

Exodus Sermon Series
I Will Be With You
Exodus 23:20-33

Israel is headed to Canaan, a land filled with terrifying giants, violent culture, and established nations, and violent culture. God has given Israel just laws and a celebratory calendar, but what difference will it make if they never make it? The Book of the Covenant begins by addressing their fear of God's presence (20:20), and now it concludes as the Lord assures them that He will be with them.

Personal Presence

Yahweh will send His angel to both keep them doing right and leading them to the place He has prepared (v20). If there was ever a place that looked unprepared for God's people, it was the Promise Land (cf. Num. 13:32-33). It's obvious that they will not succeed without God's presence and blessing, something that we must remember is true of every endeavor (Ps. 127:1-2). The word for "angel" is the same for "messenger" in the Old and New Testament, and can refer to people like John the Baptizer who is the messenger sent before Jesus (Mal. 3:1; Mk. 1:2-3). They must be attentive and obedient to his voice, and not provoke him because he will not pardon them; Yahweh's name is in him (v21). If He is referring to a human messenger, Joshua is a clear possibility. Yeshua is his Hebrew name, which is also Jesus' name. Joshua faithfully led the conquest. The voice and words of this messenger are God's, so if they listen and follow then God will be the enemy and adversary of their enemy and adversary (v22). Regardless of who this specific "angel" is, "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34:7; cf. 2 Kgs. 6:16-17). These specific nations would be cut off, and Israel must not bow down or serve their gods, or imitate their works; they have to throw down the idols and level the sacred pillars (vv23-24). God is initiating, teaching, and leading—He is present—and their response is to topple idols. Biblical faith always shows up in the public square, like Gideon tearing down the altar of Baal (Jdg. 6:12, 25ff.). For the faithful, conflict is inevitable, but God blesses the bread and water, health and fruitfulness: "I will fulfill the number of your days" (vv25-26). These are the contrasting parts of the Christian life. We must take up our crosses, confront idols, walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and there be blessed by God.

Being Scary

God sets expectations. He will send His fear before them and cause confusion among all the people, which results in shunning and/or retreat (v27). The fear and misunderstanding non-Christians have is a necessary part of the advance of the gospel. Many Christians have simply not counted the cost of following Jesus nor read the New Testament as if it's typical for what we should expect. Many false witnesses lied at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, and they couldn't even agree on what He said about destroying the temple in three days and raising it up again (Mk. 14:56-59). The apostles are falsely accused, attacked, beaten, and imprisoned repeatedly, but they go right back to the temple and town center to tear down idols (e.g. Acts 5:17-22, 28-33). The early Christians were slandered as

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cannibals, atheists, and traitors to Rome, none of which was true or reasonable. Christians today are called homophobic, racist, misogynist bigots, and these lies are all it takes for much of the church to be silent. “If we say this or teach what the Bible says about x, then they will call us y, and since y isn’t true, we’ll soften, nuance, rephrase, mumble or omit x altogether. Wouldn’t want to be unloving.” And worse, many Christians who aren’t willing to stand for the truth join the other side in opposing those who do. None of this is an excuse for speaking or acting unwisely or unkindly—just because you are accused of being a thief doesn’t mean you get to steal something. We do not want conflict for the sake of conflict (cf. Prov. 16:7). But we must recognize that a Christ-centered and gospel-driven church will be slandered by confused and fearful enemies. Give your brethren the benefit of the doubt and your prayers. God will send hornets before Israel to drive the nations out, but not right away lest the land be overrun by beasts (v29). Instead, progress will be gradual as Israel grows and fills the land (vv30-31).

No Compromise

The angel of the Lord is leading, so conquest will be accomplished, but Israel must not covenant with the pagans, their violent and oppressive way of life, nor their gods (v32). We’ve seen over and over God’s concern and tangible care for the foreigner and sojourner (e.g. 22:21; 23:9), so the issue is not nation or race, but idolatry and the injustice that comes from it: “They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you” (v33). The conclusion repeats the beginning: “No false gods.” If Israel confesses and forsakes sin, she’ll thrive. But if she forsakes God, it will be a snare. Jesus worshiped the Father alone, healed the sick and lame, cleansed the unclean, transformed the unjust, and silenced religious idolaters and hypocrites. He gave the great commission to the church to baptize and disciple all the nations, declaring the only way to salvation: “for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Our mission wasn’t completed in two years or two thousand. We have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son, who not only leads us, but personally indwells us. He is not driving the nations out, but bringing them to the Father until the world is full of His glory.