PROMISED LAND

Living for God Where Culture Is Influenced
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
Israel: placed at the crossroads to accomplish God’s plan

The message of standing stones
**Session One: Standing at the Crossroads**

**DVD Discussion (6 minutes)**

1. What was unique about Israel's location in the ancient world, and what made Tel Gezer particularly significant?

2. As inhabitants of the land of Israel, how much potential did God's chosen people have to demonstrate God's plan of salvation to their region and even the whole world? What did God require the Israelites to do in order to fulfill his plan, and what did they do that diminished their effectiveness?

3. In the cities of the ancient world, what purposes and activities were associated with city gates?
THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER
Even though the Israelites seldom inhabited Gezer, and thus allowed the Canaanites to wield much greater influence on the world’s culture than they otherwise would have, the Canaanites living there did not have an easy life. In fact, the people of Gezer had a rough life. Consider:

• When Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan, Horam — the king of Gezer — attacked them, but Horam and his troops were all killed (Joshua 10:33).
• The tribe of Ephraim allowed the Canaanites to continue living in Gezer, but used them as forced labor (Joshua 16:10).
• Pharaoh, king of Egypt, attacked and captured Gezer and then set it on fire. He killed its Canaanite inhabitants and gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon’s wife (1 Kings 9:16).
• During King David’s reign, the Israelites battled the Philistines at Gezer (1 Chronicles 20:4). Years later, Solomon rebuilt Gezer’s walls (including its huge, six-chambered gate) using forced laborers (1 Kings 9:15 – 17).

Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion
(17 minutes)

God Chooses a People and a Place to Carry Out His Plan

For generations, God had prepared the Hebrews to be bis people, to conquer the land of the Canaanites and make it the land of Israel, the nation of his chosen people. God clearly had designated a strategic region at the heart of the ancient world to be the land of Israel — a land with fertile soil and key trade routes — but why? Why did God choose these people and this particular place? What did he want his people to accomplish in the land he gave to them? Although these may seem like rhetorical questions to us, the Scriptures give us great insight into God’s intentions.

a. Who did God choose to be the founder of Israel, and why did he choose this person?

b. What promise did God make concerning the nation of Israel?

c. What was God’s purpose in establishing a nation for himself?

2. How did God intend for the world to know who he was? (See Isaiah 43:1, 10–13.)

In what ways could God’s placement of his people in the land of Israel—at the crossroads of the ancient world—help accomplish this?

3. What commitments did God make to his people before they entered Canaan? (See Exodus 6:6–8; 23:27–31; 34:10–11.)

Why would these promises have been meaningful to God’s chosen people as they went into Canaan?

Why were these promises an important part of God’s plan?
4. What do you think are the main reasons the Israelites failed to influence their culture and the world to the extent God intended?

5. Describe how you think God wants Christians today to live for him and use our position to exert influence in key areas of our culture so that “all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God” (1 Kings 8:60).

To what extent are the same reasons that limited the influence of the Israelites also limiting the influence of Christians today?
Faith Lesson (5 minutes)

God wants his people to greatly influence the culture of the world. That is why he placed his chosen people in the land of Israel and wanted them to occupy influential cities such as Gezer, where millions of people yearly passed through on the Via Maris. That is why Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth…. You are the light of the world…. let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13 – 16). And God still wants his followers today — you and me — to actively participate in and influence culture. He wants us to live so publicly that we “flavor” the culture of our world.

1. In what ways do you think God has placed you at an important “crossroads” in your world? And what are the specific arenas of life from which God wants you to show that he is the Lord God?

2. What do you do to publicly exert godly influence within your sphere of influence?

3. How does God’s call for you to exhibit him in all that you do, think, and say affect what you do every day? In what ways does this call need to play a more prominent role in your life?
Closing (1 minute)

Read 1 Peter 2:9, 12 aloud: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. . . . Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Then pray, asking God to use this session and the coming ones to give you a greater desire to love him and live for him with all your heart, soul, and strength. Ask him to increase your passion and commitment to influence your culture so that others will know that he is God.

Memorize

*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

*1 Peter 2:12*
Making God Known to the World

In-Depth Personal Study Sessions

Day One  Living in Obedience to God’s Plan

The Very Words of God

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse — the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.

Deuteronomy 11:26–28

DID YOU KNOW?
The land God selected for his people was not like Mesopotamia or Egypt, where annual flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia) and the Nile (Egypt) all but guaranteed fertile soil and adequate irrigation. Instead, God chose for his people a land where they would have to depend on rainfall, sent by God, for the survival of their crops and the feeding of their families. (See Deuteronomy 11:8–21.)

God promised blessing or judgment on the land dependent on the obedience of his people. If they obeyed, he would bless them by sending rain and abundant harvest. If they disobeyed, he would allow them to experience hardship by withholding the rain or allowing their enemies to harm them.
Bible Discovery

*Obeying God Is Part of the Plan*

God placed his people exactly where he wanted them to live and show the world the greatness of the God of Israel. Although God planned to bless his people in ways that would amaze the world, his people had to depend on him to provide for their needs and to obey him in all things. Their obedience was required for God’s blessing to be fulfilled.

1. In what way(s) did God say the Promised Land would differ from the land of Egypt? (See Deuteronomy 11:8 – 12.)

2. What kind of life did God promise the Israelites if they faithfully obeyed his commands? And what consequences did he promise if they chose to disobey and worship other gods? (See Deuteronomy 11:13 – 17, 22 – 25.)

3. How do we know that obedience to the Word and commands of God was of utmost importance, and how were the Israelites to keep God’s Word? (See Deuteronomy 11:18 – 21.)
4. What do we know about the choices the Israelites made once they entered Canaan that altered God’s plan for them? (See Joshua 13:13; 16:10; Judges 1:27 – 36.)

5. What were some of the consequences of Israel’s failure to obey God? (See Judges 2:11 – 13, 19; 10:6 – 7; 1 Kings 14:22 – 24; 2 Kings 17:14 – 17; 21:9.)

Reflection

Take a few minutes to read Solomon’s words to Israel following his prayers of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:56 – 61) and consider how important the obedience of God’s people is in fulfilling his plan of redemption for the world.

Why is it necessary for us, just as it was for the ancient Israelites, to demonstrate our trust in God through obedience?

What are some of the ways that we, living in a prosperous culture where self-sufficiency is the norm, need to obey God and depend on him?
What might be the consequences — to us and to our testimony to the world — when we fail to be the witnesses God has called us to be and don’t develop an awareness of our dependence on God or choose not to obey his Word?

Day Two Motivated to Stand at the Crossroads

The Very Words of God

“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied... Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.”

1 Samuel 17:45 – 46

Bible Discovery

Trusting God at the Crossroads

As a whole, the nation of Israel failed to live in obedience to God and, therefore, failed to display his greatness to the watching world. However, the Scriptures provide some remarkable examples of those who did recognize that they were standing “at the crossroads” and had a role to play in making the God of Israel known to the world.

1. Read 1 Samuel 17:1 – 11, 25 – 33, 36 – 37, 45 – 47.

   a. Who was the Philistine, Goliath, really challenging when he shouted against the armies of Israel? What was at stake? (See verses 8 – 10, 26.)
b. What kinds of obstacles did David face as he sought to fulfill his role in making the God of Israel known to the world? (See verses 4–7, 28, 33.)

c. Who did David recognize held the key to victory? (See verses 45–47.) Contrast his attitude and actions to those of the Israelite soldiers, to whom God had promised and demonstrated his power again and again.

2. Years after he killed Goliath, when David was the new king of Israel, he faced another challenge from the Philistines. What was at stake this time, and what happened as a result of David's trust and obedience to God's commands? (See 1 Chronicles 14:8–17.)

3. Joshua, Elijah, and Hezekiah also faced challenges in the crossroads of life and chose to obey God in order to make him known. Read their stories and answer the related questions on page 26.
What motivated his actions?  What risks did he face?  What resulted?

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<td>Joshua</td>
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<td>Elijah</td>
<td>(1 Kings 18:21–24, 36–40)</td>
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<td>Hezekiah</td>
<td>(2 Kings 19:9–19)</td>
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**Reflection**

Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who protected the spies of Israel, told them, “We have heard how the **Lord** dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the **Lord** your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2:10–11).

In what ways do her words speak to you about the effectiveness of God’s plan when his people stand at the crossroads and obey what he has called them to do?
In what ways do you think your position as a Christian in today’s world is like Israel’s position in the ancient world? How does your view affect your actions in daily life?

Think about when you have faced a difficult decision or challenge at a key crossroads in your life. In what ways did your response reveal God’s greatness to the people of your world? In what ways did you fail to display God’s greatness?

In a psalm recorded in 1 Chronicles 16:8 – 36, David expressed his commitment to honoring and trusting God so that the surrounding nations would see what God had done. How do you want the people who come after you to know the ways in which your life displayed God’s greatness to your world? Take some time now to write your own psalm about your commitment to make God known in your world. Offer that psalm as a testimony to others and a prayer of thanksgiving to God for his great faithfulness, supreme majesty, and matchless glory.
Day Three | God Is Faithful to Carry Out His Plan

The Very Words of God

*The plans of the Lord stand firm forever; the purposes of his heart through all generations.*

Psalm 33:11

**Bible Discovery**

**God Is Sovereign**

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, teaches that God is “sovereign” — in absolute control of all things. He has the power and patience to carry out through human history everything he has planned and promised to do. Many times in history, God has demonstrated his power and faithfulness in fulfilling his plan of redemption by saving his chosen people from what appears to be certain destruction.

**GOD IS FAITHFUL TO BRING ABOUT HIS PLAN OF REDEMPTION***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>1875 BC</td>
<td>God establishes his covenant with Abraham</td>
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<td>1670 BC</td>
<td>The sojourn to Egypt</td>
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<td>1450 BC</td>
<td>Deliverance from Egypt to the Promised Land</td>
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<td>David establishes peace; Solomon builds God’s temple</td>
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<td>900 BC</td>
<td>Kingdom divides</td>
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<td>Assyria destroys the Northern Kingdom (Israel)</td>
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<td>586 BC</td>
<td>Fall of Jerusalem and exile of Judah to Babylon</td>
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<td>500 BC</td>
<td>Return of the remnant to Jerusalem</td>
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<td>AD 29</td>
<td>Death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah</td>
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<td>The second coming of Jesus</td>
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* Most dates are approximate; exact dates unknown.
1. When a severe famine threatened the survival of Jacob’s family—whose sons were to be the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel—how did God save them? (See Genesis 41:25 – 32, 53 – 57; 42:1 – 5; 45:16 – 18; 46:5 – 7.)

What role did standing at the crossroads and influencing the culture play in this story?

What role did obedience to God play in this story?

2. What plot did Haman plan for the Jews, and how did God use Esther—the Jewish queen of the king of Persia—to save his people? (See Esther 2:8 – 10, 15 – 18; 3:1 – 6, 13 – 15; 4:1, 5 – 17; 5:1 – 8; 7:1 – 10.)

What role did standing at the crossroads and influencing the culture play in this story?
What role did obedience to God play in this story?

3. At times, God’s plans seem doomed to failure. One such instance occurred during King Hezekiah’s reign when King Sennacherib of Assyria threatened to destroy Jerusalem. Read Isaiah 37:15 – 22, 26, 32 – 36. In light of God’s plan to make himself known to the world, which significant truths are revealed in the following verses?

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Reflection

Galatians 4:4 – 5 reveals a key truth about God’s plan of redemption: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

No matter how long it takes, no matter how great the challenges, God is faithful to bring about his salvation. But what about your faithfulness?

To what extent are you engaged at the crossroads and living to influence your culture for God?

To what extent have you abandoned your influence in certain aspects of culture?

What risks are you willing to take to trust God and sacrificially obey him so that his greatness will be revealed to a watching world?

What will be the consequences if you withdraw, isolate yourself, or ignore what God intends to accomplish at the crossroads of culture?
Memorize

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the Law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

Galatians 4:4–5

Day Four | City Gates

The Very Words of God

Dressed in their royal robes, the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting on their thrones at the threshing floor by the entrance of the gate of Samaria, with all the prophets prophesying before them.

1 Kings 22:10

DID YOU KNOW?

SOLOMON’S GATE AT GEZER

During biblical times, city gates:

• Protected the entrance of the city from enemies.
• Functioned as the center of city life — like a city hall or courthouse today. In various chambers inside the gatehouse, people paid their taxes, set-
tled legal matters, and even met with the king. Soldiers were stationed there too.

- Provided a gathering place for prophets, kings, priests, judges, and other city leaders. For example, Jehoshaphat (king of Judah) and Ahab (king of Israel) sat on their thrones in the gate of Samaria (1 Kings 22:10).
- Created a natural place for merchants and vendors to conduct business because of the people coming and going through the gate.

**Bible Discovery**

*To “Sit at the Gate”*

The most significant remains of ancient cities found today are often the gateways. During biblical times, the city gate not only protected the city but also functioned as the administrative center or “city hall” and community center. Rulers, judges, and other officials “sat in the gate” to conduct the business of the city, and merchants gathered at the city gate to sell their goods.

What do the following Scripture passages reveal about the people and their function in relationship to the city gates?

Genesis 13:10–13; 18:20–21; 19:1–6, 9

Deuteronomy 21:18–21

Ruth 4:1–11
LESSONS ON THE PROMISED LAND

1 Samuel 4:10 – 18

2 Samuel 18:1 – 5; 19:1 – 8

Esther 2:5 – 8, 19 – 23

Reflection

Consider what the equivalent of the ancient city gates are in your world, and list the culture-influencing activities that take place there. To what extent are you involved in the activities of your “city gates”? In what ways might God want you to more actively participate in what takes place there and thereby have a greater influence on the culture of your world?

Begin praying about how God may want you to live for him and show his greatness in the city gates of your world.
THE ROLE OF THE EASTERN GATE IN THE LIFE OF THE MESSIAH

The Bible pictures the Messiah entering the temple through the Eastern (or Beautiful) Gate. Islamic leaders have taken this image so seriously that they have blocked the gate and built a cemetery in front of it in an attempt to prevent the Messiah (who would become ceremonially unclean if he touched anything connected with death) from entering the Temple Mount!

Not only will the Messiah enter the temple through the Eastern Gate, but tradition says that it will be the symbolic or literal location of the last judgment. Consider these Scriptures:

- **Joel 3:2, 12** — The last judgment will take place in the Jehoshaphat Valley, just east of Jerusalem.
- **Zechariah 14:1 – 11** — The power of God will establish Jerusalem as the heavenly city.
- **Isaiah 62:10; Revelation 21** — After the last judgment, the saved will enter the gate of the heavenly city. Since the setting is on the east side of Jerusalem, the gate will be the Beautiful or Eastern Gate.

Day Five | Standing Stones

The Very Words of God

*On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord.*

*Joshua 24:25 – 26*

Bible Discovery

**Becoming a Living, Standing Stone**

God’s work in the past — the distant past and our own — is the foundation on which our belief in God and commitment to him are built. Recognizing the importance of remembering what the one true God
had done for them, his chosen people erected standing stones as memorials to his supernatural acts on their behalf, as did the Canaan-ites to their own gods centuries before the Israelites arrived.

1. What is the difference between the standing stone mentioned in Genesis 28:16 – 19 and those described in 1 Kings 14:22 – 23?

2. What do Exodus 23:24, Leviticus 26:1, and Deuteronomy 16:21 – 22 say about the pagan use of standing stones?

3. For each of the following passages, summarize the story or event and note the work of God that the standing stones commemorate or represent:

   Genesis 35:1 – 3, 14 – 15

   Exodus 24:1 – 5

   Joshua 3:14 – 17; 4:4 – 9

   Joshua 24:19 – 27
DID YOU KNOW?

At the high place at Gezer, ten stones (some more than twenty feet tall) stand in silent tribute to a now-forgotten event. Lonely sentinels on the ruins of ancient cities, such gigantic standing stones provide a glimpse into a custom popular thousands of years ago. Long before the Israelites entered Canaan, pagans in the ancient Near East erected sacred stones to their gods, to declare covenants and treaties between cities or individuals, and to honor gods they believed caused an important event or provided a significant benefit. The stones indicated to anyone who saw them that something significant had happened in that place.

The Hebrew word translated “standing stones” is massebah and means “to set up.” Perhaps our practice of placing tombstones over the graves of loved ones is derived from a special standing stone called a stele (plural: stelae). In ancient times, these stones were erected as masseboth (standing stones) and had stories or inscriptions carved on them explaining their significance.

Archaeologists in the Middle East have unearthed many stelae, including one found in 1993 at Tel Dan that mentions the name “David”—the only extrabiblical reference to David ever discovered. To date, no massebah or stele specifically mentioned in the Bible has been found.

Reflection

Just as the people of ancient Israel erected “standing stones” to commemorate God’s supernatural actions on their behalf, God wants each of us to be a massebah—a living, standing stone that God is shaping and cutting in order to build his kingdom. In the same way that people in ancient times were reminded of what God had done for them when they saw standing stones, God calls us to live godly lives so that the world will see our good deeds and want to know our God.
Who has been a standing stone for you? Who are the people who have influenced you and made you aware of God’s work in their lives, thereby helping you to know and understand God?

What kind of standing stone are you? List the “monuments” in your life that proclaim to other people, “The Lord is God.”

If the “monuments” of your life point more to your accomplishments than to God’s greatness, what must you change?

**Memorize**

*As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him — you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God.*

*1 Peter 2:4–5, 12*