get inside their boats, and then I dove into the church van. It was utter chaos! People running all over the place, jumping into the water, diving into cars. In my mind's eye, I could see a hornet swarm from this passage, causing chaos and driving people from the land.

Processes take time. God knew what would happen to the land if he moved too fast. The land of milk and honey would be a vast wasteland. I believe people don't like processes because of the time it takes. I see it every day in my role as the communications pastor. Communication at CPC was once described as the wild, wild west. We would have 20

announcements on a Sunday; we wouldn't say no to anything, and there was no strategy behind what we communicated and who we wanted it communicated to. Everyone wanted their collateral yesterday, even though they gave me the information an hour ago.

It was like everyone on staff had a bullhorn, and we were using them simultaneously, screaming at the top of our lungs to get our own ministry message out. No one was listening. It took about three or four years for our communication processes to take root in our staff, but through those processes, we have gained trust in what we communicate both with our body and our community.

The trip from Egypt to Canaan (the promised land) could have taken about 11 days. But God gave the Israelites a longer process to avoid conflicts with the Philistines, which they weren't prepared for. They camped at Mt. Sinai for a year, received the Law, built the Tabernacle, and prepared for their journey. When they were close to the promised land, they received an unfavorable report from the ten spies, which led to fear and rebellion against God. Because of their lack of trust and disobedience, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, ensuring the unfaithful generation would die out before the next generation entered the land. That was a long process where God moved little by little.

### **God's Promise Requires Full Commitment.**

**"I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the desert to the Euphrates River. I will give into your hands the people who live in the land, and you will drive them out before you. Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you." Exodus 23:31-33.**

So this Book of the Covenant ends with a reassuring promise and a repeated warning: the land and idols. God fights for his people, but he also asks them to participate. He invites us to be co-laborers with him. It would have been easy for the Israelites to kick back and be

passive observers, but God gave them a job. Hand in hand, God and the Israelites would work together to enter the promised land.

Today, we have the opportunity to work hand in hand with God, through Jesus, to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. Why does God invite us to participate with him? Working with him is how we develop a relationship with him. It's where we learn to trust and obey. Little by little, our time with him allows us to build trust and, over time, be transformed, becoming more like him.

Sadly, the Israelites did not live up to their part. The Israelites never totally got rid of the Canaanites, and throughout the rest of their history, they kept getting ensnared by pagan gods. More importantly, they missed out on God's promises in this passage.

So how does this passage relate to you and me when the promises of this passage were meant for a specific time, a specific people, in a particular place?

### **Recognize God's Guidance**

Obedience and attentiveness to his voice are essential as he prepares the path for his promises. I've been asked, "How do I know if I'm doing God's will?" The answer is that if you are obedient to him, you are doing God's will. He will bless you for your obedience. We also need to be able to recognize his voice and be attentive to it. This is where our Rule of Life comes in. As we develop the practice of attentiveness through silence, solitude, and the Sabbath, we become more in tune with God's voice. I also want to point out that obedience isn't a condition of salvation but is expected of those who are saved. If you have decided to be a follower of Jesus, you have been redeemed! Theologian Peter Enns said,

**Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ abides with his people continually. He is with us through every stage of our redemptive journey. He is with us at the beginning: He calls us into his kingdom. And having called us, he does not leave us to our strength to hold on to him; he holds on to us and sees the process through to the end. Like the**

**Israelites, the church is a reflection of God's glory. His honor is at stake in maintaining his people. And just as obedience was expected of the Israelites, it is also expected of the church of Christ. Being in Christ does not mean that obedience is no longer required or that it is optional. The New Testament is full of admonitions to Christians to live their lives in the light of the resurrection. It is more than just a matter of "you really ought to." We have no choice; obedience is required. In fact, obedience is the actual demonstration to each other and to the world that we are redeemed people. Peter Enns**

At the beginning of this sermon, I talked about our river rafting guide and how he said he would keep us safe, but we would have to be good listeners and obey his commands at all times. During that trip, there came a point where I was so thankful I listened to the commands and instructions of the guide.

We were entering a dangerous part of the river, and the person across from me on the boat got confused about the call the guide made and ended up knocking me out of the boat. At that point, the current was so intense I got sucked under the boat.

The first command I remembered was, "Don't panic." So I tried really hard not to do that. Second, when you are under the boat, use your hands and feet to "walk" to the back of the boat. This ensures that your guide can see your hands and feet pressing through the bottom of the boat. And the last command was to trust your guide. As I "walked" to the back of the boat, the guide was looking for me and could see which way I was going. And before I knew it, like the hand of God, he grabbed my life vest and pulled me into the boat.

Following those commands was no easy task because my first inclination was to panic. Being obedient to God isn't about following a bunch of rules. We often think God's rules are meant to withhold something good from us rather than guide us toward what is truly good. Life in God's kingdom is a life of overflowing abundance. Jesus is guiding us toward

this reality, and attentiveness is designed to inspire our faithfulness and obedience.

### **Remove Idols**

Root out anything that competes with God's authority and trust in his protection over your life. We can't judge the Israelites harshly about not destroying idols when we have them in our own lives. Our digital devices often lack safeguards against harmful content like pornography. Our televisions operate without boundaries or accountability. Our relentless pursuit of academic achievement for our children goes unquestioned; our habits of consumption and spending are rarely restrained. Our debt spirals unchecked, and our compulsive work routines remain unexamined. We've lost the art of being still and present before God. As we enter this new year, what idol needs to be removed from your life?

### **Rely on His Timing**

Be patient and persistent, trusting that God provides step by step through his process. We live in a 15-second TikTok culture. The thought of a process, or little by little, seems impossible. The reality is that 15 seconds is a lie that the world has bought into. Our culture has taught us not to wait on anything, we can have instant gratification. Remember the days of a film camera. You would have to use all 24 or 36 frames of film and then take it to the developer, who would have it back to you several days later. You had to wait to see what was on that role in the film. Now, with the onset of a digital camera, you can see instantly the picture you took. We live in an instant culture. But in God's culture, God's timing is usually slow and methodical, bit by bit. Our natural bent is to run ahead of God's timing instead of relying on his timing.

In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes that inheriting our promises requires not just faith but faith and patience (Hebrews 6:12). Similarly, in the Old Testament, the threat of wild beasts serves as a metaphor for the dangers of overextending ourselves. Israel couldn't plant, cultivate, and protect vast new lands all at once without becoming vulnerable to attack on multiple

fronts. In the same way, we risk exposure to spiritual and emotional harm when we try to take on too much at once—such as launching a start-up, nurturing a new marriage, starting a family, training for a triathlon, volunteering for the PTA, and serving in the church simultaneously. By overcommitting, we open ourselves to the enemy, whom Peter warns is like a roaring lion, prowling around looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

### **Renew Your Commitment**

Examine your heart and recommit fully to walking in obedience and trusting in God's provision and promises. Dallas Willard, in his book *Renovation of the Heart*, writes about what is necessary for change in a believer's life. He boils it down to three key ingredients: vision, intention, and means. Vision is a mental image of what life will look like on the other side of the change. Intention is saying, "I will do this. I will commit to change." Means is the method or practices we implement to bring about change.

I'm sure many of you have committed to resolutions for the new year. Most of us will abandon our resolutions by January 19. So, I encourage you to take Willard's advice as you renew your commitment to Jesus. We need to clearly understand what we can expect when we choose to live according to God's way rather than our own. That's the essence of life in the kingdom of God—experiencing the transformation that comes from aligning our lives with his rules instead of following our own.

Here, God provides his people with a vision of what life looks like when they obey him rather than rebel against him. He promises, "I will be on your side. I will fight your battles for you. You'll witness my power at work while I secure your victory."

God assures his people that he will lead them into a life of abundance, blessing, prosperity, and peace. "This is my desire for you," he says. "This is the life I offer when you live according to my design, under my rule, in my kingdom."

We, too, need this vision of life in God's kingdom—a life shaped by his ways, filled

with his presence, and marked by his promises. This passage began with a promise that God would bring the Israelites to the place he had prepared for them. Jesus also reminds us of the place he is preparing for us.

On the night Jesus was crucified while sharing the Passover with his disciples, he said,

**“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.  
John 14:1-3**

What makes heaven so incredible is that Jesus will be there, and we will be with him—face to face, fully present, fully united, fully alive in his glorious presence. Even more beautiful is that Jesus is here with us now! We are privileged to be with him and know him in this life. He invites us into a relationship where we are both fully known and deeply loved.

The opportunity to walk with Jesus in this world is meant to be the greatest motivation for listening to God. It’s not about rigidly following a set of rules. It’s about experiencing a relationship with the One who loves us beyond anything we can imagine. God prepares, protects, and provides for his people as they walk in obedience and trust.