

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

GOD'S PROMISES

The true hope of salvation in Jesus Christ, the hope of the gospel, is founded upon promises made by God in the Bible. These are described by the Apostle Peter as “great and precious promises”, by which we may share “the divine nature”, that is, eternal life (2 Pet. 1:4).

A promise is an undertaking from one person to another, guaranteeing to do or give something *in the future*. The promises of God are concerned with the future, both of mankind and of the world He has created. Unlike men's promises, which can be and often are broken, God's promises cannot fail. But to become effective for any individual, they must be *believed*; in Biblical terms, *faith* is the belief of God's promises, centred in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The phrase ‘to give one's word’ has the same sense as ‘to promise’. In the Scriptures, God *gives His word* concerning the future, with all the force of a promise. All of the prophecies in the Bible concerning the future are therefore, in a sense, promises. But those principal promises that constitute the gospel are linked to *covenants*, or binding agreements. It is remarkable that the Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, should be prepared to enter into covenants with mortal men and women, and to affirm them by solemn oaths, but this is what the Bible records.

The beginning of the promises

The expression of God's gracious intention to save sinful men and women begins in Scripture immediately after the Fall of Adam and Eve, in this pronouncement: “I will put enmity between thee [the serpent] and the woman [Eve], and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Although enigmatic, these words foretell a conflict between good and evil that would be resolved by the victory of a Saviour provided by God, the promised *seed* (or descendant) of Eve.

In the course of time, man's wickedness drove God to bring the judgement of the Flood upon the earth. But in the aftermath, He made a second great promise to faithful Noah: “I will not again curse the ground any more . . . While the earth remaineth . . . summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (8:21,22). This promise of the permanence of the earth was confirmed by a covenant, made by God with all flesh, and symbolised in the rainbow (9:11-13).

God's promises to Abraham

The next great development in the unfolding of God's promises for the future was made to Abraham (originally Abram). He was called by God, about 2000 B.C., to leave his home in Mesopotamia to journey to Canaan, which was to become known as the *Promised Land*. The promises God made to him were amazingly wide in scope:

“I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2,3);

“Lift up now thine eyes, and look . . . for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever” (13:14,15);

“Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be” (15:5).

Abraham's belief in the last of these promises from God was "counted . . . to him for righteousness", in other words, his sins were forgiven because of his faith (v. 6; cf. Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23).

These promises once again focused on the promised *seed*, descended from Abraham, eventually revealed as the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). The multiplication of that seed "as the stars of heaven" refers to the multitude of people of all ages who would gain salvation through Jesus, by believing the same promises (Dan. 12:3; Heb. 11:12,13).

God endorsed His promises to Abraham by covenants, first a covenant for the land of Israel (Gen. 15:18) and then one with his seed, that He would be *their* God. This was marked in Abraham's natural descendants, the nation of Israel, by the rite of circumcision (17:1-14). Finally God sealed all of His promises and covenants with a solemn oath:

"By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD . . . that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (22:16-18).

These promises, subsequently reiterated to Isaac and Jacob (Israel), are the very foundation of the gospel of salvation (Gal. 3:8,9). They require that Abraham and all the faithful must rise from the dead, as Jesus did, in order to enjoy them (Acts 24:14,15; 26:6-8).

God's promises to David

Nearly 1,000 years after Abraham, when his descendants, the nation of Israel, had become a kingdom in the land of promise, God made further momentous promises to David the king: "I will set up thy seed after thee . . . and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be My son" (2 Sam. 7:12-14). These promises too were affirmed by God by covenant and oath (Ps. 89:3,4), and were reiterated by the angel Gabriel at the annunciation of Jesus's birth (Lk. 1:32,33).

God's promises to Jesus

All of these promises are centred in Jesus, the Son of God (Acts 13:32,33; Rom. 15:8,9; 2 Cor. 1:19,20), and so the New Testament begins with the words: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of *David*, the son of *Abraham*" (Mt. 1:1). But there are other promises in the Old Testament directed personally to him.

For example, Jesus is personally promised rulership of God's Kingdom: "Ask of Me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession" (Ps. 2:8). Exalted to God's throne in heaven, Jesus is affirmed by an oath to be a priest or mediator for all believers: "Sit thou at My right hand . . . The LORD hath sworn . . . Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:1,4; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 5:5-10).

God's promises to us

While God's promises cannot fail to be fulfilled, for us as individuals they are *conditional* upon our faith, our covenant with Jesus the Saviour through baptism, and a patient seeking for godliness: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . . And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:27-29). By believing and acting upon God's promises, we can obtain eternal life and share in the marvellous blessings of God's Kingdom which is to come on this earth.

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