

The Best Promise of All

December 26, 2021

Welcome and Merry Christmas to all of you here and those watching online.

When we look back on 2021, a lot has happened. Since this is the last message of the year, I thought it would be good for us to start with a review of the significant events that were newsworthy in 2021. Here's a short "Year in Review" from Time Magazine.

VIDEO: "2021 Year in Review"

Many of these have made a significant impact on our lives personally. Probably more so than in years past. Some of these events have brought us joy, others fear and pain. But what if I told you there is one thing that will give you the greatest possibility of experiencing

joy, satisfaction and purpose in life in the new year, no matter what you experienced in 2021?

What if I told you about a promise God has made to us that is so amazing and so incredible that you will thank me for the rest of your life for sharing it with you. Would you believe me?

And what if I told you that the fulfillment of this promise will have a greater impact on your life both now and in the days to come than anything else on this earth?!

The promise I'm talking about is in the form of an unconditional covenant that God has made with Christ followers. And while this promise is for Christians, this promise also provides one of the most compelling reasons for why even skeptics should consider the truth of Christianity. It has the potential to be a game changer for all of us who are here today and watching online.

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

As I just mentioned, the promise I'm referring to is the single most significant promise in the entire Bible.

That's why I titled this message, "The Best Promise of All".

While most of us are familiar with the word "promise", not many of us understand the meaning of the word "covenant". A covenant is an arrangement or a promise between people. All of life operates or arises out of a covenant. When two people want to go into business together the first thing they do is draw up a contract or a partnership. It is the basic covenant that defines the terms of their operation. A marriage is that kind of a covenant. It is an agreement between a man and a woman to stick together against all odds, to work out their problems, and honor one another. Patrick Mahomes made a covenant or contract with the Chiefs. At the time of signing his deal in September 2020, Mahomes' total contract value amounted to \$502 million over 12 years — if he hits all of his incentives. His incentives are simple. Each year

starting in 2022, he can earn an additional \$1.25 million if the Chiefs reach the Super Bowl and an additional \$1.25 million if he is named NFL MVP for a maximum of \$2.5 million per year in incentives. Now that's a covenant if you ask me!

So, a covenant is a contract or a promise between two or more people. To understand more fully the concept of "covenant" from a biblical perspective, I want us to watch this short video:

VIDEO: The Best Promise of All... The Bible Project

WHAT IS THE NEW COVENANT?

As the video said, God has made a covenant with those of us who trust in Jesus. Our partnership with him is the most fundamental covenant of all. God has made a promise or arrangement with us that, through our faith in Jesus Christ, he will provide for us what it takes to flourish in any area of life, despite our

circumstances. As the video said, this unconditional promise about doing life with God is known as the NEW COVENANT and it was first prophesied in the books Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the Old Testament.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Ezekiel 36:26,27

Notice the number of times God says, “I will...” Four times in this passage, God promises that He will provide all that we need to live the Christian life. This is the unconditional promise of the New Covenant.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul reaffirms the importance of the New Covenant in his letter to the church at Corinth.

Such is the confidence we have toward God through Christ. Not that we are adequate in ourselves so as to consider anything as having come from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:4-6

Notice how the Apostle Paul boils down the essence of the New Covenant. We aren't adequate but God makes us adequate to live the Christian life. Simply put:

Nothing coming from us, everything from God.

Nothing comes from us, that is, we aren't adequate to live the Christian life. But in contrast everything comes from God... he will make us adequate. And notice that this promise isn't conditional. It's not dependent on something we must do to earn it ...it just IS. It's an unconditional covenant or promise that isn't based on our performance.

Unfortunately, this basic truth, that “everything comes from God and nothing from us” is hard for us to grasp and believe. Why? The answer is simple: we are naturally SELF SUFFICIENT IN OUR THINKING.

We think that the power to live life comes from us...that we have what it takes to make life happen. But the truth is that NONE of us really supplies our own energy; God does. But God does this so continually and so imperceptibly that we have the illusion that we are supplying it; that it is something inherent in us. But the Scriptures say just the opposite:

***You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.
Deuteronomy 8:17,18***

We are so used to making a decision and then promptly starting to do something that we never realize that if God didn't give us power to act, we could not do what we decided to do.

We could not even move a muscle, raise an arm or wink an eye if it weren't for power supplied from God. All of life operates on this principle of God's provision, but we are blind to this basic truth that God is constantly supplying the power we need for everyday living.

WHAT IS THE OLD COVENANT?

There is more to this idea of covenants than just the New Covenant. There's an Old Covenant as well. If the New Covenant is "Nothing coming from us, everything from God", what do you think the Old Covenant is? It's the exact opposite of the New:

Everything coming from us; nothing coming from God.

“It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old (written) covenant ends in death; but under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life.” 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 NLT

In the same passage where he mentions the New Covenant, we see the Apostle Paul contrasting the New Covenant life with an Old Covenant one. He says that living by the New Covenant (and the Holy Spirit) brings life but living by the Old Covenant (and a set of laws) brings death. Why is that you may ask? Because...

The Old Covenant is based on our performance to a set of standards,

Whereas the New Covenant is based on the Holy Spirit’s work in us.

When the Apostle Paul uses the term Old Covenant in the passage we just read, he is referring to the principle of self-effort. This was typified in the Laws we find in the Old Testament, like the 10 commandments. The Law made certain demands like,

The 10 Commandments

“You shall not kill, you shall not steal, or you shall not covet.” The law, however, was actually made to drive us away from our self-effort and lead us to humility and dependence on Christ.

Instead, all we have to do is to look back at man’s response to the Law in the Old Testament to see where things went wrong. When Moses, the leader of Israel, came down off the mountain where God gave him the Law (the 10 Commandments), the people responded by saying, “all that you have said we will do.”

In saying that, they revealed that just like us, self-effort lies at the root of our hearts. And that self-effort leads to death, as we just read.

Old Covenant “self-effort” can be summed up like this:

“If it’s going to be, it’s up to me.”

You see, every one of us is born into this world operating on the Old Covenant idea that it’s all up to us to make life work. That kind of perspective is in direct contrast with the New Covenant, which we can learn over time when we become a Christian.

We are ingrained from birth to trust in ourselves for life and therefore we believe, “If it’s going to be, it’s up to me”.

Now for those of you listening who do not believe in Christ, there is no other way to live. You have no one but yourself to depend on. You have no choice. But

living that way can be exhausting and I hope you can see that there's a better way.

Now to be clear, being a Christian does not mean that you automatically operate in the New Covenant. That is why we find Christians who are just as mixed up, just as torn up inside, just as unable to handle life as non-Christians are.

Though they are Christians, they haven't learned the fundamental way of living as a Christian. They haven't learned how to operate in the New Covenant, which is available to them in the Lord Jesus. They are still operating, for the most part, in the Old Covenant. That is what is fouling up their lives.

For those of us who are Christians, at any given moment, we are operating on one or the other of these two. You can't draw from both at the same time.

Jesus said so:

"No man can serve two masters. Either he will love the one and hate the other or cling to one and despise the other," Matthew 6:24.

You cannot cling to both at the same time; you cannot draw from both simultaneously. You can only live in the present, and therefore the present moment is either being lived in your own strength or God's, but not both.

"But," you say, "I don't understand that. How could a believer in Jesus Christ act as though nothing depended on God? Of course we depend on God." Sadly, it's amazing how easy it is to do this. We all know that God is here with us, but we really don't expect him to do anything unless we get stuck. We often don't even want to stop and ask Him if he would have us do something different than what we have planned. That's the problem.

Let me illustrate. Some of us are familiar with the story of Jesus feeding the crowd of five thousand. One

day, as he had just finished speaking, a huge crowd gathered by the seashore in the evening hours. The crowd had been listening all day and they were hungry. Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, came to Jesus and said, "Send them away. We have no bread to feed them with," (Matthew 14:15b).

Jesus said to him,

"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16).

And what was Philip's reaction?

"We do not have money and the stores are all closed and we cannot get a loan from the bank and there is no way we can do this," (John 6:7).

Philip was counting on merely his human resources to fix the problem. But here is the Lord Jesus, whom he had just seen do miraculous things, standing in front

of him, and yet he didn't trust him at all. He trusted in the normal resources of life.

How often and how easily do we act just like Philip? God tells us to do something, and we start immediately looking at our own resources saying, "Have I got the training, the personality, the finances, the background?"

Now I am not implying that you don't have to do some planning because God does direct us to do certain things and not to do other things. But my point is this: In whom do you look to first? Who do you place your trust in when you decide to do something? Is it you, or God in you?

We only have to look at ourselves to see how much of our lives are lived in that Old Covenant. We expect success by virtue of something resident within us or our capabilities, such as our savings account, our training, our personality, our good looks or something

like that. This kind of attitude indicates that SELF SUFFICIENCY is at the root of actions.

Sometimes we even play a “modesty game” in order to hide our self-sufficiency. We learn all kinds of little subtle tricks to hide our egoism and prideful self-effort.

Now other times, we look at the demands, the problem, the situation we are asked to perform, and we say just the opposite: "I don't have what it takes. I can't do that." But again who are we looking at when we say something like that? Ourselves! We are excusing ourselves because of our INADEQUACY, which is just another way of trusting in ourselves and not God.

Trusting in our self-sufficiency or excusing ourselves because of our inadequacy are equally wrong because they focus on ourselves instead of on God and His resources.

THE PROBLEM: TRUSTING THE WRONG RESOURCE

Here's the bottom line: after saying all of this, we can finally begin to understand the basic problem of human life.

***The basic problem of human life: WE ARE
DEPENDING ON THE WRONG RESOURCE.***

This is our basic problem and one that isn't easily unlearned. We must learn to recognize what the bible refers to as "the flesh" (the old self-sufficient life at work within us) and learn to identify if it is the Old or the New Covenant we are depending on.

Nothing is more basic to operating rightly than this.

The Old Covenant is all about depending on ourselves for life, which results in what the bible calls "death".

The death I'm referring to occurs whenever we experience the negative qualities in life, like boredom,

worry, anxiety, hostility, anger, greed, pride, etc. This is death because it comes from trusting in something we think we have inside ourselves, only to eventually realize that we are unable to make things work on our own.

These negative qualities of life are based on the choices we make. God has left the choosing left up to us, just as it was with Adam, in the garden of Eden. The power of choice is what is given to mankind, but NOT the power to do. The minute you or I choose to act, SOMETHING ELSE must supply the power within us. Either it is the old twisted form of Old Covenant life often referred to as "the flesh," or it is the New Covenant life from the Spirit which will produce "the fruit of the Spirit," as mentioned in Galatians 5:22,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness..., Galatians 5:22 NASB

But the key is that we must learn to reject our self-reliant ways and start depending on God.

That's why, here at NHCC, we have a value called, "Dependence on God". We have this value on our walls because each and every day we have a choice to make; to either to depend on God or depend on ourselves.

Now let's pause and summarize some of the things we've said so far. The promise God has made for those who are in Christ Jesus is,

"Everything coming from God, nothing coming from us." He will supply all of our resources for life.

THEREFORE:

To the extent we draw our resources from ourselves, we will experience discouragement, boredom, frustration and aimlessness in life.

To the extent we draw our resources from God, we will experience things like joy, peace, love and fulfillment.

We are incapable of producing anything of lasting spiritual significance in our life.

Salvation and my spiritual growth come from God alone...not from my hard work, however sincere it may be.

APPLYING THE NEW COVENANT

Before we discuss how to specifically apply the New Covenant, I want to say when I first became aware of this teaching, it was a turning point for me as a young Christian.

Early on in my Christian life, I was more interested in “following the rules of Christianity” (10 commandments, plus other religious disciplines) as opposed to “cultivating a relationship with Jesus”.

With all sincerity, I felt the way to succeed as a Christian was to follow the commandments of God to the letter and then life would turn out that way I wanted it to. I followed an Old Covenant formula for success, where $A+B=C$. “A” meant I learned the commands of God, “B” meant I would attempt to obey those commands to the letter and “C” meant that my life was going to be successful as a result of my efforts.

What I began to realize was that the Christian faith was never intended to work that way. Over time, God helped me to unlearn my tendencies to rely on my OWN EFFORTS. I had to learn a whole new way of life, based solely on my dependence on God. I had to learn that I am not sufficient to follow the commands of Christ even if I wanted to. It’s only through my relationship with Christ, as I listen to and respond to his Holy Spirit within me, that I have any chance to experience the abundant life that Jesus offers us. And by the way, I’m still learning to how to do this, even at 64 years of age!

Let's talk about applications. It's one thing to say we should live by the New Covenant, but how does that work out in real life? So, let's try to make this promise as real and practical as possible.

At the heart of this New Covenant way of living is the idea of trust. So the first thing we need to ask ourselves is this: In whom do we place our trust? In God or ourselves?

Applying the New Covenant begins with learning to trust God and not ourselves whenever we begin to act in any area of life. We cannot assume that we know what to do or have the power to do it properly. That's where we must start. We must STOP operating on our own strength and start trusting in God's resources. And when you do, the first thing you focus on is to:

1. LOOK TO SEE WHERE GOD IS AT WORK IN YOUR LIFE.

When I am living according to the New Covenant, where “everything comes from God”, I should expect God to be the initiator of everything in my life. It’s God’s plan and not my plan that I’m interested in. Therefore, I begin by looking to see where God is working in my life.

A few months ago in his message series “Experiencing God”, Rick spoke about some of these same realities if we are going to experience God in our everyday lives. The first three realities he mentioned were:

God is always at work around you.

God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.

God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.

Those realities mean that we must learn to “wait” and see where God is working before we act. We don’t try to get ahead of God and then ask him to bless what we

are doing. That's backwards. In John 5:19, Jesus said this very same thing:

"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does." John 5:19

Do you ever come to God and say, "Lord, I have worked this all out, I want you to bless it"? Now what exactly does that communicate to God? It says that it all depends on me. I want you, God, to make it work."

That is trying to mix the Old with the New Covenant, and that will never work. Remember we cannot serve two masters. If we are trusting in ourselves and it will eventually lead to death.

Jesus never acted that way. He never got ahead of God. Which is why he was able to experience the fruit of the spirit in his life, even when his circumstances

were hard. He waited to see what God was doing, and then he responded aggressively to God's initiative.

So ask yourself: Am I getting ahead of God and then asking him to bless whatever it is I'm doing? Or am I waiting to see where God might be working in my life and then aligning my life with His will? Am I experiencing signs of death, like anxiety, frustration or boredom in my life or do I see signs of life and positive fruit, like love, joy, peace and patience?

This is our first application: Look for where God is working in your life, and expect to see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit when you do.

Now the second application of the New Covenant is...

RELATE ALL OF LIFE TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER.

One of the best ways for you to know if you are living by the promise of the New Covenant is to ask yourself,

“how many of my activities do I pray about before taking action?”

As we learn to operate in the New Covenant, we will focus first on praying and second on doing. If we are going to keep from getting ahead of God, we must learn to pray before we act. It's through prayer that we learn to discern God's voice. It's through prayer that we express our dependence on God and not ourselves. That's why the bible is chocked full of verses reminding us to pray FIRST:

***Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
Philippians 4:6***

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. James 5:13

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

If you are worried, pray. If you are about to make a decision, pray. If you are excited about something, rejoice in prayer. If you are confused and need wisdom, then pray. If you just received a Christmas bonus, by all means give thanks to God, and then ask Him what his desire is for that bonus and wait for him to respond. And if you didn't get a bonus, then count your blessings anyway because God still loves you.

Praying about EVERYTHING is an indicator of dependence on God and that's the heart of the New Covenant.

And finally, after you have looked to see where God is working, and prayed before you take action, then

AGGRESSIVELY RESPOND TO GOD'S INITIATIVE.

Once you sense God that is at work in an area of your life, and you have asked him for the power to act, then by all means, take action. At this point, you and I are free to aggressively respond to what God is telling us to do. But in your responding, don't forget to lean into God. We aren't adequate to consider anything as coming from ourselves, therefore even simple everyday actions are opportunities for us to trust the power of God, and not our own abilities.

Over the years, I've tried to incorporate more and more of this mindset into my home and work life. For example, whenever I'm counseling others, I rely on God to "be my wisdom". When I am doing a funeral, I depend on God to use his power to comfort the grieving spouses or family members through me. When I walk up on this stage as I did today, I tell myself, "I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit", as I get ready to say my first word.

At home, we thank God before each meal as a reminder that He is our Provider, not us. In addition, I

remind myself that I can't be a servant hearted husband without his power and motivation.

When I sense that God wants me to mentor or invest in a young man's life at NHCC, I approach these men confidently with the expectation that God will work in both of our lives as we meet together. These are just some of the many ways I aggressively respond to the God's initiative in various areas of life.

As we learn to live out of the New Covenant, we will look to see where God is working, we will relate all of life to God through prayer, and we will aggressively respond to what God wants us to do by the power of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION: CHRIST IN YOU

As we draw this to a close, I just want to make one thing perfectly clear. The New Covenant is the best promise that God has ever made to humanity. And because Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, and His death on the cross is the basis for

this unconditional promise, we look to Him to provide everything we need for life and godliness. So as we celebrate advent of Jesus this Christmas season, let us remind ourselves that the heart of the New Covenant is the person of Christ. The one who the bible says is the “mystery of the ages” ...

***The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
Colossians 1:25-27***

Jesus Christ is the foundation of the New Covenant. It is Christ in us that makes it possible for you and I to live with hope. That is why we sing:

In Christ alone, my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
my Cornerstone, my solid ground,
Here in the love of Christ I stand. Let's pray.