

# The PROMISES of GOD

Taking God at His Word



**Kurt DeHaan**



*introduction*

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Taking God at His Word

**n human terms,** promises are easily broken. In God's terms, they are a sure thing.

Knowing what God has promised us and how he keeps his promises gives us assurance, hope, and peace. This booklet guides us through a study of what the Bible says about the promises of God.

Use it as a starting point for your own discovery of the vast wealth of promises our faithful God gives to us.

*Mart DeHaan*

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*one*

# God's Faithfulness to His Promises

**K**ofi didn't like to publicize his problems, but when an American church brought him to the USA for a speaking tour, people naturally asked questions about his ministry. One day a pastor asked him: "What do you need help with?" Instantly Kofi knew the practical answer to that question. He directed a school and an orphanage and had planted more than twenty churches across two countries in West Africa. "We need about a thousand dollars to repair our

van's engine," he said. "It is not possible for me to cover our region on my bicycle. With a reliable vehicle, I can transport the necessary resources and co-workers." He didn't tell the pastor about the patchwork maintenance, the balding tires, the rusted doors, and the cracked and aging hoses.

"We'll get you that money," announced the well-meaning pastor. "I'll have our treasurer send a check."

*What an answer to prayer!* Kofi thought. Soon he returned to his country with the good news. Weeks passed. Then months. Eventually he sent a gentle inquiry to the pastor who had promised to help. He got an apologetic reply saying the money would be on its way soon. More time passed. The dilapidated van sat in the compound, a rusting monument to broken promises. The money never arrived.

Have people ever let you down? That question belongs in the same category as: Is water wet? But what about this question: Has *God* ever let you down? Before you answer, let's put it another way. Have you ever felt that God didn't keep his word? Have you wondered—even complained—that he didn't come through in the way you thought he should?

We know that God has promised to protect and care for his children.



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Perhaps we've  
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He has promised to make us strong, to fill our hearts with joy, and to give us peace. God has promised to answer our prayers. Yet at times those promises seem empty. Our prayers for a rebellious child seem to go unanswered. Inflation and bills gnaw away at our paycheck. Someone close to us dies of cancer. Neighborhood crime gets worse. Terrorists plague the world. And Jesus hasn't returned to make things right. Joy and peace seem like dreams.

The Bible tells us, "The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does" (PSALM 145:13). What happened to all the promises God has made? Perhaps we've misunderstood. Or maybe we're just expecting too much.

## PROMISES IN THE BIBLE

The way some people use the term, a promise is nothing more than a good intention easily discarded. Like the proverbial rule, promises are made to be broken. But when God makes a promise, it's backed with more than just good intentions and wishful thinking. He is giving us his absolutely trustworthy word.

Although the promises<sup>■</sup> of God are the heart of the Bible, Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, doesn't have a specific word<sup>■</sup> for *promise*. Yet we clearly see the concept throughout its pages. In the cultures of the Old Testament, when anyone spoke of what they would do in the future, the word *promise* fit well. The speaker's word, honor, and integrity were at stake when making a verbal commitment.



🔔 *Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel **just as he promised**. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. 1 KINGS 8:56*

🔔 *The words (**amar, dabar**) translated into the English word **promise** mean "to say" or "to speak."*

The New Testament idea of promise follows the same pattern. God stands behind what he says. The term comes from the Greek word *angelia*, which means "announcement" or "message." Everything God has spoken, every announcement, every message, is a promise based on God's perfect, good, and trustworthy character.

## PROMISES ARE TRUE TO GOD'S NATURE

We may have a problem keeping our promises. But God is different. He has all the power and wisdom in the universe at his disposal. He will never have to make an excuse for failing to fulfill what he has promised, and we have no excuse for not believing him.

Hudson Taylor, renowned 19th-century missionary to China, wanted little to do with the religion of his mother and sister, yet he couldn't deny the reality of their faithful prayers. It was in his teens that he put his faith in Christ. He later wrote this about his conversion experience: "Brought up in such a circle [of faith] and saved under such circumstances, it was perhaps natural that from the commencement of my Christian life I was led to feel that the promises were very real, and that prayer was a sober

matter of fact transacting business with God."<sup>1</sup> Simply claiming what was offered.

Yet this "business" does not mean we can manipulate or demand of God. He never advertises more than he can deliver. He's not out to deceive us. He offers what he wants us to have, and he wants us to have the best he has to offer—the joy of a close relationship with him now, and eternity with him and those who love him.

The Creator continues to be the Lord over all of life. By his nature God is good, merciful, and true to his word. The Bible tells us how God's promises reflect those qualities. Because he is all of those things, we do not have to fear when we hear that God keeps his promises *on his terms*.



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## **TYPES OF PROMISES**

God's terms for keeping his promises are clearly stated. What he promises, he will deliver. Some promises even come with an unconditional guarantee—he will hold up his end of the agreement no matter what we do. Then there are promises that carry with them directions (conditions) we must follow if we are to enjoy all that he offers. These

conditional promises depend on our fulfilling certain requirements.

## ***Unconditional Promises***

An unconditional promise is simply one in which God says he will do something, and nothing we can do will stop it from happening. The fulfillment of unconditional promises does not depend on the actions of people; only on God. Even if we are unfaithful, God cannot be anything but faithful to his word.

After the great flood destroyed everything, God gave Noah (and the world) an unconditional promise that he would never again send a global flood to destroy the earth (GENESIS 9:8–17). Many years later, God unconditionally promised King David that his royal line would last forever (2 SAMUEL 7:16). Because David was an ancestor of Jesus (MATTHEW 1:1, 6) and Jesus's kingdom will have no end (LUKE 1:32–33), God was faithful in this promise despite David's repeated shortcomings and failures.

When Jesus was on earth he promised that after he ascended to heaven he would send the Holy Spirit (JOHN 16:5–15). In Acts 2, we read exactly how that happened. He also promised that Satan's forces would never



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overcome the church (MATTHEW 16:18). And although much evil has been directed against the church down through the centuries, it still flourishes. Another promise—that he would return to earth to judge the living and the dead and fully settle his kingdom (MATTHEW 16:27; 25:31–46)—has yet to occur, but because this is an unconditional promise, no one and nothing can stop it from happening.

## ***Conditional Promises***

Some promises are like product warranties. They will be fulfilled only if the customer meets the stipulations set up by the manufacturer. That was the case in the Garden of Eden. God promised that Adam and Eve would enjoy life in the Garden on the single condition that they didn't eat the fruit of a certain tree. Not keeping that condition would result in death (GENESIS 2:16–17).

The covenant God made with Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai contained many conditions. Prior to giving the Ten Commandments, God told Israel that if they kept the conditions of the covenant agreement with him, he would care for them as his special treasure (EXODUS 19:3–6). Several of the Ten Commandments state the results of missing or meeting God's conditions. The Lord said he would punish all who worshiped idols but he would show love to those who loved him (EXODUS 20:4–6). He promised to declare guilty anyone who spoke his name in a disrespectful or contemptuous way (EXODUS 20:7). He promised long life in the Promised Land to those who honored their parents (EXODUS 20:12).

In Exodus 23:20–33, God told Israel he would

wipe out their enemies when they entered Canaan. He would take away sickness, and give long life and no miscarriages. However, the conditions included paying attention to and obeying the angel of God, worshiping God, and not making a covenant with their enemies or allowing them to live in the Promised Land. Later God promised success, prosperity, and protection *if* the people obeyed the Law of Moses (JOSHUA 1:7–9). Unfortunately the Israelites did not hold up their end of their agreement and these blessings were forfeited.

➤ *These promises, while giving us an indication of God's nature, are not intended to be applied **universally**. They were specifically given to the nation of Israel.*

After the Israelites settled in the land God promised them, they became dissatisfied with judges as their rulers; they wanted a king like other nations. Even though God's original plan didn't include a king, he provided one, promising the people good things *if* they honored and obeyed God. Yet he warned of judgment if the king or the people rebelled (1 SAMUEL 12:13–15). Their first king, Saul, didn't last long before disobeying God. Because Saul failed to keep God's commands, he forfeited the throne (1 SAMUEL 13:13–14).

Many of us cling to the promise *if* you "Take delight in the Lord," then "he will give you the desires of your heart" (PSALM 37:4). This fits well with the promise in the New Testament: *If* we seek what has eternal value, God will take care of our temporal needs (MATTHEW 6:25–34). But

if we expect this to mean a large bank account, huge retirement plan, or big vacation home, we're probably going to be disappointed. Those are our desires when we pursue the values of the world. But if we pursue what God delights in and seek things of eternal value, our heart's desires will be significantly different.

The prophet Jonah gave God's conditional promise to the wicked people of Nineveh. He announced that the city would be overthrown within forty days if its citizens did not repent (JONAH 3:4). Much to Jonah's surprise, the people did turn to God and the city was spared. But it didn't last. The Ninevites eventually returned to their old ways, and God held to his promise. ▀



*Forgiveness is free and waiting for us, the only condition to receiving it is that we must confess that we need forgiveness.*

▀ *More than **100 years after Jonah prophesied**, the prophet Nahum warned Nineveh, "The LORD is slow to anger" but also "the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished" (NAHUM 1:3). Invading forces comprised of Babylonians, Chaldeans, Medes, and Persians turned Nineveh into a ruin that would not be discovered until the 19th century.*

[The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, 2009, Vol. 4, pp.489-492]

Perhaps the most familiar and arguably the most important conditional promise is found in the New

Testament: God will forgive *if* we confess (1 JOHN 1:9). Forgiveness is free and waiting for us, the only condition to receiving it is that we must confess that we need forgiveness. We must admit that we are sinful people who need a Savior. This confession doesn't earn God's forgiveness. Recognizing our need is simply saying to God, "I want the forgiveness you are offering." In our "civilized" world, we consider ourselves independent, strong, capable, intelligent and overall, pretty good—certainly not sinful. Our perception makes it difficult to realize the importance of this necessary first step to receive the free gift of eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, by Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, edited and revised by Gregg Lewis, © Copyright 1990 by Discovery House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p.7.



*two*

# How God Fulfills His Promises

## GOD FULFILLS SOME PROMISES IN PREDICTABLE, EXPECTED WAYS

**As we look at** some of the promises and prophecies of the Bible, we see that many have already been fulfilled. In many cases the fulfillment of the promise was clear and undeniable, just as expected. When God told Pharaoh that he was going to send a plague of frogs, he did just that (EXODUS 8). When he told David that his son would build the temple, Solomon was born and he built it (2 SAMUEL 7:1–17; 1 KINGS 5–8). When God said that Judah would be judged for her unfaithfulness and sent into



exile, that's exactly what happened (JEREMIAH 25). Jesus said the temple would be destroyed with not one brick left on another, and in AD 70 it was totally demolished (MATTHEW 24:2).

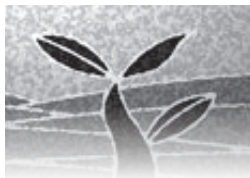
🔪 *When the Roman general Titus overran Jerusalem, his soldiers set fire to the Temple, completely destroying it. Its devastation occurred on the same date in the Hebrew calendar (the 9th of Av) that Solomon's Temple had been ransacked and burned in 586 BC. The day also marks the observance of several other major tragedies in Jewish history. [<http://www.jewishhistory.org/destruction-of-the-first-temple/>]*

But God sometimes fulfills his promises in ways we could never have imagined.

## GOD FULFILLS SOME PROMISES IN UNEXPECTED, SUPERNATURAL WAYS

At times, the Lord has used methods we could easily understand. He sent his people into battle with a promise of victory, and he gave them strength and strategy to overcome their enemies. On other occasions, he did the unexpected. He defeated Pharaoh's army as they pursued the escaping Israelites (EXODUS 14), he caused the walls of Jericho to collapse (JOSHUA 6), and the angel of the Lord destroyed 185,000 Assyrians (2 KINGS 19:35). God can fulfill his promises in unexpected and supernatural ways.

Sometimes we have a hard time recognizing how God has fulfilled a promise or imagining how he will fulfill it. When God promised in the Old Testament that he



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would send a Messiah, few people expected a Messiah like Jesus (ISAIAH 53; MATTHEW 1). No one expected the way God brought both Jews and Gentiles together into the body of Christ, the church. No one anticipated such a long time between Messiah's work as Redeemer and his future work as Judge and King.

On many occasions, the apostle Paul used the word mystery to describe the way God's plan

of salvation has been fulfilled in Christ. Among these mysteries is the establishment of the church as central to God's plan to fulfill his promises (EPHESIANS 3:8–10). And at the center of God's mysterious fulfillment of promises is Jesus Christ. The Old and the New Covenant promises are based on and find their fulfillment in what Christ has done and will do.

➤ *For a full treatment of these **Old and New Covenant promises**, it is wise to study Romans 9–11, Galatians 3–5, and Hebrews 7–10. Romans outlines God's selection, rejection, and ultimate salvation of His chosen people. Galatians provides an overview of the law's relationship to God's promises and our freedom in Christ. Hebrews details the preeminent role of Christ in all of this.*

While we try to figure out how God is going to answer a prayer or fulfill his promises, he is calmly and

powerfully working out his plans behind the scenes and in ways and for reasons that we may not comprehend. It should not surprise us that in Isaiah 55, the Lord described our inability to understand his methods: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (vv. 55:8–9).



*Although his reasons may elude us, and his methods may surprise us, God always fulfills his promises.*

Although his reasons may elude us, and his methods may surprise us, God always fulfills his promises. As the apostle Paul said: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 CORINTHIANS 1:25).

## **GOD FULFILLS SOME PROMISES THROUGH SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS**

God fulfills many of his promises in visible ways. The Psalms contain statements about the power of God to bless the righteous with protection, wealth, health, and long life. We would be wrong, though, to expect nothing but physical prosperity in this life. ▀ God often shows his faithfulness by providing invisible, spiritual blessings.

One look at the life of King David demonstrates this. His life consisted of repeated conflict, family dissension, and physical maladies.

🔊 *It is true that **we will reap what we sow** (GALATIANS 6:7–10), but that does not mean that we will reap all the benefits (or the bad results) in physical, tangible ways in this life. Many of those results will come to full fruition in eternity.*

Job was a righteous man who feared God, yet he suffered terrible illness and the loss of his family and possessions. Even his closest friends weren't supportive; they made the mistake of assuming that right living translates into a trouble-free life. Yet Job didn't quite despair. He was wise enough not to give up hope in God and stated that all this would "turn out for my deliverance" (JOB 13:15–16).

The apostle Paul went through all types of good and bad experiences, yet he found that in all of life he could be content because God gave him strength (PHILIPPIANS 4:11–13). To him God's faithfulness—a spiritual blessing—was far greater than anything he could possess on earth.

## GOD FULFILLS HIS PROMISES IN PART NOW, MORE LATER

Some promises may be fulfilled in part because only a portion of the conditions have been met, or the promises may be fulfilled in stages according to God's plan. For example, the Lord told the Israelites coming out of Egypt that he would drive out the nations before them

and give them the Promised Land. They were to do this in stages (DEUTERONOMY 7:22). But because they didn't follow God's instructions they only drove out some of the people, and consequently enjoyed only part of God's blessing.

The Old Testament promises concerning the Messiah were fulfilled in part with Christ's first coming; others will be fulfilled when he returns. The prophets spoke of a coming king who would be from the line of David, a king who would restore Israel's status as God's special nation (JEREMIAH 33:14–26). Jesus fulfilled the part of the promise about the suffering Servant (ISAIAH 53) and will one day return to set up his eternal kingdom.



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## **GOD FULFILLS HIS PROMISES THROUGH HIS TIMING**

Many of us have difficulty understanding God's timing and how he fulfills his promises. We can't wait. We expect results today or tomorrow, not years from now.

As time-bound human beings, we can't grasp God's eternal purposes (ECCLESIASTES 3:11). The perpetual changes of life are part of God's pattern and plan for all

the ages, but from our perspective it looks like a tangle of threads. When we don't see his promises becoming reality right now, we become impatient and are tempted to ask hard questions of God. But his timing is best.

✎ *The author of Ecclesiastes puts **God's timing** into proper perspective: There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens . . . [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. . . . God will bring into judgment both to the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed (ECCLESIASTES 3:1,11,17).*

Hebrews 11 lists some Old Testament saints who realized that God fulfills his promises according to his timetable. These people lived by faith, believing that God would eventually do all he promised, even if they did not understand why the Lord delayed action for years or even beyond their lifetime.

Abraham is the preeminent example. When God told him to pack his bags and travel to the land of promise, Abraham went, though he didn't know where he was going. The Lord told him that he and Sarah would have a child, yet he waited until their old age to fulfill his word. And Abraham had to imagine a future when his descendants would inherit the Promised Land. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph knew of God's promise for their descendants, but they never saw them fulfilled (HEBREWS 11:20–22).

Moses knew that the Lord would rescue his people, but he had to wait until he was 80 years old before God used him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He even chose

mistreatment in the short run so that God would reward him later (HEBREWS 11:24–26).

All of the promises of God are fulfilled in his perfect timing, according to his wisdom. Many of those promises are fulfilled now. Many await fulfillment. All who trust Christ for forgiveness of sins receive that forgiveness and new life immediately—along with many spiritual benefits (JOHN 3; EPHESIANS 1). And while some people experience the evidence of God's love and care through prosperity of life and good health, others experience the love and strength of God through poverty and sickness. In all cases, though, God is true to his word. He keeps his promises.



*three*

## Discerning God's Promises

**If you want to stand** on God's promises, you need to be sure you are on solid footing. Our spiritual lives must be founded on what God has said, not merely on what we *wish* he had said or what we *think* he might have said. We need to be sure we are not misquoting the Lord when we claim a biblical promise for ourselves.

### KNOW THE CONTEXT

A basic rule of interpretation that applies to the whole Bible also applies to our interpretation of biblical promises:



*know the context.* This involves two aspects. First consider the context of the immediate setting by looking at the surrounding verses. Does the interpretation fit the context?

Second, weigh the context of the promise by considering how the passage relates to the entire Bible. God does not contradict himself. The interpretation of the promise must be in harmony with all of Scripture. This step requires a growing knowledge of the Bible and a dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding of it.

Without these two steps of careful discernment, we may simply miss the point of what God has said. Or we may understand a biblical promise accurately but fail to see that God gave the promise to someone else in a particular situation. Many people quote Bible verses as promises to them as individuals when in fact the promises were given to specific people in the Bible, to a nation, or to people of a certain time period.

## **IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE**

Proper interpretation also includes knowing who the promise was given to. Some of God's promises are to everyone, some are to all who believe in Christ, others are to a group of people (Israel, other nations), and still others are to individuals.

When you read the Bible and come across a statement that sounds like a great promise, you shouldn't immediately claim it for yourself, even though it may be tempting to do so. Perhaps you are unemployed and having a hard time making your savings stretch, and you open your Bible

to the place where God gives a beautiful promise about being prosperous and living in a land flowing with milk and honey. You might get excited if you didn't read further to learn that the promise was given specifically to Israel prior to occupying the Promised Land. 🏠

🏠 Although **such a promise** is limited to whom it is addressed, it does reflect God's ability to prosper anyone he chooses to prosper.

The author of Psalm 145 recognized that while some of God's good promises apply to all people, other promises apply only to a select person or group: "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. . . . You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. . . . The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy" (vv. 9, 16, 18–20).

Before we can claim one of God's promises, we need to know if the promise given included us.

## ***God's promises to all people***

A few of the promises that apply to all inhabitants of the earth include: salvation to those who believe and condemnation to all who reject Christ (JOHN 3:16–18); history that will culminate according to God's master plan (DANIEL 7–12); a day of judgment for believers (2 CORINTHIANS 5:10) and unbelievers (REVELATION 20:11–15); a promise that God's character will not change (JAMES 1:17); rewards for all who diligently seek him

(HEBREWS 11:6); and the certainty that everything he says will happen will happen (MATTHEW 5:18; 24:34–35).

## ***God's promises to believers***

God's promises both conditional and unconditional are numerous. He equips us with all we need to live on earth as his beloved creatures. He promises to provide power for living (EPHESIANS 3:20) and strength to do his will (PHILIPPIANS 4:13) by giving us spiritual gifts (1 CORINTHIANS 12). He will not only provide for our physical needs, he will give us mercy and grace in times of need (HEBREWS 4:16) and all we need to live for him (2 PETER 1:3–4). He promises to give us wisdom when we are tested (JAMES 1:5), as well as a way to defeat temptation (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13). He will free us from sin's grip (ROMANS 6:22) and provides the ability to make Satan flee (JAMES 4:7). He will also forgive our sins (1 JOHN 1:9) and give us peace of mind (PHILIPPIANS 4:7).

He assures us that we have access to him through prayer (EPHESIANS 3:12), that he will provide help in our praying (ROMANS 8:26), and that he will answer our prayer (MATTHEW 7:7–11; 1 JOHN 5:14–15).

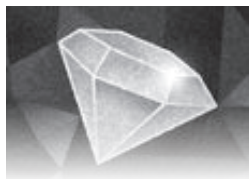
When our lives come to a close, we are assured of salvation (JOHN 10:29), eternal life (JOHN 3:16; 5:24) with a home in heaven (JOHN 14:1–4), and rewards for service (2 CORINTHIANS 5:10). And when the time comes, God promises us resurrection to glory (1 THESSALONIANS 4:16–17).

## ***God's promises to specific individuals***

Many biblical promises have application only to one individual or a specific group. God promised to rescue

Noah and his family (GENESIS 7:1), to give Abraham an abundance of descendants (GENESIS 12:1–3; 15:1–6), and to provide his chosen people with a land of “milk and honey” (EXODUS 3:8). He gave Moses miraculous signs (EXODUS 4:1–17), Joshua a dry path to cross a river (JOSHUA 3), and Gideon victory over the enemy (JUDGES 6:16). Later he promised King David a son who would be qualified to build the Temple (2 SAMUEL 7) and King Solomon great wisdom and wealth (1 KINGS 3:10–14). He answered King Hezekiah’s prayer by promising him healing and a longer life (2 KINGS 20:5–6). Many years later, he promised Mary she would conceive a child in a supernatural way (LUKE 1:26–38).

Even though some promises were given to specific people, the principles behind these promises can in some cases apply to us, and in other cases cannot. If the promise reflects an unchanging characteristic of God and how he relates to us, then we can reasonably assume that because he is unchanging he will continue to reflect that promise in relating to other people. For example, when the Lord told the apostle Paul, “My power is made perfect in weakness,” he was addressing a specific situation in Paul’s life—the “thorn in my flesh” of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; yet that truth applies to all people who recognize their weakness and reach out to God for strength.



*When the time comes, God promises us resurrection to glory.*

An example of a promise that we can't rightfully claim is the one given to Joshua when the Lord said, "I will give you every place where you set your foot" (JOSHUA 1:3). That might sound like a great promise to claim if we are looking for a home and don't have enough money, but we would be out of order to do so. Yet that promise could legitimately remind us that God can give us anything he in his wisdom and power chooses to give us—including a home we can afford.

## ***God's promises to Israel***

The history of God's chosen people, Israel, has been one of repeated promises and the people's failure to benefit from God's gracious offers. The entire Old Testament—the books of Moses, the Writings, and the Prophets—are full of promises. These come in the form of assurances of God's love and care for his people, as well as prophetic statements about the future of Israel and the surrounding nations. A few of the many promises to Israel are: possession of the land of Canaan (GENESIS 13:14–17); the Law's blessings and curses (DEUTERONOMY 28); judgment, exile, restoration (THE PROPHETS); and a Messiah (ISAIAH 52–53).

⚠ *We must be careful, however, in applying these promises to the political nation named **Israel**. The Israel of the Old Testament and the state of Israel today are not the same. The Israel of the Old Testament are descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people, designated as a nation when they exited Egypt. The Israel of today is a democratic, Jewish-majority state that occupies an area of land decided upon by the United Nations General Assembly after World War II, in 1947.*

## EXPECTATIONS AND EMOTIONS

At times we may fall into the trap of thinking that God will keep his promises in the way we expect. We might assume that he will do something in an obvious or immediate manner rather than in a method that becomes apparent over time. We may expect him to change our external circumstances and environment when what he really wants us to see is that his promises can be fulfilled through inner changes in us.

God is into long-range planning. We see only the surface, here-and-now events, and we do not know how God is working behind the scenes to fit the pieces together to form an overall pattern. The ways God has acted in the past, though, show that he fulfills many promises in stages or in unexpected ways.

Our emotions have a way of taking over our lives. Wrong emotions can overrule right thinking. If we have been hurt, we may blame God for not doing what we believe he promised. The death of a loved one can cause us to lose perspective if we allow our feelings to override the truth about God. A failed romance or marriage can trigger doubts. Personal rejection, failure, loss of a job, physical pain, or injustice can stir up feelings against God that become stronger than any force of reason.

## OUR PROMISE-KEEPING GOD

In 1967, two little boys accompanied their missionary parents as they traveled on the freighter *African Lightning*. It was the most economical way for them to return to the mission field. En route, the family befriended the ship's

engineer. One day he told the boys of his own son, now a teenager, who no longer played with his GI Joes. He promised to send them to the boys when he returned to his home in New York.

The boys' father didn't want to say anything, but he doubted the action figures would ever arrive. The return voyage would be too long; the chief engineer would forget; the family's destination was too remote. Surely, something would interfere with the fulfillment of that promise.

And then one day two GI Joes arrived in a package at the mission station. The boys were overjoyed! That chief engineer had kept his promise.

It's almost natural for us to be skeptical about someone keeping a promise, because we know that even the best of us are fallible and flawed. Yet when we keep our promises, we honor our promise-keeping God.

We may forget the evidence of God's faithfulness in our lives. We may fail to recall how he has fulfilled his promises to us in the past. As a result, we can lose confidence in his ability to be faithful in the future.

But we have a God who never fails. Jesus gave this assurance to those who trust him: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (JOHN 10:27–30).

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. As he said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (HEBREWS 13:5). That's a promise we can always count on. 🌿

## appendix

# What about Proverbs?

**The book of Proverbs**<sup>1</sup> presents a different problem. We must be careful not to assume the book contains God's individual promises to us. The proverbs are promises in the broad sense that they describe how God rewards those who fear him and live wisely, and how he opposes those who disregard him and live foolishly.

🔗 *It's fascinating that **Ecclesiastes** follows **Proverbs** in the Bible. Solomon compiled most of the Proverbs and wrote Ecclesiastes, yet the two books present what at first glance appear to be starkly different views. Taken together, however, they make good sense. Proverbs shows us how to live wisely, and Ecclesiastes highlights the folly of living for this life only.*

We can run into problems if we do not interpret the proverbs within the larger context of Old Testament wisdom writings and in light of all biblical truth. The proverbs offer practical wisdom about the effects of our actions. For example, a person who lives a life of violence



can expect to be a victim of violence (PROVERBS 1:18–19). Ignoring the wisdom of the proverbs will *likely* lead to a shortened, problem-filled life (PROVERBS 1:19–33) instead of a life that enjoys the favor of God (PROVERBS 2:1–8). Every proverb, though, should not be understood as a promise of here-and-now results.

↗ *This does not mean that victims of **violence** are violent people, nor does it mean that all violent people meet a violent end. Psalm 73 is one example of a Scripture that laments the fact that violent people sometimes seem to get away with it. Yet the psalmist understood “Those who are far from you will perish; . . . but as for me, it is good to be near God” (vv. 27–28).*

Many verses in Proverbs seem to promise wealth, health, safety, and happiness to those who follow the path of wisdom (PROVERBS 3); or that the righteous person will not go hungry (PROVERBS 10:3) and will be untouched by trouble (PROVERBS 19:23). No one would deny that these proverbs do reflect the general principles of how God has designed life to operate—we reap what we sow. But life is not always so predictable, as the experiences of Job, David, Solomon, Paul, and other Bible characters demonstrate. In many cases, God has something better in store for a person than immediate blessings; such people are laying up treasure in heaven. The proverbs, therefore, provide down-to-earth principles for everyday life. The person who wants to be wise and enjoy God’s favor will read Proverbs and put its God-fearing instruction into practice.



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