

# How to Apply the Land Promise to Children: A Case Study in Ephesians 6:1

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In Ephesians 6:1–3 Paul calls believing children (i.e., children *in the Lord*) to obey (v. 1) and honor (v. 2) their parents. In verse 1, Paul gives the motivation, “for this is right,” and in verses 2–3, he motivates children with the fifth commandment, ‘the first commandment with a promise.’ And importantly, the promise says, “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land [or, on the earth].”

Because this promise is rooted in the covenant Yahweh made with Israel at Sinai (see Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16), it’s worth asking, “How should we apply this to the church today?” This is especially worth asking, when we see how Paul has applied the work of Christ to Jews and Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:11–22) and how he has intentionally left off the words “that the Lord your God is giving you”—words that specified this promise for Israel.

Indeed, as many commentators have observed, Paul seems to be enlarging God’s promise to Israel for all those who are in Christ—both Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, we are helped to see how Paul cites this verse, as it sheds light on this passage to children, *and* it helps us to better read our Bibles.

Therefore, with that in mind, I share a handful of quotations that help us think carefully about this passage.

## Frank Thielman

*Paul may simply be referring to the general principle that children who submit to the authority of loving parents are more likely to live longer than those who do not (Hoehner 2002: 793). Some scholars who take this position think that this text reflects a situation in which the eschatological expectation of the early church has dimmed, and the ethic of some Christians has “declined” (Best 1998: 568) into an accommodation of life in the world (see Lincoln 1982: 39–40; contrast Hoehner 2002: 793–94).*

*In light of Paul’s frequent use of the “new creation” theme throughout the letter (2:15; 3:9; 4:13, 24), however, it is possible that the idea of a new creation may also stand behind his thinking here. Paul may be saying that children whose obedience to their parents arises from their commitment to “the Lord” (6:1) will live eternally not on a particular land with national boundaries such as ancient Israel, but rather on an earth without boundaries, as God created it to be.*

*As with Paul’s use of Gen. 2:24 in 5:31, “new creation” theology is far from explicit in this text, if it is present at all. At the same time, such an idea is consistent with Paul’s thinking that in the church God is breaking down national barriers and creating one new humanity (2:14–16).*

"Ephesians," in [Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament](#), ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson.

### Oren Martin and Thomas Schreiner

In his book on the land, Martin observes in a footnote, citing Thomas Schreiner:

*The same could be said of Eph. 6:2–3, "Honour your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." In the OT, the promise relates to a long life in the Promised Land that God gave to Israel. Does it follow, then, that Paul sees no significance in the promise to live long in the land? No. Schreiner (2001: 328–329) writes, 'If we understand Paul's theology, we know that the inheritance promised to Abraham has become the world (Rom 4:13). Paul does not restrict the inheritance to the land of Palestine. He understands the inheritance to refer to the future glory awaiting believers (Rom 8:17). The promise of long life in the land, in Paul's view, relates to our heavenly inheritance. In other words, those who obey their parents will receive an eschatological reward the inheritance promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How Paul handles the command to honor one's parents is paradigmatic. The injunction to honor parents is fulfilled rather straightforwardly in the new covenant, but the promise to live long in the land no longer relates in the same way. The land now becomes the future world that belongs to the people of God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26). The land promised in the Old Testament anticipates and is fulfilled in the eschatological inheritance awaiting the people of God.'*

[Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 135.

### G.K. Beale

*Ephesians 6:1–3 is similar to Matt. 5. There Paul says children should obey and honor their parents, "so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth." This is part of a quotation of Exod. 20:12, which promises obedient children that they "may live long in the land" of Israel's promised inheritance in Canaan. Paul clearly universalizes it, which is not surprising, since he so straightforwardly does so in Rom. 4:13. Paul's reference to the earth here probably refers to the new eternal earth. The fifth commandment, originally referring to long life in the promised land, appears to be typologically applied to Christians living long on the new earth (in the light of Eph. 1:14; 4:30, which likely include reference to the final resurrection of saints and their resurrected life in the age of consummation).*

[A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 757–58.

All in all, it seems best to read this passage in light of Christ's finished work and the inauguration of the new covenant. Surely, when we come to the New Testament, we find help in understanding the land promises by reading the words of Jesus (Matthew 5:5) and Paul (Romans 4:13). Even more, knowing that Christ's kingdom is both present and future (i.e., already and not yet) helps us see how passages like Ephesians 6:1–3 are both fulfilled in the present and await a future fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21–22).

Indeed, this brings us back to what Paul says, Children obey and honor your parents. As he goes on in verses 2–3, the ultimate motivation for Christian children to obey their parents is not to gain some earthly reward. Rather, because children of God have *already been given*

*eternal life in Christ*, their obedience now reflects that future reality. And because they want to please God (cf. Colossians 3:20), the call to remember this fulfilled promise is motivating to obey and honor parents.

May we as children of God honor our parents (in whatever stage of life we are in), in order to grow in our Christlikeness and to reflect the new life we have in Christ. In this way, we not only hold fast to our future inheritance, we also show others how it has changed us, giving us the chance to share the good news of Christ with them.

To that let us pray and labor.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

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