

Lesson 11: The Story of the Promise (54)

We build our lives around promises. From mortgages to wedding vows, from Netflix to Cable TV and cell phone bills, in large and small ways, our whole world is built around the idea that promises are made to be kept. The fact that our lives rest on promises means that our lives are spent waiting. In between a promise and its fulfillment is a delay.

Worse than that, we know that all too many promises in life are broken. As children, our friends broke their promises to us. So did our parents sometimes. As adults, it's more of the same, only the stakes are higher, as marriages and business contracts fall apart. And the amazing thing is that for every divorce, every betrayal, every contract broken or alliance undermined, we get up the next day and make promises again. In one way or another, the story of our lives is the story of promises made, promises kept, and promises broken. Why? Fundamentally, *we make promises because we live in a universe created by a God who makes promises, which is what we're going to consider this morning.*

For the last few weeks, we been following several storylines in the Bible and learning how that storyline in Scripture translates into doctrine; what we believe. We are interested in doing biblical theology so that we might have a theology that's biblical. Typically, I have begun by tracing a storyline or narrative through the Scriptures; then we have considered patterns in that storyline; then we have drawn systematic lessons from the storyline and its patterns. 3 steps. This week, we're condensing the three steps into two. To trace the storyline is to observe the pattern itself.

In a very profound sense, the story of the Bible is the story of a single promise, made by God Himself, and how He kept and will keep that promise. As we consider that promise, I hope the story of your own life will come into sharper focus; as well as the character and person of God.

THE STORY OF PROMISE (54)

So what is the story of God's promise? *It begins in the words of God's curse after the Fall. Adam and Eve had chosen to disobey God, and so He brought upon them the just punishment for their sin. But in the very sentence of condemnation, God makes a promise: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* (Gen. 3:15) He will put enmity between His people (the seed of the woman), and Satan's people (the seed of the serpent), and that one day a son will be born who will defeat Satan and so deliver His people from their sin. The promise comes out of the blue. Adam and Eve have done nothing to merit it, and yet there it is.

Yet notice the promise has two sides: the seed of the serpent will strike at the seed of the woman; yet, the seed of the woman will prevail. Sure enough, this promise and its various reoccurring fulfillments come to characterize redemptive history. Cain murders Abel, but God preserves Adam's line through Seth. Moving toward Noah, all of humanity seems to be captured by sin and deserving of God's judgment. But God's promise endures, for though the judgment of the Flood is catastrophic and universal, God preserves Noah and his family, and then to ensure his promise of deliverance is kept, God makes another promise—never again to destroy all humanity by Flood.

Centuries pass. Humanity is no better than they were before the Flood. But God has not forgotten his promise. In **Genesis 12**, God chooses Abraham, an old childless man, and promises to make him into a great nation that will ultimately be a blessing to the whole world. The threat of the serpent rises up again as Abraham decides to take matters into his own hands and produce a seed through an illicit relationship: Ishmael. But that's not what God intended. And so barren Sarah gives birth to Isaac, the miracle baby.

A rivalry ensues between Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau, with Esau trying to destroy Jacob. But Jacob is the chosen seed and the Lord preserves him. Jacob, has 12 sons, and it begins to look like the promise of becoming a great nation is on its way. But once again, God's promise is challenged, by jealous strife and attempted murder, by Joseph's slavery and imprisonment. But God is faithful. He sovereignly uses Joseph's suffering, which his brothers meant for evil, as the very means of salvation and deliverance for the whole family. Again, the seed of the serpent rears its head as the descendants of Jacob are enslaved by Egypt, and a whole generation of boys is slaughtered by Pharaoh's command. Again, God is faithful. God preserves the life of Moses, and then uses him to deliver his people from their slavery.

At Mt. Sinai, God makes a covenant with Israel, in much the same way he did with Adam and Eve before the Fall. If they obey, they will stay in the Promised Land. But if they rebel, God will cast them out. Of course, their rebellion begins almost immediately. But though God judges his people, he remains faithful to his promise to Abraham. A new generation, led by Joshua, is raised up, and God gives them the land he had promised their forefathers.

Finally, in an ultimate act of rebellion, the nation of Israel rejects God as their King, and asks for a king like all the other nations. In mercy, God anoints a king after his own heart, David, who will be like a son to him. But notice the serpent even tries to chase down and destroy David from within Israel itself—first through Saul and later through David's son Absalom. Yet God, who is gracious and faithful, makes yet another promise to David, a promise that is really just an extension of his promise to Abraham and that gives final shape to the promise of **Genesis 3**. God promises David that he will always have a son to rule on his throne forever, and that son will rule in righteousness.

At first it appears that son is Solomon. But it's not. Solomon proves unfaithful, and judgment follows as the people are sent into exile. But even in the context of judgment and exile, God reveals that he has not forgotten and he has not failed in his promises. The prophets are given a message of hope, that God will make a new covenant with his people.

One night in the town of Bethlehem, the city of David, a baby is born, whose name is Jesus. Again, the serpent snaps, and a whole generation of boys is killed. Yet the Lord preserves his life. Could He be the promised son, the long-expected King who would deliver His people? Everything about His life suggests He is. His words have authority, and His work of healing and exorcism are miraculous. It seems that God has not forgotten, but is finally keeping His word. And then the unthinkable happens. Once again, the sin and rebellion of the serpent seem to gain the upper hand. The religious leaders of Israel reject Jesus, and the Roman authorities crucify Him. In a cold, dark tomb outside Jerusalem, God's promise seems to have finally and utterly died.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Three days later, Jesus got up from the dead, and demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that God keeps His promises. Through His sacrificial death on

the cross, Jesus had crushed Satan's power and freed His people from their bondage to sin. And through His resurrection, He guaranteed that the new life of the Kingdom of God had finally dawned.

SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL (56)

That's the storyline of promise. But notice, what I've really been doing is demonstrating to you how the Bible is structured. It's structured by God's promises and God's acts of fulfillment. What's striking when you consider the fact that God is a God of promises is that it means our lives are, by design, lives of waiting. After all, a promise and its fulfillment typically have a delay in the middle. God didn't just fix matters right there in the Garden. He didn't send Jesus before the Flood. And God hasn't sent Jesus back today...at least yet. Which raises the questions: why the waiting? Typically, we're tempted to blame God for what we perceive as his slowness. But simply by meditating on the biblical pattern of promise and fulfillment, we learn much about ourselves and God.

1. Man Is Sinful

First, all of redemptive history is structured by Promise/Fulfillment because man is sinful. We need to be redeemed. The fact that the entire Bible is structured in this fashion says that there's a problem to be fixed. What's the problem? *We've turned away from God and stand under condemnation. Yet the fact that redemptive history is structured by Promise/Fulfillment doesn't teach us about ourselves, it teaches us about God.*

2. We Live Amidst Spiritual Warfare

Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12, "**We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**" I don't point this out to absolve ourselves of blame for sin. No, it's simply that we need to recognize that this world, its powers and its cultures, are not neutral. The serpent is at work through the seemingly innocent forces of this world. Therefore, we need to be watchful and wary of worldliness in our hearts.

3. God Is Patient and Calls All People to Repentance

We struggle with what seems like God's delay in keeping his promises. But the fact of the matter is, it displays God's patience, as his desire for all to come to repentance. Peter puts it this way. "**With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**" (2 Peter 3:8) You may be here this morning, and you're not a Christian, and you may have found yourself wondering how gullible we Christians must be. It's been 2000 years, and still Jesus has not come back. It is that God is being patient and merciful toward you. Looking back at God's patience with rebellious Israel, the book of Hebrews pleads with you. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." You do not know when God's patience will come to an end. Today, at this moment, his hand is stayed; he is exercising patience toward you. Today, this moment, is the time to repent of your sins, and place your faith in Christ.

4. God Is Gracious and Initiates Salvation by Grace

Not only is God patient; he is gracious. And he doesn't just leave us to figure it out. He initiates salvation. God's promise in Genesis 3:15, along with every other promise he utters, it is entirely of God's initiative; it is *grace*, pure and simple. Adam and Eve have just rejected God in the face of his abundant goodness, but God promises to deliver them and their descendants! Did you notice the pattern as I told the story? What was Abraham when God promised to make him a blessing to the nations? An idolater. What was Moses when God set him apart? A murderer and fugitive from justice! What was David when God anointed him as King? A little shepherd boy who would grow up to be a murderer and adulterer. What about the apostle Paul? And what are you when God's promise is held out to you in the gospel of Jesus Christ? As Paul says, "all of us... have gratified the cravings of our sinful nature and followed its desires and thoughts... [all of us are] by nature objects of wrath." (**Eph 2:3**). God does not owe us salvation. The promise God has made to save is a promise of pure grace.

5. God is Faithful and Keeps His Promises

And we see God faithfully keeping his OT promises in at least three ways. First, he's done it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Far from being merely the tragic work of wicked men, far from being Satan's triumph over Jesus, the cross was God's triumphant victory over sin and Satan's power. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "**For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.**"

Second, God continues to apply his promise to us through the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus has sent as a down-payment and sign that the good things promised are true and already here. So Paul goes on in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, "**And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us,²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.**"

How does the Holy Spirit do this? By applying the life of heaven to our lives on earth. By producing in us the fruit of the spirit, which is heavenly fruit. By confirming to us that we are indeed God's children, as he testifies to our own spirits and leads us to call God Abba, Father. Christian, do you see the evidence of the Spirit in your life? Then take heart. For it is the Spirit's work to give us confidence that God has kept and is keeping his promise, and that the day will come when he will redeem his down-payment with payment in full.

Third, we know that God has already bound Satan. He cannot deceive God's elect. But we also know that God will ultimately defeat Satan and the powers of this world. We read about this in the final chapters of Revelation.

6. God Is Trustworthy and Will Fulfill What He Promises

In this we learn that God is absolutely *trustworthy*. The problem with promises that we make is that they are only as good as our intentions, and only as trustworthy as our ability to perform them. This means that even the best of us are by nature promise-breakers. But not God. When God makes a promise, you can take it to the bank. For he cannot lie, so his promises never deceive. Consider Jesus' words in John 10:27-30, "**My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and**

they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

If you are here this morning, and you have truly repented of your sins and placed your trust in Christ, then you can be certain that God will preserve you till the end. That certainty has nothing to do with the strength of your faith or the righteousness of your life. It has everything to do with the power and faithfulness of God. As Paul says, **“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** (Phil. 1:6) Christian, God keeps his promises. Always. You can count on it. Does that mean that it doesn't matter how we live? All we have to do is make a decision for Jesus and go on as we had before? Not at all. As we consider the fact that redemptive history is structured by this pattern of promise/fulfillment and that history is all about this delay in between the two, we not only learn about God, we learn about what he intends for us as Christians. There is mercy not just for the non-Christian in God's delay; there's mercy for the Christian as well.

7. God Intends For His People to Be Purified

One of the constant refrains in the Old Testament is that God uses suffering, and even chastisement, to refine his people and to purify them. It's the image of smelting, in which the dross is removed and the pure precious metal remains behind. So in **Psalm 66**, looking back on the wilderness wandering and the difficult days of the Judges, the psalmist acknowledges: **“For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.”** Zechariah, looking forward to the Messiah says the same thing. God says, **“I will bring into the fire, I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.”** Friend, if you are a Christian, you need to understand that though this world means it for evil, God intends the suffering in your life for your good. He is sanctifying you. Just as Christ “learned obedience from what he suffered,” as he entrusted himself to God in the wilderness temptation, so we learn to put our faith solely in God through our suffering in this life. “God's discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who are trained by it.” But it's not just our purification God's after. He's also patient in keeping his promise because he's concerned to reorient our hope.

8. God Intends to Reorient Our Hopes (58)

This world constantly sings a siren song of hope in our ears, urging us to invest ourselves here, to live for this life, to save up earthly treasure, to cultivate the praise of men. It's a beautiful song, but like the sirens, it is a song that will lead us to destruction. God knows this, and he wants us to come to the same realization. And so when he saves, he does not whisk us off to heaven. But he leaves us here, in part to learn that this world is not our home, and to grow in us a “longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” His desire is that we would grow weary of the lies and pretenses and broken promises this world peddles, and instead with Abraham, live as an alien here, all the while “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

9. God Intends for His People to Persevere to the End

It matters how we live. Jesus made that promise about his sheep, and he said his sheep listen to him and follow him. How do you know that you have truly believed in Christ? The Bible tells us that it's the very nature of a Christian to repent and follow. Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:22, **“The one who endures to the**

end will be saved.” It is the grand mark of a Christian, not that he does not sin, but that he perseveres to the end. So put no confidence in some decision you made yesterday or 10 years ago. Rather, examine yourself today, to see if you are in the faith. Does this mean that it all depends on our efforts? No, it all depends on God. Yet God has determined to use our efforts, that our hopes might be reoriented and that we might grow in holiness. Philippians 2:12-13, **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”**

10. God Intends for Us to Work

What is holiness? It's not simply being set apart from sin. It's being set apart to the glory and love and work of God. John 9:4, **“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.”** Matthew 9:37-38, **“Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”**

THE END OF THE DELAY

It's a day we still look forward to. That day, when Christ returns, and we enter into the full redemption, not just of our souls, but of our bodies too. The end of the delay. For God means to fully and finally deliver his people, not just from the guilt and condemnation of their sins, but from this very body of death. Friend, Christ is coming back. And on that day, the trumpet of God will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. The dross will be gone. The sin will be gone. Sanctification and suffering will give way to glorification and joy. On that day, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. As Paul declares with a shout of joy—“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” **(1 Cor. 15)**

So Christian, stand firm. Persevere. Your faith and labor is not in vain. Christ has kept his promise; he has delivered you from sin and Satan's power. And he has promised never to leave you, not even to the end of the age. It's a promise he will certainly keep. For He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” **(Rom 8:32)** There is no better promise maker; there is no other promise keeper.