

ZONDERVAN

Promised Land Discovery Guide

Copyright © 1999, 2008 by Ray Vander Laan

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920.

That the World May Know is a trademark of Focus on the Family.

ISBN 978-0-310-87874-2

All maps are courtesy of International Mapping.

All artwork is courtesy of Ray Vander Laan unless otherwise indicated.

All Scripture quotations, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other – except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: *DoMoreGood*®

Cover photography: *BiblePlaces.com*

Interior design: *Ben Fetterley, Denise Froehlich*

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Introduction / 7

Session One

Standing at the Crossroads / 11

Session Two

Wet Feet / 39

Session Three

First Fruits / 69

Session Four

Confronting Evil / 97

Session Five

Iron of Culture / 125

Bibliography / 155

INTRODUCTION

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 primarily Jews living in the ancient 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 the people of the Bible did, modern Christians will deepen their appreciation and understanding of God's Word. Unfortunately, many Christians today do not have even a basic knowledge of the world and people of the Bible. This series is designed to help solve that problem. We will be studying the people and events of the Bible in their geographical, historical, and cultural contexts.

Although the DVD segments offer the latest archaeological research, this series is not intended to be a definitive historical, cultural, or geographical study of the lands and times of the Bible. No original scientific discoveries are revealed here. My goal is simply to help us better understand the message of the Bible. Once we know the *who*, *what*, and *where* of a Bible story, we will be able to better understand the *why*. By deepening our understanding of God's Word, we can more clearly see God's revealed mission for our lives and strengthen our relationship with him.

The Assumptions of Biblical Writers

For this study, it is important to realize that people today use the names *Israel* and *Palestine* to designate the land God gave to Abraham and that 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 State of Israel. In this study, however, *Israel* is used in the biblical sense. This choice does not indicate a political statement regarding the current struggle in the Middle East, but is chosen because it best reflects the biblical designation for the land.

Biblical writers assumed that their readers were familiar with Near Eastern geography, history, and culture. They used a language which, like all languages, is bound by culture and time. For example, the people whom God chose as his instruments — the people to whom he revealed himself — lived in the Near East, where people typically described their world and themselves in concrete terms. Their language was one of pictures, metaphors, and examples rather than ideas, definitions, and abstractions.

This is why the Bible is filled with concrete images. While we might describe God as omniscient or omnipresent (knowing everything and present everywhere), the people of the Bible would have preferred to describe God by saying, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” or “God is our Father, and we are his children,” or “God is the Potter, and we are the clay.” So to understand the Scriptures, we need to know more than what the words mean, we need to understand them from the perspective of the people who thought and spoke in terms of those images every day of their lives. We need to know what it meant for them to recognize Jesus as the Lamb killed on Passover, and to think of heaven in terms of an oasis in the desert and hell being like a city sewage dump.

The people of the Bible also had an Eastern mind-set rather than a Western mind-set. Eastern thought emphasizes the process of learning as much as or more than the result. Whereas Westerners tend to collect information to find the right answer, Hebrew thought stresses the process of discovery as well as the answer. So as you go through this study, use it as an opportunity to deepen your understanding of who God is and to grow in your relationship with him.

Understanding the World of the Hebrews

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” (Genesis 13:17). From the outset, God’s choice of a Hebrew nomad to begin his plan of salvation (a plan that is still unfolding today) 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.

The Promised Land, then, was the arena in which God’s people were to serve him faithfully as the world watched. So if we are to fully understand God’s plan and purpose for his people, we must also understand the nature of the place he selected for them. After all, 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.

The land God chose for his people was on the crossroads of the world. A major trade route of the ancient world, the *Via Maris*, ran through the land, and more than a million people a year traveled that route. God intended for the Israelites to take control of the cities along this route and thereby exert influence on the nations around them. Through their righteous living, the Hebrews were to 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 concept of the Promised Land as it is presented in the Bible. Instead of seeing it as a crossroads from which to influence the world, modern Christians tend to view it as a distant, heavenly city, a glorious “Canaan” toward which we are traveling as we ignore the world around us. We focus more on the destination than the journey and, in a sense, view our earthly experience as simply preparation for an eternity in the “promised land.” We have unconsciously separated our walk with God from our responsibility to the world in which he has placed us, which distorts our perception of the mission God has set for us.

Many Christians today have forgotten that the mission of God's people has always been to live *so that the world would know that their God was the true God*. This was true when the Hebrews left Egypt and possessed the Promised Land. It was true during the years of the exile in Babylon. It was true during the time Jesus lived on earth after the Jews had returned to Israel. And it was true for the disciples of Jesus who followed him as their Rabbi and obeyed his command to go out into the world and make disciples.

The life of faith is not a vague, otherworldly experience. Rather, it is being faithful to God right now, in the place and time in which he has put us. This truth is emphasized by God's choice of Canaan, a crossroads of the ancient world, as the Promised Land in which the Israelites were to live. Our mission as Christians today is the same one God gave to the Israelites when they possessed the Promised Land, the same one Jesus gave to his disciples. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might, and to love our neighbors as ourselves so that through us *the world may know that our God is the one true God*.

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

The people who lived in the land of Israel left behind an indelible record of their lives. An important part of that record lies in large mounds called *tels*, which are piles of debris from ancient cities that over the centuries were destroyed and rebuilt, one on top of another. As archaeologists excavate tels, they peel away preserved layers of history and bring to light evidence of the culture, architecture, art, diet, weapons, and even writings of the people who lived in those ancient cities. Their findings about the culture and people of ancient Israel stand as a testimony to the truth of the words we read in the Bible.

This video focuses on Tel Gezer, one of the greatest tels in Israel. To stand on this huge mound is to stand on the ruins of as many as five thousand years of human history! Today, Tel Gezer's location in a quiet, agricultural region gives little indication of its importance in history. But in ancient times, Gezer was a bustling crossroads.

Gezer could be described as a city “in between.” To understand this, we need to zoom out and consider the geography of Gezer and the ancient world. To the west is the fertile, coastal plain that lies along the Mediterranean Sea. To the east are the foothills — the *Shephelah* — beyond which lie the mountains of Judea and, beyond them, the forbidding Arabian Desert. So Gezer lies “between” the desert and the sea.

If we zoom out farther, we see Egypt, a technologically advanced world power southwest of Gezer. Far to the east lies Mesopotamia, the home of civilizations the Bible refers to as Persia, Babylon, and Assyria. Gezer was one of three cities in the land of Israel that were located on the *Via Maris*, the main coastal road that ran “between”

the mighty empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Via Maris bustled with activity as those powerful civilizations shared economic and cultural ties.

Gezer was also one of few points where an east-west road intersected the Via Maris. The road ran east from Gezer into the mountains of Judea to Jerusalem and on toward Jericho and the King's Highway, which was another trade route (more difficult to travel than the Via Maris) east of the Jordan River. So the people of Gezer literally lived at the crossroads of the ancient world!

This session reveals the connection between Gezer's strategic location and God's plan for Israel. Whoever controlled the city could, in effect, dominate trade on the Via Maris and greatly influence the people and cultures of the ancient world. So God placed the children of Israel in Canaan, and specifically in cities such as Gezer, where they could make a difference, where they could be a powerful, "flavoring" influence on the world. God wanted his people to live out his salvation in everyday life, to demonstrate morality, justice, and compassion in such a way that the whole world would see it and know that the God of Israel is the one true God.

But for the most part, Israel failed to wrest control of the land and cities of Canaan, including Gezer. They never exerted the powerful influence God desired them to have as his witnesses to the world. Instead, they allowed the pagan culture of the Canaanites to flourish and exert its influence.

This insight into ancient history has a significant application for Christians today. God calls his people to stand at the crossroads and to actively participate in shaping our culture and our world. He calls us to be a flavoring influence on others and to live in such a way that when people see us, they also see God.

Opening Thoughts (4 minutes)

The Very Words of God

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 12:1–3

Think About It

God carefully chose a specific people, the descendants of Abraham, to become a nation and take part in unfolding his plan of salvation for the world. He also chose a specific place for those people to live and fulfill their role in bringing about his plan of salvation.

Today, God still chooses people to do the work of his kingdom on earth. Think for a moment about where you live, what you do, and the people with whom you have contact. Can you think of why God might have placed you where you are?

DVD Teaching Notes (22 minutes)

Tel Gezer: geographic and cultural crossroads

City gates: focal point of defense and administration