

God Keeps His Promises

Joshua 21:43-45

Well, we are continuing in our summer series through the Old Testament book of Joshua, and I want to give a quick review of where we've been in case you haven't been here or have forgotten.

This is the historical account of God leading his people, Israel, a people he has created by his grace, into the Promised Land after having rescued them from slavery in Egypt and providing for them and leading them through the desert.

So, we've seen God work in amazing ways for his people in this book, things like a miraculous crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land. We've seen the Lord fight on behalf of Israel to drive out and destroy the inhabitants of the land in places like Jericho.

And last week we were in chapter 10 where we saw the Lord miraculously make the sun and moon stand still by his sovereign power to extend the day for the battle at hand.

Well, this morning, we are going to fast forward and jump ahead 11 chapters in our series. We are going to jump to the very end of chapter 21...

But let me give you a quick outline of what happens in between..

Chapters 10-12: Continued stories of Israel's conquests as they take cities in southern Canaan and then northern Canaan.

Chapters 13-21: They begin to divide the land among the various tribes of Israel to make their home. I'd encourage you to read through these chapters this week.

Now, we are going to skip over this section and jump to a short passage at the end of chapter 21 because our passage this morning gives us the concluding verses in this section AND, really, our passage this morning **serves as the heart of the entire book of Joshua**. They bring with it a summary and the ultimate lesson that the book of

Joshua is meant to emphasize. So everything we've seen so far in this series leads to this moment...

Joshua 21:43-45

43 Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. **44** And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. **45** Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

These verses serve as an outline of the book of Joshua up to this point, working backwards:

v. 43 - God gave to Israel all the land he promised - ch. 13-21

v. 44 - God gave them rest as they defeated their enemies - ch. 1-12

v. 45 - summary of entire narrative - These things happened, therefore, God's promises proved perfectly true.

This is what the account of Joshua, the conquests, and the division of land was meant to remind the people of Israel, and us today, of...that God is faithful to his promises. The story of Joshua is how Israel gets to see the fulfillment of God's promises to them as a people.

And the faithfulness of God is a common theme in all of Scripture, not just this book. It is spoken of frequently, even at times with superlatives...

Psalms 36:5

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

Psalms 119:90

Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast.

Over and over again, through both words and deeds, Scripture testifies to the faithfulness of God. It is a characteristic that is displayed all over its pages.

And as Christians, we believe in the faithfulness of God. We believe that what God says is true, that he doesn't lie, that he is trustworthy, that he can and will bring about those things that he has promised. And most, if not all, Christians here this morning could share the ways in which the Lord proved himself faithful to them some time in their past.

Perhaps God provided financially for you once, or maybe he brought healing to you - whether that was physically, emotionally, or mentally. Or perhaps you just experienced a deep sense of comfort by the Spirit as you walked through a difficult season. Certainly, if you are Christian, you could speak of his faithfulness to draw you to himself and bring you to faith in him.

So, as Christians, we are pretty good at believing in God's faithfulness - **at least when it comes to the past**. However, we can tend to struggle in believing that God is faithful in the present and will be faithful in the future. It's easier for us to say God was faithful, because we've already seen his work. It can be harder for us to say that God is faithful today and will remain faithful in the future.

It's too easy to look at what is going on around the world, this past week and a half especially, and wonder if God really is faithful to his promises, to care for his people around the world and to make all things new for example. Maybe you don't have to look that far, you just look in the mirror and your own personal life and wonder if God really is faithful to care, guide, and provide as he said he would.

And this isn't a new struggle for us today. This has been a struggle for fallen humanity since the fall and was certainly true for God's people, Israel. And I think if we look at their history we can see a common pattern for doubting God's faithfulness to us...let me give you a few reasons we might be tempted to doubt God's faithfulness as shown by Israel's story.

1. The Experience of Delay

We might walk through some hardship, some difficulty, and even though we know what the Scriptures say about God's faithfulness to us, we might start to doubt it because we don't *immediately* see how God will work in our circumstance. And so whether that is a difficult week, year, or decades of life, we grow weary of trusting in God's promises when we don't see them seemingly come to fruition in our preferred timing.

But what I want you to notice from our text in Joshua 21 is that Joshua 21 is the fulfillment of a promise made all the way back in Gen. 12.

In Genesis 12, God made a massive promise to a man named Abram...

Gen. 12:1-3

1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will

bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This is called the Abrahamic Covenant, in which God promises Abram that he will give him so many descendants that they will be a new nation and that they will be blessed by God. And then, if you continue in chapter 12, we read that as Abram journeyed away from home he came into the land of Canaan, and God promises to give his descendants that land. In other words, it would be the Promised Land.

So God makes these grand promises to Abram, and then...seemingly nothing. No immediate fulfillment (which is obvious because to have enough descendants to make a great nation takes some time), so there wasn't an immediate fulfillment **but there wasn't even immediate progress**. Abram and his wife Sara become so impatient with the Lord and doubt God's faithfulness to make good on his promise that they try to take matters in their own hands. They have no children, and since you can't have descendants without a child, Abram has a child with Sara's servant, Hagar.

And think through the rest of the story...

They have kids, who have kids, who have kids, and so on, until Israel really is a great nation, but then they are in bondage in Egypt. And not just for a short amount of time - 400 years.

And then, Israel is finally rescued from bondage only then to wander in the desert for another 40 years!

Imagine what that would have been like! For those anxiously awaiting God to fulfill His promise, for those who generations later have heard over and over again about God and what He said He would do...clearly in the hearts of many, doubt had begun to creep up in their hearts and wonder, will God really keep His word? "I know everyone keeps saying this about God, but I'm starting to wonder. If I'm being honest, at one time I was convinced of God's faithfulness, but now, even I am starting to doubt it."

And then, *finally*, in Joshua 21, God fulfills his promise. And that is important to consider, because on the other end of that long gap of time, **Scripture says God was faithful, none of his promises failed Israel.**

You may be walking through a difficult season personally, and surely that season is lasting longer than you'd like. We all have those seasons. But if we aren't careful we might begin to view God as just another person in our life that overpromises and under delivers. **But we need to recognize that a delay in God's provision is not a denial of God's faithfulness.**

Don't let the delay of God's resolution to your circumstance cause you to doubt God's goodness and faithfulness to you.

Another reason we are tempted to doubt God's faithfulness is...

2. The Existence of Pain & Suffering

In other words, the very fact that pain & suffering exists is reason for many to cause God's faithfulness.

This is one of the most common objections to the character of God, if not his very existence. The argument goes, if God was good, if God was loving, there would be no pain, evil, or suffering in the world. Because if God was good and if God was loving, he would rid the world of the pain, evil, and suffering that is so rampant in our world.

This is not a new objection. This was thought by Israel themselves as they wandered in the wilderness.

If you remember when Israel is released by Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, they are on their way out, the Lord changes Pharaoh's heart so that he pursues Israel, and they find themselves stuck between the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind them. The existence of this situation causes them to doubt God's goodness and faithfulness to them (Ex. 14).

The Lord, of course, miraculously saves them, but just a few chapters later (Ex. 16) we read that they grow hungry in the wilderness. They are without food, in need of provision, and it causes them to doubt God's goodness and faithfulness to them.

And then, later in the book of Numbers (Num. 13), they come up to the border of the Promised Land for the first time, they send in spies, and almost all of the spies come back and say that there is no way that they can defeat the inhabitants of the land in battle, and it causes them to doubt God's goodness and faithfulness to his promises to them.

And the truth is, our stories are not unlike Israel's. We walk through difficult times and the very fact that there *are* difficult times causes us to doubt God's goodness and faithfulness. We might think, "If God was truly faithful to me, his child who he has adopted into his family, then it is hard for me to understand why I would be going through this."

But if that is you and you are struggling with this idea, whether you are a Christian or not, consider that what we ought to doubt is not God's faithfulness but our understanding.

Tim Keller put it this way in his book *The Reason for God*:

"If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed, you can't have both ways."¹

In other words, if it is reasonable for us to believe that God could stop all suffering, then it is also reasonable for us to admit we don't know the possible good reasons he hasn't.

3. False Expectations in False Promises

In reality, these reasons to doubt God's faithfulness are connected. They stem from false expectations of God. We have the false expectation that God will not allow difficulties in our life or, if he does, we have the false expectation that he will deliver us and remove those difficulties immediately.

But what this reveals in us is that we don't know the actual promises of God. And if we are unfamiliar with the actual promises of Scripture, we end up holding God accountable to promises he didn't actually make.

And this happens all the time. People set their hope on promises God never made, they are just promises that some preacher made on behalf of God.

- that the Christian life would be without hardships
- that a Christian is someone with no temptations and will obtain perfection from sin
- that a Christian will never face persecution for their faith
- that a Christian will always have perfect health, or if a Christian faces illness they will be healed if they just have enough faith
- that a Christian will prosper financially, relationally, and vocationally

If we believe that God promised those things for us, then *of course* we will doubt God's faithfulness when he doesn't provide them.

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 25.

During our time in Italy, I had the opportunity to do some ministry at an African refugee camp. Refugees would flee Africa on small rafts and risk their lives to make it to Italy so they could be in Europe. They would get picked up and bused to different camps around Italy. So I, and another guy from my church, would go each week and do a bible study with any of the guys who were interested and they would tell us about their experience with church back in Nigeria and Ghana and Ivory Coast. They almost always told us that the “Man of God” in their town said that they could be rich if they had enough faith and gave enough to the “Man of God.”

So imagine their disillusionment when instead of being rich, they barely survive a trek across the Mediterranean Sea and now live as illegal immigrants in a country where there is no work for them.

Thankfully, we were able to sit down and point them to the promises of God actually found in Scripture hoping they could find true hope in Christ.

And, again not just them, but Christians all over the world set their hope in false promises. Thankfully, we don't have to be clueless as to what God has promised, because we have his sure Word.

Promises such as...

Hebrews 13:5b

...“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

John 14:3

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

2 Timothy 3:12

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

Romans 10:13

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

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.

These (and more) are the promises we stake our hope on. *These* are the promises that we build our life upon. *These* are the promises that we view the world by, **because these are the promises that God actually made.**

And how do we know those are God's promises? Because we find them in Scripture - God's Word. And because God is faithful, none of his promises will fail.

By the way, let me, as the Teaching Pastor who teaches our Grace Road Institute theology classes plug our classes real quick. Whether you know or it or not, everyone has a theology. Everyone has a belief about God and how the world relates to him. And so the question is not whether or not you will hold a theology, but whether or not it will be a biblical theology. Our fall class, which we will be announcing soon, is on Systematic Theology, or basic Christian doctrine. I highly encourage you to consider taking it. Just wanted to put that on your radar...

So, all of that to say, when we think God has not been faithful to his promises, just consider that maybe we aren't as familiar with his promises as we'd like to think.

FAITHFUL AND SOVEREIGN

However, as you read about redemptive history in Scripture and you look at your own personal experience and the experiences of millions of others, it is important to bring another trait of God into the discussion alongside God's faithfulness. It's something that the people of Israel had forgotten so often, and we do too...

Not only is God faithful but God is also sovereign.

That God is faithful means that God *will* keep His promises.

That God is sovereign means that God *can* keep His promises

[ILLUS] One of a parent's favorite words is the word, "maybe." That is also one of a kid's *least* favorite words, because it can be seen as just a copout when a parent doesn't want to say "no." And if I'm being honest, I use that word a lot with my kids.

I use it because it is a strategic word. It relieves the pressure of having to give a definitive answer to a pressing question in the moment. It's a way of deferring the decision down the road. But it's also strategic because it keeps us as parents from making any promises that we might not be able to keep. And that is important, because we can't always keep our promises....

But understand that the inability to keep a promise, is not something that God has ever experienced.

God's sovereignty means that nothing can thwart God's plan for you and me and the world.

-No amount of evil we see in this world

-No corrupt government, organization, or individual

-No unexpected tragedy or setback
-Not even our own unfaithfulness to Him
Nothing can stop God from keeping His word.

Again think about Israel...

-Abraham & Sarah's age/infertility did not matter.
-Should Abraham have killed Isaac, it would not have mattered.
-Israel in bondage under the absolute rule of Pharaoh does not change anything.-Israel in desert for 40 years does not nullify God's promise.
-All of the greater armies and enemies did not stop God from fulfilling his promise.

How many times have you promised to meet someone only later to have to call or text and say, "Sorry, something's come up. I'd like to be there but it's out of my control." God has never had to make that phone call! He's never had to say, something's come up, sorry! I can't do what I said I would do. He is sovereign over it all.

But, not only does God's sovereignty mean that He *can* keep His word it ALSO means that *He chooses the means through which He will keep His word.*

The story of God bringing Israel into the Promised Land and the greater story of God redeeming mankind reveals that ***the promises of God are always fulfilled by the means of God.***

That will mean even through tragedy, even through judgment, though trials and difficulties, even through extended periods of waiting, God is faithful and able to keep his promise to you and to me.

WE SHOULD DOUBT OUR DOUBTS, NOT GOD

We have a nasty tendency of letting our circumstances shape our beliefs about God, when we ought to be letting the truths about God shape our beliefs in our circumstances.

Instead of saying, "This circumstance is bad, therefore God is bad," we should say, "My God is good, therefore this circumstance, however unpleasant, painfully and bad, will be used for good. I don't how, I don't know when, I don't even know why, but I know **who**. God can and will keep his promises to work all things together for my good and his glory."

LOOK TO THE CROSS

Of course, the ultimate proof of God's faithfulness to us and to the hope of God's redemption in the future is the cross!

Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says about God's faithfulness..

Hebrews 6:13-18

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, **14** saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." **15** And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. **16** For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. **17** So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, **18** so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

The idea being here being that when we swear an oath we typically swear on something outside ourselves. You can think of taking the witness stand, we typically place our hand on the Bible and make an oath to tell the truth. But for God, there is nothing greater than himself to swear by, therefore he swore on himself. And by him doing that we have "strong encouragement to hold fast the hope set before us" which he goes on to identify...

Hebrews 6:19-20

19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, **20** where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Because Jesus went to the cross as our sacrificial substitute, he has entered into the sanctuary. And *there* is where our hope lies. There is our "steadfast anchor of the soul."

Think about it. If there was ever a moment in which God might not come through on his word to bring salvation, it surely would have been the moment when Jesus was going to the cross. And yet, Jesus died for us. He was faithful.

GOSPEL

If you have not yet trusted in Christ, we would point you to another precious promise of the Lord...

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.

Turn away from your sin and self-righteousness and put your faith in Christ today. God is faithful to forgive you based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection. You can trust in Him to keep his promise.

If you have trusted in Christ, let me leave you with a final word of encouragement. This a quote from AW Tozer's *Knowledge of the Holy*...

“Every heart can make its own application of this and draw from it such conclusions as the truth suggests and its own needs bring into focus. The tempted, the anxious, the fearful, the discouraged may all find new hope and good cheer in the knowledge that our Heavenly Father is faithful. He will ever be true to His pledged word.”
-A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 56.

Remember, the Promised Land in Joshua points to the ultimate and eternal Promised Land for all of God's people. And one day when we arrive there, we will be able to say, just as we read in our passage this morning in Joshua, “Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to us, his people, had failed; all came to pass.”

We don't see it yet. But we will. Be patient. The Lord is faithful to His word.

VERSES & SLIDES

Joshua 21:43-45

Psalm 36:5

Psalm 119:90

Genesis 12:1-3

Hebrews 13:5

John 14:3

2 Timothy 3:12

Romans 10:13

Romans 8:28

Hebrews 6:13-18

Hebrews 6:19-20

1 John 1:9

AW Tozer quote

SERMON DISCUSSION

Have you ever found it difficult to trust in the faithfulness of God? When? Why?

How might wrong theology affect someone's trust in God?

What false promises have you encountered in your Christian walk?

Why is God's sovereignty so important to his faithfulness?

What promise do you need reminding of today? Find a verse in Scripture that you can memorize and encourage yourself (and others) with.