

Ask a Pastor

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Rev. Brian Bill

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1. I found God. I have a relationship with God. I know he exists and I know He is with me. However, God made promises and didn't deliver and I am right back where I started when God started to answer and communicate. I lost my job again, put down my cat and my dog, am divorce 5 years and have two disabled children. If God is love and I freely love just to have my heart broken again and again. Why do I have a relationship with God when He isn't delivering on His promises? Why even make the promises? Why would God talk to me in the first place?

Wow, you've really been going through a hard time. I can't imagine how difficult it must be to be out of work, for your marriage to end in divorce, for your pets to die and to care for two disabled children.

I like how James MacDonald defines promises in his book, "Always True." Here's what he says: "A promise is the assurance that God gives to His people so they can walk by faith while they wait for Him to work."

I find that it's helpful to establish some guardrails on the pathway to God's promises.

1. Put the promises in their context to get their full meaning. One of the most popular promises is found in Hebrews 13:5: "***Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.***" This is so comforting, isn't it? But we seldom quote the first part of the verse: "***Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said...***" Because of the promise of God's presence we can live free from the love of money and become more content with what we have. Now that's a promise we all need.

2. Be careful about claiming someone else's promise. Let's take a look at a very popular passage in Jeremiah 29:11: "***For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.***" Let's go back to verses 1-3 where we see that this is actually a sentence from a letter sent to Jewish exiles living in Babylon.

In verses 4-9, the people are told to "***Build houses and settle down...increase in number...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.***" They're also warned about not listening to false prophets.

Then in verse 10, we hear the promise: "***When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.***" This promise was given to those in captivity. They were going to be there for 70 years, and then God would fulfill His plans for them.

This promise is actually even more powerful when we realize the people it was first directed to and the problems they were facing. With that as a brief background, let's look at Jeremiah 29:11

again: *“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”* Here are some truths that jump out at me:

- **God is a promise-keeper.** Who else keeps a promise for 70 years?
- **God knows everything.**
- **God is not out to harm us.**
- **God wants to help us.**
- **God has plans for us.**
- **With God our future is filled with hope.**

3. Focus on promises that are repeated elsewhere in the Bible. One way to know if a promise is universal is to find the same promise in other places in the Bible. For example, Joshua 1:5 is a promise to Joshua: *“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* Let’s return to Hebrews 13:5 where we see that this promise is restated for *all* believers: *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*

4. Be willing to accept all God’s promises, not just the ones you like. For example, God also promises persecution and suffering and difficulty for the Christ-follower. I came across this quote recently that I think is really helpful: “Our suffering is made worse in this country because no one tells us it is coming.” But Jesus tells us that trouble is coming in John 16:33: *“In this world you will have trouble...”* We can’t just put the pleasant promises up on our walls and act surprised when suffering comes. Having said that, hold on to the second half of this verse because we know that we don’t suffer alone: *“...But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

5. The ultimate aim of God’s promises is to glorify Himself. Be careful about demanding that God must do something for you. We can’t just name it and claim it without worshipping the Name that is above all names and desiring that He display His honor and glory. Psalm 119:38: *“Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.”*

6. Some promises are conditional. God will do His part when we do ours. Often we see this in the use of “if/then” passages. Notice Deuteronomy 11:22-23: *“If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow – to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him – then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you.”* Conditional promises are also found in the New Testament. Here’s one from James 4:10: *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*

7. Promises must be appropriated and applied by faith. Charles Spurgeon once said: *“Do not treat God’s promises as if they were curiosities for a museum; but believe them and use them.”* By the exercise of our faith, God’s promises become personal. Hebrews 4:2: *“...But the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.”* One time we’re told that Jesus did not do many miracles in a town *“because of their lack of faith”* (Matthew 13:58).

This is clearly seen with the giving of the land of promise (that would be Wisconsin) in the Book of Joshua. Joshua 21:43: *“So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their*

forefathers...” The promise of land was given to them but they had to take possession of the promise to make it their own: “...and they took possession of it and settled there.” Let’s not be like the people described in Psalm 106:24: “*Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise.*”

8. Don’t be passive about God’s promises. Friend, if you want to profit from the promises, you can’t be passive about them. Hebrews 6:12: “*We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*” Charles Finney put it like this: “*The promises were made to be used by God’s children, by all who will believe them and appropriate them.*” Proverbs 13:4: “*The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.*”

9. Make sure you are prepared to receive God’s promises. God is looking for surrendered hearts and for those who are quick to confess sin. Psalm 66:18: “*If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*”

10. Hold on to hope. Sometimes we have to wait a long time before a promise is fulfilled in our lives. Hebrews 10:23-24: “*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*” Don’t give up. Don’t bail when you think God has failed you. He hasn’t. Hebrews 10:36: “*You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*”

Can I ask you a question? When you wonder “*Why would God talk to me in the first place?*” are you referring to an experience you had? Do you think you heard the audible voice of God? Let me caution you to focus on the promises that we have in God’s Word and not put your faith in what you think God may have told you or an experience you may have had.

I leave you with the powerful promise found in 2 Corinthians 1:20: “*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.*” The promises of God are not “yes” and then “no.” They are not “I don’t know” or “Maybe so.” The promises of God are always yes.

The context here is that some Christians were accusing Paul of breaking his promises because his travel plans changed and he was not able to come to Corinth. Some were even casting doubt on the message of Christ that he preached so he wrote back to establish that he was not a promise breaker. And God certainly isn’t either. I wrote down these statements as I reflected on this passage.

- **God’s promises are many, running from Genesis to Revelation.**
- **These promises are made by God Himself and therefore will be kept.**
- **These promises reflect God’s character.**
- **These promises are established beyond all doubt.** The word “yes” is a Greek expression and means certain and true. Someone has said that God’s favorite word is “yes.” “*Amen*” is a Hebrew phrase and means “so be it” or “it’s already done.” It can also mean “fully accomplished.”

- **All of God's promises are fulfilled in the person of Christ.** We could say that all of the conditional promises are kept by Christ. We could change the "if" to "since." Since He has fulfilled all of the Father's conditions, *then* all God's promises come through Him because Immanuel is God's Amen. Revelation 3:14: "***These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.***"
- **These promises come through Christ but must be claimed by us ("spoken by us").** One must know Christ in order to claim the promises that come through the Promised One. God is looking for people who say "yes" and "Amen" to Him. Most promises are for believers only.
- **These promises are given for the glory of God, not just for our good.**

I hope that helps!