Unit 7, Session 4

The Promise of God’s Presence

Summary and Goal
In this session, we return to the Israelites still on the cusp of the promised land. We will listen in as God chooses Joshua to replace Moses as the one to lead them into the land. We will also see God’s faithfulness to provide warnings and reminders to the Israelites of what would happen if they abandoned Him and pursued the idols of the surrounding nations. Finally, we will look on as Moses instructed the people to take to heart the words God had given them, knowing that whether they obeyed or not would impact how they lived in the land.

Session Outline
1. Sinful rebellion remains despite faithful leadership (Deut. 31:14-18).
2. Sinful rebellion remains despite warnings and reminders (Deut. 31:19-22).
3. God’s presence remains with His people and He gives them words of life (Deut. 31:23; 32:44-47).

Session in a Sentence
God remains with His people and provides words of life even when we abandon Him.

Christ Connection
Despite the people’s ongoing sinful rebellion, God promised to be with them and provided them with words of life. Jesus is the Word of God who paid the penalty of our sin so that we might have life and relationship with God.

Missional Application
Because we are a forgiven people in whom God’s presence dwells, we proclaim the Word of God to others so that they too might have eternal life in Him.
READ: Relay the information regarding leadership transitions on page 38 in the Daily Discipleship Guide (DDG).

Transitioning into a new leadership position can be quite difficult. Whether replacing a company’s outgoing CEO, taking over as a new teacher midway through the year, or stepping in as a new coach for a successful team, the challenges can be numerous. Those who have experienced transitions like these—either as the transitioning leader or as a member of the team—can testify that new leadership can often be disruptive. It can shake the status quo and culture of an organization, for better or worse.

INTERACT: Ask groups of 3-4 to discuss the following questions in their DDG (p. 38).

What are some challenges you have faced when stepping into a new position of leadership or when following a new leader? How did you respond to these difficulties? What helped you navigate the transition? (be prepared to give some answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SUMMARIZE: In Deuteronomy 31, we return to the people of Israel about to experience a significant leadership change during a climactic time in their history: their entrance into the promised land. In this session, we will listen in as God chooses Joshua to replace Moses as the one to lead them into the land. We will also hear some of Moses’ last words regarding God’s faithfulness to provide warnings and reminders to the Israelites of what would happen if they abandoned Him and pursued the idols of the surrounding nations.

For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit www.GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: Sinful rebellion remains despite faithful leadership (Deut. 31:14-18).

SAY: While still in the wilderness, Moses had disobeyed God and failed to respect His holiness, so God told him that he would not be the one to lead the people into the promised land (Num. 20:1-13). Now at the age of 120 years old, Joshua would replace him as the leader of Israel.


14 The Lord said to Moses, “The time of your death is now approaching. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the tent of meeting so that I may commission him.” When Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting, 15 the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.

16 The Lord said to Moses, “You are about to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves with the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will abandon me and break the covenant I have made with them. 17 My anger will burn against them on that day; I will abandon them and hide my face from them so that they will become easy prey. Many troubles and afflictions will come to them. On that day they will say, ‘Haven’t these troubles come to us because our God is no longer with us?’ 18 I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods.

EXPLAIN: Reference the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 39) to emphasize that God’s presence with His people remained unchanged—God’s pillar of cloud remained with the people—even though they were experiencing the transition of their leader from Moses to Joshua. As time permits, show how the storyline of Scripture bears witness to the biblical motif that God desires to dwell among His people.

Rather than a power struggle, we see here a clean transition of leadership. Moses was instructed not only to hand over the title and role of “leader” but also to be part of commissioning his successor. God called Moses and Joshua to the tent of meeting, where God’s presence was manifested in the pillar of cloud. God’s leader was changing, but as the pillar of cloud shows, God’s presence with His people remained unchanged.

- In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were to live in God’s presence under God’s loving rule (Gen. 2).
- At Mount Sinai, God invited the people into His presence as a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5-6).
- With the construction of the ark and the tabernacle, God’s presence was manifested among the people in the pillar of cloud (Ex. 40:34).
- The biblical motif that God desires to dwell among His people continues throughout Scripture with the temple, the incarnation of Jesus, and the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God indwelled His people.
SAY: It is easy to overlook the powerful truth that God wants to dwell among us and be involved in our lives, but we would be wise not to. This fundamental Christian theme is radically different from the other religions of the world, in which people work their way to God; Christianity is about God coming down to dwell with us.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some transitions in life that Christians can weather well believing that God dwells with His people? (changes in leadership at church or work; changing jobs; moving to another city/state/country; transitions in family makeup/dynamics)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 39) and the leader content below to highlight the shock of God’s desire to be with His people even though He knew they were sinful and they would abandon Him for idols. Also point out that the people’s rebellion would result in God’s severe but purposeful discipline.

God’s desire to dwell with His people makes His prophetic warning about their prostitution in the promised land even more striking. He told Moses that the Israelites would eventually abandon Him for the false gods of the surrounding nations and break the covenant He had made with them. In response to their unfaithfulness, God would remain faithful to His word—He would hide His face from them, but only for a time and for the purpose of restoration (Deut. 28–30).

• God is omniscient, meaning He has perfect knowledge of all things past, present, and future. Where we know some things and can predict with limited success what will happen, God knows all things. As the One who brought this world, including time, into existence, God’s knowledge is complete. Thus, God knew exactly what would become of the Israelites once they settled into the promised land.

• God wouldn’t turn a blind eye to the sin and idolatry of the Israelites or merely sweep it under the rug. Ignoring sin is not an act of grace; providing a way to be forgiven of sin is at the heart of grace. For a time, God’s face would be hidden from them, and they would face the consequences of their idolatry. Through those consequences they would experience troubles and afflictions, but one day they would turn back to God with all of their heart and soul and be restored.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How should we respond to God’s warnings about the consequences for sin and idolatry? (we should resist all temptation and sin so we can glorify our faithful God; we should be faithful to Him because He is always faithful to us; we should recognize the guilt, shame, and consequences for our sin as God’s means to turn our hearts back to Him; we should pray we never grow complacent in our sin)
Point 2: Sinful rebellion remains despite warnings and reminders (Deut. 31:19-22).

INTERACT: Ask group members to share briefly a favorite song and why it is meaningful for them.

SAY: The medium of story, rhyme, or song is a powerful vehicle for communicating a message. An important message needs a powerful medium of delivery. Such was the case with God’s message to Moses and Joshua. Moses would record a song to be sung by generation after generation to serve as a warning and reminder of what would come about if and when the people abandoned God and turned to the idols that surrounded them.

READ Deuteronomy 31:19-22 (DDG p. 40).

19 Therefore write down this song for yourselves and teach it to the Israelites; have them sing it, so that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. 20 When I bring them into the land I swore to give their fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey, they will eat their fill and prosper. They will turn to other gods and worship them, despising me and breaking my covenant. 21 And when many troubles and afflictions come to them, this song will testify against them, because their descendants will not have forgotten it. For I know what they are prone to do, even before I bring them into the land I swore to give them.” 22 So Moses wrote down this song on that day and taught it to the Israelites.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 40) to explain the point of Moses’ song. Then connect the warning of this song with the warnings we need to heed regarding the threat of sin.

The lyrics of Moses’ song are laid out in Deuteronomy 32. It details the death and destruction of the Israelites as a result of their sin and unfaithfulness. With this song, God wanted the people to grasp how their sin would eventually lead to this outcome. God had rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, but they were still enslaved to their sin. Singing this song would remind the Israelites that God is holy, and a holy God cannot overlook sin and injustice, otherwise God would fail to be God.

- God’s reminder and warning to the Israelites overlaps with the reminders and warnings for us today. Sure, our context is different, but Scripture is crystal clear as to the spiritual downfall that will result if we turn to the various and pervasive idols of our modern day. Like the Israelites, we too will suffer calamity to our own souls if we allow the idols of our hearts to reign supreme and unchecked. The same graciousness that God displayed to the Israelites in giving them a faithful reminder is the same graciousness that He gives us today in the complete revelation of Scripture.
FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 40).

Enslaved to Sin: Human beings are enslaved to sin, continually living with the propensity to transgress God’s commandments whenever possible. It isn’t until one experiences salvation through the work of Christ that he or she is able to overcome sin’s enslavement through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Essential Doctrine “Enslaved to Sin”: Because of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, all of humanity has inherited a sin nature that inclines them toward sin and rebellion. Human beings are enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17), continually living with the propensity to transgress God’s commandments whenever possible. It isn’t until one experiences salvation through the work of Christ that he or she is able to overcome sin’s enslavement through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:2).

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 40) to show that though the Israelites would fall into sinful rebellion against God, God would remain faithful to His promises and purify them.

Even though God’s people would abandon Him, He would not abandon them forever. God would not give up on His promise to bless the nations through Israel. According to Moses’ song, when the people finally found themselves in a position of judgment and unable to find deliverance through their powerless pagan gods (vv. 15-38), God would be there, holy and faithful, to purify His people and His land (vv. 39-43). No one will ever be able to claim that God abandoned His promises.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What does God’s faithfulness to the Israelites in their sinful rebellion say about His love for the nations today? (God is patient, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance; God’s heart to redeem the Israelites bears witness to His heart for the nations to be numbered among His people; no one, regardless of their history or heritage, is beyond the saving power of God)
Point 3: God’s presence remains with His people and He gives them words of life (Deut. 31:23; 32:44-47).


23 The LORD commissioned Joshua son of Nun, “Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I swore to them, and I will be with you.”

32:44 Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and recited all the words of this song in the presence of the people. 45 After Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, 46 he said to them, “Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to follow all the words of this law carefully. 47 For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

EXPLAIN: Reference the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 41) as you put God’s words through Moses in their larger context. Being on this side of history, we know God’s discipline would lead to an exile from the promised land, and God’s promises to purify and restore the people would bring them back. But until that time, the word of God continued to function as a warning to each successive generation.

God used Joshua to lead the people into their inheritance, and the people were blessed. But each generation had to renew its own commitment to the covenant and pass God’s commands on to the next generation, and most failed to.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to consider their own faith in Jesus using the scale in their DDG (p. 41), whether they have no faith, a borrowed faith, or they own their faith and it is personal and meaningful to them.

How would you describe your faith in Jesus on this scale?

No Faith    Borrowed    Owned

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 41) to note the life and death implications of God’s Word.

Moses implored the people to “take to heart” his words from God because they are “your life.” If the people or their children ignored them, death would come, but long life to those who honored them. Similarly, how we respond to Jesus has life and death implications for eternity.
Commentary: Moses described God’s words as leading to life, pointing us back to Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He quoted this verse to the devil (Matt. 4:4), showing us what it looks like to live by the Word of God. Jesus succeeded where Israel failed. Satan tried his usual tactics of elevating human desires and twisting God’s words to inflict doubt about what God had said, but Jesus stood resolute and unshaken in His confidence in the word of the Lord. Israel, on the other hand, would give in to temptation and disregard the warnings found in God’s word through Moses. They would fail to live by the word of God and instead live by their own fears and desires and suffer the consequences.

SAY: God’s warning signs and reminders are for our good. When He implores us to take His Word seriously so we enjoy life in this land, it is a mercy so we don’t reap the consequences of our sin. But His Word also gives us reminders of the gospel for sinners, of the grace and forgiveness extended to all who look to Jesus for eternal life.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 41).

God Is Merciful: Mercy refers to God’s compassions and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin.

Essential Doctrine “God Is Merciful”: Mercy refers to God’s compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God’s mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.

INTERACT: Point group members to the “Voices from Church History” quote in the DDG (p. 41), but read the expanded quote from the Leader Guide. Then ask group members the following question.

Voices from Church History

“The amazing thing is that everyone who reads the Bible has the same joyful thing to say about it. In every land, in every language, it is the same tale: Where that Book is read, not with the eyes only, but with the mind and heart, the life is changed. Sorrowful people are comforted, sinful people are transformed, people who were in the dark walk in the light. Is it not wonderful to think that this Book, which is such a mighty power if it gets a chance to work in an honest heart, is in our hands today?”

–Amy Carmichael (1867-1951)

What are some ways we can take God’s Word to heart in order to own our faith in Jesus and live by it? (we should expose ourselves to more of God’s Word through preaching, group Bible study, personal Bible study, and Bible memorization; we can pray God’s Word in faith that God will accomplish His Word; we can find encouragement and accountability in other Christians to live by faith)
EXPLAIN: God provides faithful warnings and reminders for us in Scripture, testifying not only to His merciful character but also to His desire to see us choose what is right, given the life and death consequences that follow. We dare not take God’s warnings and reminders lightly, respond to them casually, or consider them optional. His word is what brought the universe into being, His word is what upholds all things, and His word is what became manifest in the person of Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life.”

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 42), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we are a forgiven people in whom God’s presence dwells, we proclaim the Word of God to others so that they too might have eternal life in Him.

• How will you show love and adoration for the Word of God, Jesus Christ?
• What are some ways your group can encourage one another in the spiritual discipline of spending quality time in God’s Word?
• How has God’s faithful warnings and reminders in Scripture benefited you personally? How can you use those past moments of growth when sharing the gospel with an unbeliever?

PACK ITEM 5: HYMN HANDOUT: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together.

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are merciful, patient, and faithful to Your promises despite Your people’s sin and rebellion throughout history. Thank You for Your enduring promises to restore Your people that ultimately come to fulfillment through the saving work of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to hold fast to Your Word as we proclaim the gospel to the rebellious world around us. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 43-45), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 46) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 43-45) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 46) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 43-45) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

• Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.

• Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 5 as a part of point 3 in the session: As Christians, we get to play a part in God’s story of redemption, something far beyond ourselves.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

• Day 2: “We should never become so satisfied with God’s provisions that we lose our way and forget our greatest need: Him.”

• Day 4: “Of course, while wanting to be a blessing to people is good and noble, what you believe will bless them the most is even more important.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 46) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

• Encourage group members to share specific promises that God has made to His people in Scripture when they pray for and with one another.

• See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Point 1: Sinful rebellion remains despite faithful leadership (Deut. 31:14-18).

“The marriage/prostitute metaphor describes the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel (Ezek. 16:8; 23:36-39; Hos. 2:2-13). The worst sin Israel could commit against him was to acknowledge and worship the foreign gods of the pagan nations. Such behavior was a violation of the marriage vows enshrined in the covenant text (27:11-26; Ex. 19:8).”

“...soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land... They would begin to violate the covenant almost before the ink was dry upon it. Because Israel would forsake him, Yahweh would also forsake them... Their defection would bring disasters and difficulties into their lives. These problems would be designed to awaken the people and cause them to wonder if their trials were connected with God’s displeasure. The recognition of the connection between pains and prior behavior would be the first step on the road to repentance. God’s tribulations are remedial rather than punitive.”

The three expressions Yahweh uses to describe his response to Israel’s apostasy reflect the intensity of his rage (v. 17a). While Moses had spoken earlier of Yahweh’s anger and his abandonment of his people, the idiom ‘to hide the face’ occurs here for the first time. The expression signifies the withdrawal of favor. In ancient courtly contexts, for a king to turn his face from a subject signaled disaster, though the idiom was often applied to gods as well.”

Point 2: Sinful rebellion remains despite warnings and reminders (Deut. 31:19-22).

“People may forget sermons, but they often remember songs. So Moses is commanded to write down the words of a song for the people to sing (31:19). As the Israelites become established in the land, they will continue to sing this song, sometimes without thinking about the words, as many do with hymns and worship songs today. But the words of this song will be a witness... against them. They cannot deny that they know the truth they have been singing about. They cannot deny that God warned them of the terrible consequences of turning away from him (31:20-22). This song demonstrates the value of using music to get Christian teaching into the cultural mainstream of our nations. For example, people sing carols about the birth of Jesus and his salvation at Christmas time without paying much attention to the words. But one day those songs could become the means of leading them to the truth of God.”
“The need for a song of witness (v. 19) is apparent. The question is not whether Israel would sin but when and what should be done about their sinful behavior. Sadly, Israel’s future behavior mirrored that of her past. The song of witness was forever a nagging reminder of her lack of gratitude to God. The song is found in 32:1-43.”

**Point 3:** God’s presence remains with His people and He gives them words of life (Deut. 31:23; 32:44-47).

“Then God turns to Joshua. His commission is brief and does not look to the distant future but to the immediate situation. It repeats the call for courage and determination and assures him that God will be with him in the days that lie ahead (31:23). This is a promise that God has given to many of his servants over the centuries. The fact that the instruction to Moses to write the song and the song itself are separated by the words of Joshua’s commissioning in 31:23 may be deliberate. The song warns Israel of the dangers of disloyalty. In the time that follows, they are to be loyal to Joshua and to God.”

“The intervening warning about covenant failure and the instruction to compose a song of witness having been concluded, the Lord returned to the matter of Joshua’s commissioning (v. 23). At the beginning of the pericope, however, he had addressed Moses concerning Joshua (v. 14). Now he addressed Joshua himself, commanding him to ‘be strong and courageous.’ The command here is the same as the one Moses had urged upon his younger colleague already (v. 7) and the same as Joshua would hear from the Lord following Moses’ death when he alone would be called upon to wear the mantle of theocratic administrator (Josh. 1:6-7).”

“These verses return to prose narrative, with verse 44 providing a frame for 31:30. The speaker of the song is strictly Moses, but Joshua is introduced in order to point to the song’s intended use in Israel’s future … The song is not only included in all these words of verse 45, but is linked to all the words of *this law* (tôrâ) in verse 46. And these words must be *taken to heart* and passed on to future generations, emphasizing again the instructional intent of Deuteronomy (4:9; 6:7,20-25; 11:19; 31:9-13). Finally, Moses points out that *this law* (tôrâ) is *not just idle words* (dābâr). *They are your life, and by this word (dābâr) you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess* (v. 47; cf. 30:15-20).”

References

In these sessions of *The Gospel Project*, we experience some of the most exciting narratives in Scripture. There are accounts here of sin and judgment, of moral decline and merciful intervention, and of rescuers who need rescue. Through it all, one thing is clear: God is with His people and He is faithful to His promise.

It’s important to keep that central theme in mind because many people read these stories about the conquest of the land and try to find examples for emulation. To be clear, we can learn a lot from these Old Testament heroes (see 1 Cor. 10), but we cannot implement their virtues apart from our connection to the Vine—Jesus Christ Himself, the One who bears fruit in us and through us.

As we walk through our present wilderness, struggling against sin and encountering sorrow, we know that the God who has gone before us is faithful. He is the One who prepares the way for us to be His ambassadors. He is the One who breaks the chains of our idolatry and lifts our gaze to His unchanging glory.