

"Unwrapping the Gift of Promise"

In our series on *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life* we've been looking at the promises of God given in Genesis to Abraham and his descendants. This Christmas weekend I want to talk about unwrapping the gift of promise. One of the themes of the Christmas story is that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises. One of the important lessons of Christmas for all of our lives today is that **God makes and unfaithfully keeps great promises**. In a world of so much uncertainty, how deeply do we long for something on which we can count? A promise, made by someone you can count on, reaches into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable. A promise like that fuels perseverance and gives hope. One of the great themes of the Christmas story we all need to hear is that **God makes and unfaithfully keeps great promises. To live life well in this world we need to know and believe the promises of God.**

I. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES WITH UNFAITHFUL CONSISTENCY.

Did you hear that emphasis in **Genesis 21:1-2** when it says, *The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.* Many years after the story of Abraham takes place, in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, angels tell Mary and Joseph that Mary will bear a son and that son will be the fulfillment of God's most ancient promises. When Jesus is born, you could use the words spoken about Sarah to describe the birth of Jesus. *"The LORD visited Mary as he had said, and the LORD did to Mary as he had promised. ² And Mary conceived and bore a son."*

In the gospel of Luke, a few days after Jesus is born Mary and Joseph bring him to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord, and there they meet a man named Simeon. **Luke 2** says Simeon was righteous and devout and he was waiting for the consolation of Israel and when he sees the baby Jesus in **Luke 2:29** he takes him in his arms, 7blesses God and says, *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, You may now dismiss your servant in peace.³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."* (NIV)

A. The story of Christmas is the story of a promise kept.

All the prophecies about Jesus given in the Bible and leading up to his birth in Bethlehem unfold the one great promise of a Savior.

1. The first reference to a promised Savior is in the third chapter of Genesis. God promised Eve the “seed of the woman” would crush the head of the serpent. In the poetic imagery of the Bible God promised a Savior who would make right what had gone wrong.

2. What happens in the Bible is that more and more detail is given that brings the promise into clearer focus. The “**seed of the woman**” (Genesis 3) could be any man. But in time God chooses one man; **Abraham** (Genesis 12). God said the Savior – the one who comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found - would come from Abraham's seed. Abraham had two sons; God said from **Isaac** the seed would come. Isaac had two sons. God said the promise would come through **Jacob**. After Jacob's name was changed to Israel, he had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. The Bible said the promised Savior would come through **Judah**. Abraham's descendants multiplied, but their story took some strange turns. They ended up slaves in **Egypt**. So some 600 years after Abraham God raised up **Moses** to deliver them and lead them to the Promised Land. He gave them his law to keep them set apart in the midst of the chaotic sea of a pagan world. After around 400 years in the Promised Land, God raised up a king named **David**. God revealed that the promise of a Savior would come from the descendants of David. Many people lived by faith and knew God and worshipped him but most of the people did not. They made a mess of things, so around 400 years after David the nation split in two and both kingdoms were conquered and taken into **captivity and exile**. It was during that time of exile that God sent prophets like Isaiah who repeated and enlarged on the promises. In **Isaiah 7:14** Isaiah said. *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* The prophets and their prophecies were all about the promises of God.

The story of Christmas is the story of a promise kept.

B. The Christian life is a life of faith in the promises of God.

1. The Christian life begins with faith in a promise. Our salvation doesn't depend on promises we make and we keep but on promises that God makes and God keeps and that we receive and believe. **John 3:16**, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* When the Son of God came into our world to fulfill God's promise he came to suffer and die for our sins. *The weary world rejoices because he came to do what we could not do.* He died for our sins and rose as our Savior and Lord. When you trust in him, you receive his grace, his presence, his forgiveness, the gift of eternal life. That's a promise.

2. Once we have received Christ the whole life we are to live is based on faith in God's promises. We live by faith, walk by faith, fight the good fight of faith and endure the tests of faith. But the foundation and fuel for our faith are the promises we are believing and the promise-making God in whom we are trusting. Charles Spurgeon put it memorably. He said, *"Faith without a promise is like a foot without ground to stand on."*

Listen to how **Psalms 119** speaks to us about the promises of God. **Verse 50**; *My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.* **Verse 76**; *May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.* **Verse 148**; *My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.* **Verse 162**; *I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil.*

Application: One reason we are calling people this year back to the ancient paths of Bible reading, and meditation and memory is so that we can be strengthened in God's promises. Someone said, If the Bible was a cup and the promises within it water, the cup would be overflowing. Someone said faith lives in the promises of God like a fish in the water. There is not a person here this Christmas and New Year, who doesn't need to unwrap the gift of promises and learn how to live by faith in a promise-making, promise-keeping God.

God keeps his promises with unfailing consistency. And the Scripture is careful to point out that

II. WHEN GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES HE DOES WHAT HE SAYS HE WILL DO.

Notice that emphasis in **Genesis 21:1-2**. *The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.*

Illustration: A young man named Alex Sheen lost his father to cancer in 2012. He was asked to do the eulogy for his father. In it, he said, *"My father was an average man. But for everything that made my father "average" and "every day," there was one thing he did exceptionally well. He kept his promises. My father was a man of his word."* He went on to talk about the importance of keeping promises. At the end of the service, he gave blank cards except in the bottom right-hand corner were written the words, *"because I said I would."* So the idea was that you would write out your promise, *"I will Finish school, quit smoking, whatever ... because I said, I would."* He offered to send these promise card to anyone who asked, started a non-profit and a website, and it became a movement. Barely 18 months later he had sent more than 250,000 cards to 82 countries. Stories of commitments made and kept poured in. Some were small. Some were staggering. It was such a simple concept that people would honor their words and do what they said. It is good to do what you say you will do. But flip that thought and think about God. He always does what he says. Consider this: God, who can not be thwarted by any power or person has given you the gift of his promises. Things he will do for you, in love, because he said he would. He took on human flesh and came into our world in Jesus because he said he would. He will save your soul as you trust in him because he said he would.

A. God does not always do what you think he should, but he does exactly what he says he will!

That might not be what you wanted, or expected. Abraham and Sarah wanted the promised child to come quicker, without all the waiting, all the mistakes on their part and the tests of faith along the way. God had a larger, better plan and purpose. He is God, and we are not. The Jewish people waiting for the promise of a Savior expected and wanted a powerful warrior not a squalling baby in a sheep stall. They expected a conquering hero, not a crucified carpenter. But the wisdom of God was wiser than the wisdom of men. So we were given the gift of an even greater Savior than they could have imagined. God did what he said he would do.

Part of the challenge of living in relationship to God is choosing to accept His promises as he gives and keeps them, not as you might wish them. The confidence you have is that God will give you what you would want and ask for if you knew what God knows. If you knew

and loved what God knows and loves you would delight in the wisdom of everything God does exactly the way he does it. **Deuteronomy 32:4** *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. God does what he says he will do, and that is good.*

B. If God does what he says he will do, then it is important to know what God has said he will do.

Illustration: In J.I. Packer's classic book *Knowing God*, there is a powerful section about the promises of God in a chapter called "*Thy Word Is Truth*." He talks about how years ago some of our grandparents who were Christians used to have these little things called **promise boxes**. I've seen them. They were small wooden boxes in which there were tiny little rolled up scrolls of paper each printed with a promise from the Bible. So the idea was each day, or whenever, you could just pull out a promise to read and reflect on. Now the problem was it was easy to take these promises out of their context and misunderstood what they meant. But the basic premise that was the inspiration for that practice was right.

Packer writes:

In the days when the Bible was universally acknowledged in the churches as "God's word written", it was clearly understood that the promises of God recorded in Scripture were the proper, God-given basis for all of our life of faith, and that the way to strengthen one's faith was to focus it upon particular promises that spoke to one's condition. (*Knowing God* p. 115)

Do you have some promises from God to rely on and find strength in? Here are some promises that have been particularly meaningful to me.

1. The promise of salvation. It's made over one hundred and fifty times in the New Testament. One example is **John 6:40**, *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*"

2. The promise of wisdom. **James 1:5** *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* I so often don't know what to do, what is the wise course the right thing. But I can trust in God.

3. The promise of straight paths. This is similar to wisdom, but it speaks of an overarching guidance that includes God's provision. **Proverbs 3:5-6** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

4. The promise of ongoing forgiveness. **1 John 1:9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

5. The promise of God's presence. It's found in many forms and places. I like **Hebrews 13:5**, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

6. The promise that all things work together for good. **Romans 8:28** *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.*

If God does what he says he will do, then it is important to know what God has said he will do. And...

C. If God does what he says he will do, you can trust him to do what he says he will do.

That's what is meant by, "*unwrapping the gift of promise.*" Imagine there is a gift you want and actually need. And someone who loves you sacrifices to get it for you, but you leave it boxed up, unwrapped, out of reach and unused? What good is it to you? Charles Spurgeon used a different analogy. He said, "*What is the use of having an anchor at home when your ship is in a storm in the sea?*" He was talking about committing Scriptural promises to memory, and his point was what use is it to have a Bible filled with promises if you cannot remember them in the storms and struggles of life. This sermon's message isn't about a dramatic Bible story to unfold or a complicated doctrine to make clear. It's just a simple truth. You need to unwrap the promises of God and connect them to your life and build your life on them.

Illustration: John Piper once said, in a podcast I believe, that meditating on God's promises is one of the primary ways we experience joy in God. So a listener asked the question: What is a promise you have treasured throughout your life and why? He told how when he was in his twenties he was about to get on a plane and fly to Germany for what would be a very anxious season in his life in which

everything felt fragile, uncertain, unknown and threatening. His father couldn't be there to see him off, but he called him on the phone. His Father recited **Isaiah 41:10** and prayed that God would make it real in his life. Here is what it says: *Fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* He said from that day that became his go-to promise more than any other.

He said one of the reasons he loves that promise is because it is not only a promise about God but very explicitly a promise directly from God. In other words, it does just say God is with you. It's God himself saying, *Fear not for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* He said, when he recites this promise he hears, by an act of faith, the living God speaking these words to him. I love this promise too. It covers so much of the struggle of life. Do you feel weak in any way? God says, *"I will strengthen you."* Do you need help, of any kind? God says, *"I will help you."* Do you feel you've fallen down, or been knocked down, beat down? God says, *"I will uphold you."*

CONCLUSION

This Christmas see, in the birth of Christ, this truth that God makes and unfailingly keeps great promises. Believing that, unwrap the gift or promise. Hold on to faith and hope by holding on to the promises of God. Preach and recite them to yourself, sing them and pray them back to God with thanksgiving. Find, courage, strength, and joy in choosing to trust in him. He will do what he has said he will do.

Amen