

# The Road to Christmas

## The Journey Begins



### What is “Christmas?”

*Christmas* is usually defined as “a holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ” (*Webster’s New World Basic Dictionary*).<sup>1</sup> Over the years, Christmas has become more commercialized and secular, so that many people don’t really think about Jesus during Christmas. In this Bible study series, the word *Christmas* will designate “the birth of Jesus Christ, and its significance.”

### A Road Desperately Needed

The Bible begins with creation. God created the physical universe and its life forms, including the first human beings (*Genesis 1*). His creation was “very good” (*1:31*). There was a harmony of relationships. However, man rebelled against God’s authority, and the harmony was broken (*3:1-24*). Humankind became lost in a world of sin, shame, suffering, and death. A road out was desperately needed. God had a plan to restore his creation, and that plan emerges in *Genesis 12*, which records God’s call and promise to Abram (Abraham). Our journey begins with Abraham.

### The Call to Journey

📖 “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household 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 you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’” (*Genesis 12:1-3, NIV*).<sup>2</sup>



The essential elements of God’s promise to Abraham are:

- ☑ Offspring (seed), many descendants (*12:2; 13:6; 22:17*).
- ☑ Land, including the land of Canaan (*12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7-8, 18; 17:8*).
- ☑ Blessing to Abraham (*12:2; 22:17; 26:3; 28:3*) and blessing to all peoples (or nations) of the earth through Abraham’s offspring (*12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14*).

### Held Up in Egypt

Abraham went to the land of Canaan and lived there for many years (*Genesis 13-15*). His son Isaac and grandson Jacob (also called Israel)<sup>3</sup> also lived there. Would Abraham and his family become a “great nation” there? Not yet. Because of a severe famine,<sup>4</sup> Israel’s whole family would eventually have to move to Egypt.


<sup>1</sup> The word ‘Christmas’ comes from the early English phrase ‘Christes Masse,’ meaning ‘Christ’s mass.’ ‘Mass’ is the name of the Roman Catholic Church’s worship service

<sup>2</sup> This promise is repeated (in some form) on at least four other occasions (*Genesis 13:14-17; 15:4-5, 18-21; 17:2-8, 15-16; 18:18-19; 22:17-18*). The promise is also repeated to Abraham’s son Isaac (*Genesis 26:4-5*) and grandson Jacob (*Genesis 28:13-15; 35:11-12*).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob fled to Haran (*Genesis 27:41-43; 28:10*) and lived there several years. Eventually, Jacob returned to Canaan (*Genesis 31:3; 35:27*). On the way back, Jacob ‘struggled with God’ and was renamed ‘Israel’ (*32:22-30*).

<sup>4</sup> ‘famine’ – widespread lack of food. The story leading up to this move is one of the great stories of the Bible, wonderfully demonstrating the providence of God. Read *Genesis 37-50*, or ask Jay for a 2-page synopsis.

### What about the promise?

 As Israel and his family traveled to Egypt, God spoke to him in a vision... ‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said, ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again’ (*Genesis 46:1-4a, NIV*).

### Rescue from Egypt


After Israel’s family moved to Egypt, they were blessed with good land and many children (*Genesis 47:27*). They became great in number (*Exodus 1:6-7; 12:37*). However, The king (pharaoh) of Egypt feared their potential, and began to oppress them with forced (slave) labor (*1:8-14*). The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out for help from God (*2:23*).

### What about the promise?

“God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant (agreement) with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” (*2:24, NIV*). God chose an Israelite, named Moses, to deliver (set free) the Israelites (*3:1-10*). Through a series of miracles, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt (*7:14-15:21*).<sup>5</sup>




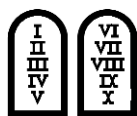
When God had made his promise to Abraham (over 600 years earlier), he had said...

 “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions” (*Genesis 15:13-14, NIV*).

### New Directions for the Road Ahead

After rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, God led them to Sinai, and He made a covenant<sup>6</sup> with them, and gave them detailed directions.

 God said, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (*Exodus 19:5-6*).<sup>7</sup>



God gave them “the Law” – specific commandments, regulations, and ritual prescriptions, which would be Israel’s “constitution” as they settled in the “promised land”. After eleven months in the region of Sinai, the Israelites set out for the land of Canaan (*Numbers 10:11-12*).

<sup>5</sup> The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (the ‘exodus’) is foundational in the history of Israel. Its significance is both historic and symbolic. Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt symbolizes the Christian’s deliverance from slavery to sin and death. The ‘Passover sacrifice’ (*Exodus 12:24-27*) symbolizes Jesus Christ – the ‘lamb of God’ (*John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:18-19*) and ‘our Passover lamb’ (*1 Corinthians 5:7*).

<sup>6</sup> ‘covenant’ – an agreement between two parties that establishes a relationship and in which obligations or mutual responsibilities may be enacted. Some Bible covenants provide only divine promises while others entail obligations.

<sup>7</sup> ‘kingdom of priests’ – representatives of God and mediators of God’s grace to the nations. ‘holy nation’ – set apart for a special purpose. In the New Testament, these terms are ascribed to Christians (*1 Peter 2:9*).

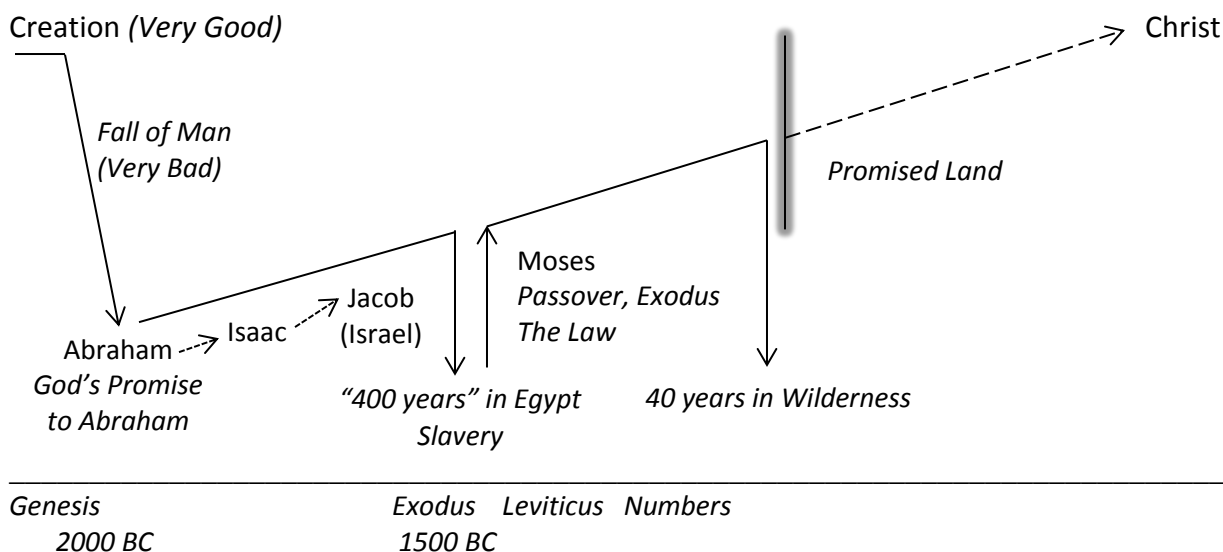
## Turning Back

When the Israelites arrived at the edge of the promised land, the LORD told Moses to send some men to explore the land. So they went up and explored the land (*Numbers 13:1-2, 21*). After returning, “they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, ‘The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size’” (*13:32*).



“That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron...” (*14:1-2b*). “And they said to each other, ‘We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt’” (*14:4*). “The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me..?’” (*14:11*). Because of their unbelief, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness. God said that not one of them (20 years old or more, except Caleb and Joshua) would ever see the promised land (*14:23, 29-30*).

*What about the promise? To be continued in Lesson 2.*



## Our Own Journey

Referring to Israel’s wilderness experience, the apostle Paul wrote, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination (end, fulfillment) of the ages has come” (*1 Corinthians 10:11, NIV*).<sup>8</sup>

1. God promised the land to the Israelites, yet an entire generation did not see the promise fulfilled. What does this teach us about God’s promises?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Paul specifically mentions Israel’s idolatry, sexual immorality, testing the Lord, and grumbling (*10:7-10*; cp. *Exodus 32:1-6*; *Numbers 25:1-9*), but his statement can be applied to Israel’s example of unfaithfulness in general.

<sup>9</sup> God is faithful. He will fulfill His promises. But people may choose to be unfaithful, and forfeit the benefits of God’s promises. God promised Israel blessing in the promised land, but Israel was unbelieving and disobedient, so that generation did not enter into the blessing.

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is one of the New Testament passages that apply Israel's wilderness experience to us today.<sup>10</sup> Consider the following excerpts:

📖 “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ... And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest<sup>11</sup> if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief” (*Hebrews 3:16, 18-19, NIV*).

📖 “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest” (*4:1-3a*).

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, the Christian is between promise and fulfillment (in the ultimate sense). Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have been delivered from slavery,<sup>12</sup> but we have not reached our final destination (“God’s rest” in its fullness).

2. How do we enter “God’s rest”? As Christians, how can we experience more of “God’s rest” in our journey through this life?<sup>13</sup> In what ways can the Israelites’ bad example be applied to our lives?<sup>14</sup>

### *Reflection/Application*

- Are you “wandering in the wilderness” because of unbelief, doubt, fear, or disobedience to God? Do you have the hope of entering the ultimate “promised land” (heaven, God’s rest in its fullness)? Are you truly trusting and obeying God? Are you experiencing “God’s rest?”
- Perhaps you are still “enslaved in Egypt.” You cannot enter the “promised land” until you’ve been set free from “Egypt”! The Bible says only Jesus (*the* Passover lamb) can set you free.
- The Israelites “turned back” when the road ahead looked difficult. They failed to obey God’s instructions and trust in his promises. Is there something in your life that you know God wants you to do, but you have not proceeded because of fear, or lack of faith. Humble yourself before the Lord, seek His help, and “make every effort to enter [God’s] rest.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 3:7-4:11 quotes and applies Psalm 95:7c-11 to the Christian life. The passage also pulls in Genesis 2:2 (in Hebrews 4:4) to further explain the meaning of ‘God’s rest.’

<sup>11</sup> The term ‘rest’ in the Old Testament refers to the peace and well-being that Israel would experience in the promised land (Deuteronomy 3:20; 12:9; Joshua 1:13, 15; 21:44). However, the New Testament makes it clear that the temporary, earthly rest experienced in Canaan was not the ultimate (greatest and final) rest, but pointed to a rest that is heavenly and eternal (Heb. 4:1, 8-10). This rest is ‘God’s rest’ (Psa. 95:11; Gen. 2:2; Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:1, 3-5).

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>13</sup> Some say the ‘rest’ in Hebrews 3-4 is only a future realization. Others say it is primarily (or ultimately) future but has a present aspect. I tend to agree with the second view. Even if the ‘rest’ is only a future realization, the following principles are still true: The Christian enters into God’s new covenant blessing when he/she receives Christ and becomes a ‘new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). While God’s blessing will not be *fully* realized until the end of our present lives (when we enter the ultimate ‘promised land’), his blessing is also a present reality in Christ (e.g., His presence and power in the indwelling Holy Spirit, love, peace, joy, hope, security, purpose, etc.).

<sup>14</sup> Those who follow their example of unbelief, rebellion and disobedience will not enter ‘God’s rest’ (heaven). Those who *have* believed are called to persevere in the faith, so that they will receive what God has promised (Heb. 10:32-36). This passage also instructs our daily Christian lives. The more we doubt and disobey, the more we will experience restless wandering in the wilderness. The more we truly trust and obey, the more we will experience the blessings of God, including His peace, comfort in hope, and the abundant life available in Jesus Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 4:11. We enter ‘God’s rest’ by His grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). However, in our Christian journey, we still have the responsibility to trust and obey (Philippians 2:12-13).