

## **God Promises to Guide**

**Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light**  
**Unit 2: God's Promises**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 15, 2023**  
**By Jay Harris**

**Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 48:3-8a, 17**

### **Key Verse**

*Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I am the LORD your God, who teaches you how to succeed, who leads you in the way you should go. (Isaiah 48:17)*

### **Lesson Aims**

- To examine the reliable map God had given his people through the law and the prophets
- To ponder how God went “off map” into uncharted territory to liberate God’s people from Babylonian captivity
- To recognize when God may be taking us off the map
- To contemplate ways we can discern God’s leading
- To think of the benefits of following God’s guidance

### **Recalling Our Journey**

The theme for the lessons of the Winter Quarter is “From Darkness to Light.” Don’t we all want to be on a journey from darkness and despair to light and hope? We’re exploring God’s Promises in this January unit, which is appropriate for the first month of a new year. The promises of God fill our own lives with promise and potential. So far, we have explored, “God Promises to Hear and Forgive” and “God Promises to Restore.” Think how these promises help us in our journey from darkness to light. The theme for this lesson is “God Promises to Guide.” To have a guide on our journey makes a huge difference.

In this lesson, we will explore the various ways that God guides us as we move into the future. Much of the future remains unknown to us until we experience it. We can trust however that we move into a future kept by God. This is not to say that we move into a future that is predetermined. God leaves us with choices. Even when we make the wrong choices, God does not completely abandon us to our own free will. We have already learned that God promises to hear and forgive. God promises to restore. By meeting God in this way, we are co-creators with God of our future. If we will let God be God and take the lead, God will guide us. God goes before us into every place that we ourselves must go.

### **How the Law and the Prophets Provide a Map of the Future**

**<sup>3</sup>The former things I declared long ago;  
they went out from my mouth, and I made them known;  
then suddenly I did them, and they came to pass.**

One of the distinguishing features that set apart God's people from their neighbors in the Old Testament is the way they were taught to view God. Israel's neighbors saw their gods primarily as gods of nature. They made idols to help control the natural forces that they believed shaped their lives. God's people believed that God made the natural world, for sure, but the Hebrews were different from the beginning because God revealed himself more as a God of history than a God of nature. God was and is always making history with his people. God speaks to his people and sets history in motion.

It is remarkable to think how much of the Old Testament tells what is to come. In the call to Abraham and Sarah, the Lord said, "Go from your country and your kindred to the land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) God planned to reveal the destination as Abraham and Sarah walked by faith into the future. What served as their "map" was one in which the details were being added as they traveled with God as their companion.

We see the same thing in the call of Moses in Exodus 3, when Moses was called by God to lead the Hebrews in their liberation from slavery in Egypt. From the very beginning, before the first confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, God began filling the mind of Moses with a vision of their ultimate destination in "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." God began forming God's people with laws and commandments relating to every aspect of life. Many of these commands assumed a settled existence that God's people would not achieve until decades later. God made these things known long before they came to pass. God told them that he would enable them to take possession of the land. When they doubted God, they ended up wandering in the wilderness for forty years until the generation that participated in the Exodus from Egypt died out.

The Book of "Deuteronomy," which means "second law," tells how God restated his laws for the benefit of the children of the Exodus generation who would be entering the Promised Land. It was as if God was giving them the spiritual map that they would need to follow in order to live and succeed in the future. When you read the commands in the Book of Deuteronomy they have a definite prophetic quality. They told of what was to come if God's people were obedient. They also told what was to come if they were disobedient. These commands made up the map they were to follow.

The Old Testament prophets provided maps too. They made known God's messages about the future before the events in question came to pass. The future that God's people walked into was foretold. This allowed God's people to prepare for the future. For this to work, they had to listen and follow what the Lord said through his messengers. Sadly, the people often did not listen. They did not heed the Lord's commands. They did not follow the map that was given to them.

**<sup>4</sup>Because I know that you are obstinate,  
and your neck is an iron sinew  
and your forehead brass,**

**<sup>5</sup> I declared them to you from long ago,  
before they came to pass I announced them to you,  
so that you would not say, “My idol did them;  
my carved image and my cast image commanded them.”**

We’re told in this scripture that another reason for announcing the future before it came to pass is because God’s people were stiff-necked and hard-headed. Often God’s people were rebellious. When they suffered misfortune, they could not say that they had been uninformed or that they had not been warned. When good things happened, they could not say that their idols had caused these good things to happen. In all these things, God had previously gone on record. God had given his people a reliable map to guide them.

### **The Former Things vs. New Things**

In our scripture, we hear God announcing a strategic shift. We therefore need to pay attention. God referred to “*the former things I declared long ago*” (vs. 3), then God announced a pronounced shift: “*from this time forward I tell you new things.*” (vs. 6)

**<sup>6</sup> You have heard; now see all this;  
and will you not declare it?  
From this time forward I tell you new things,  
hidden things that you have not known.  
<sup>7</sup> They are created now, not long ago;  
before today you have never heard of them,  
so that you could not say, “I already knew them.”  
<sup>8</sup> You have never heard; you have never known;  
from of old your ear has not been opened.**

Do you recognize the movement God was making? God was shifting from the former things that God declared long ago to new things. God continued emphasizing the shift. These new things were hidden from view. They were not known. They were recently created, not created long ago. No one had heard about these things. No one could say, “I already knew them.” In case we didn’t hear it in verse 7, we hear again in verse 8 that no one had heard, no one had ever known, and no ear had ever been opened to the new thing God was announcing in their hearing. The captives in Babylon would be the first in history to be exposed to this new thing.

One word we could use is the word “unprecedented.” If you use the word *unprecedented*, you need to be able to back it up. We already began exploring the new thing God was doing in the last lesson on January 8 when we explored a passage in Isaiah 43. In that same chapter, in verses 18 and 19, God summarizes the unprecedented nature of what God was doing: “*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?*”

God actually began in Isaiah 40 announcing this new thing that God was just starting. It was a new hope God was announcing. What exactly was new about these new things?

- Just when God’s people were tempted to despair that they would never return home, God said, “Comfort, comfort my people” (Isaiah 40:1) because the end of their exile was in sight. This would be most unexpected. It would amount to a second exodus—but a very different exodus.
- This second exodus from Babylon would differ from the first exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses because an enemy would not be pursuing them: “For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.” (Isaiah 52:12)
- In the first exodus from Egypt, the people thirsted in the wilderness so that water had to be brought forth miraculously from rock, but in the second exodus, water will be plentiful: “*For I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.*” (Isaiah 43:20-21)
- Perhaps, the biggest “new thing” however was that the servant God had chosen to defeat the Babylonians and lead God’s people home was a Gentile, a Persian—a complete outsider to the covenant people of God. In several places in Isaiah, this chosen leader is referred to by name: “*I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free.*” (Isaiah 45:13)

This last point brings out the most unprecedented aspect of what God was doing. You can almost hear God explaining his actions. His choice of a Gentile was that controversial. You can tell that God was not apologizing for his choice. God was doubling down on his selection. The former things had some kind of precedent, but the new thing God was doing had not been seen before. God was making a point. God can do the unprecedented.

Think of the former things, the course that had precedents, as the map that was somewhat familiar to God’s people. If we use this analogy, then the new thing God was doing, the new direction God was going in was uncharted territory.

Think of the Lewis and Clark expedition at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They set out to explore the West and find a navigable water way to the Pacific Ocean. They set out in canoes. They were tracing upriver to the find the headwaters—the source of the river—hoping to find a river on the other side of the mountains that would flow to the Pacific. When they got to the top of the mountains, they were surprised to find mountain tops spread out as far as the eye could see. Their maps at that point failed them. They had to go off-map. They were in uncharted territory. More than a map, they needed their guides.

### **God Promises to Guide Us**

The scripture lesson skips to the 17<sup>th</sup> verse. It helps us make a connection to the earlier point God made about declaring the former things and then declaring new things.

**17 Thus says the LORD,  
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:**

**I am the LORD your God,  
who teaches you how to succeed,  
who leads you in the way you should go.**

When life goes into uncharted territory, we need a guide. Compare a guide to a map. A map is a great thing to have, but the instruction a guide provides is much more personal than a map. A guide customizes the experience of leading for the one being led. You can talk to a guide and ask questions and the guide can talk back.

According to the scripture, God guided God's people in the most personal way. God was their Redeemer, Savior, and Restorer. God was the Holy One dedicated to Israel. God was the Lord and the God who belonged to them. God was their personal guide devoted to teaching them how to succeed and to leading them in the way they should go.

As New Testament believers, we can claim this scripture. God is *our* Redeemer, the Holy One dedicated to us. God is the Lord and *our* God. Who knows us better? God knows us better than we know ourselves, because no one sees us better than God. Our Guide teaches us how to succeed and leads us in the way we should go.

One of my favorite experiences of using a guide is while fly fishing on a trout stream in western North Carolina. A friend of mine hired a guide for the two of us one year, and it was an amazing experience. So, a couple of years later, I hired a guide to take me and my adult son on a fly fishing experience. We were taken to the Pigeon River.

This is what our guide did for us. He told us where to meet him, and then we followed him in our SUV. The navigation screen in my car showed me where we were going thanks to GPS. It showed me where we were going relative to the rivers and streams in the area. Looking at the map on the screen made me thankful I was following our guide and not relying on my very limited knowledge of the area.

The guide took us where we would have a good chance catching trout. His knowledge of fishing in the area is extensive. He knew where it would not be too crowded with other fishermen. It's not as if there were signs all along the way saying, "fish here." He took us down an unmarked trail to our fishing spot. He had brought the waders we would need to get into the stream. He brought the fly fishing rods we would use. His equipment was much better than anything I own and maintained in much better condition.

Then the guide taught my son how to fly fish. My son had never fly fished before. He was a beginner. The guide taught him how to use the equipment, and how the trout behave. He showed where the trout tend to hang out and how they point upstream.

He taught us how to "present" the fly so that the fishing line unfurls just so and the fly lands on the surface just so. He taught us how to trim the line so that there is not excess line, so that when a trout struck our fly, we would have a better chance of hooking the trout. He taught us how to strip the line to bring the trout in and net it with the nets he brought. He brought his cases of

many varieties of hand tied flies. The guide knew which ones the fish were biting based on the species of natural flies in the area and where they were in their cycle of hatching and growth.

When we had fished an area for a time, we walked in the river to the next place he took us. He knew all the places because he knew what was below the surface. He was constantly talking to us so that we were continually adjusting what we needed to do. In all this, we were learning an incredible amount. He was teaching us how to succeed in our fly fishing trip. There is nothing like being taught by an expert who also possesses the local knowledge of the area that is needed to succeed.

When I hired the guide, I was giving a gift to myself and my son. The gift was an experience we would share. The guide helped make the experience what it was. The experience was designed to create a memory my son and I would share.

My point is not to try to sell the joys of fly fishing or the benefits of using a guide. It is an analogy, obviously. What a fly fishing guide means for fly fishing, pales in comparison to the way God guides us in life. What God brings to the guidance of believers comes from God's infinite and intimate wisdom and knowledge. The question is, "How exactly does God guide us?"

### **Learning to Follow the Lead of our Guide**

I am 58 years old, and I gave my life to Christ just before I turned fourteen. God has been my guide for a long time, but if I am honest, I know I could be much more in tune with God's leading. I know this because I know people whose awareness of God's leading is much greater than mine. The degree to which we experience God as our guide has to do with the depth of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. (Right now, resolutions for the new year are forming in my mind, and I hope they will form for you.)

Going back to the language of using a map and following a guide, I know that in my life, the map and the guide work together. My study of scripture provides a map and my devotional life is how I engage the Lord as my Guide. Having said this, it is hard and not really advisable to draw a hard and fast line between the two. The map that scripture provides is God's map after all. God as our Guide is the One who has provided in scripture our map.

In my study of scripture, God through the Holy Spirit speaks to me. This is why I can come back again and again to the same scripture and it says something different to me. This is why scripture reading and prayer go hand in hand. This puts us in the best position to hear both the former things and the new things God wishes to speak to us.

Think of the praying we do before we read scripture, during the study of scripture, and after our study times in scripture. The more we spend time with God in prayer before we read scripture, the more in tune with God we will be. As we read scripture, we want God to invade our thoughts. We want to be aware of the "a-ha" moments when we gain a new insight. We want to recognize that in any new insights, there has been an intersection between the words of scripture and our

present lives. We also want to pray after each study time in scripture. What connections does God want to continue to make between the ancient wisdom found in scripture and our present lives?

Our ongoing prayer habits are what allow us to be in tune with our divine Guide when we travel into uncharted territory. Let's acknowledge that time spent in uncharted territory is often fraught with a certain amount of unease, restlessness, apprehension, and perhaps even agitation. In these times, God as our Guide is more than just a teacher. God is a companion, who is present with us, supporting us and loving us and comforting us and making us ready for the challenges before us.

We also know that God opens doors (and closes some too). God provides opportunities. The Holy Spirit prompts us. Sometimes what we call our intuition may be the Holy Spirit prompting us as we live our daily lives. The Holy Spirit also convinces and convicts. This kind of guidance is crucial in our daily living. We can trust the promptings of the Spirit best when there is a foundation in place based on a growing understanding of God's Word and an ongoing prayer life. Read Psalm 119 on a regular basis and you will discover how the saints of old trusted God and his Word as their guide.

**How do you recognize when God making be taking you *off-map*? How are you learning to follow God's leading? What have been for you the benefits of following God's leading in your life? How might you become more in tune with God as your Guide in the coming year?**

### **Prayer**

Covenant God, you raised up leaders and prophets to announce things before they came to pass to guide us. Help us to be open both to old insights and new movements of your Holy Spirit, that we may live life following your leading and to know you as our Guide, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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