July 23, 2017

Hebrews 6:13-20, Psalm 34:15-19 “Promises”

Rev. Pat Weatherwax

13 When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,14 saying, “I will surely bless you and multiply you.” 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. 16 Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. 17 In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, 18 so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. 19 We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

**INTRODUCTION**

When I was a child I loved it when my oldest brother sang solos in church. He was enough older than me that I greatly adored him and his wonderful bass voice. I memorized most of the songs he sang. One favorite was about God’s promises. He sang:

WHAT GOD HAS PROMISED

God has not promised skies always blue,

Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;

God has not promised sun without rain,

Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

But God has promised strength for the day,

Rest for the labor, light for the way,

Grace for the trials, help from above,

Unfailing kindness, undying love.

(Author: Annie Johnson Flint)

Part of Hebrews 5 that I haven’t spoken on was verses 11-14, addressing “spiritual maturity”. Understanding that song about God’s promises and being a mature Christ follower, at least in part, means giving up the childish notion that God is our fairy godmother who is supposed to grant all our wishes, or be like Mighty Mouse, swooping down to rescue us from all danger. (Lots of you are too young to remember the promise of Mighty Mouse: “Here I come, to save the day!”) Promises are part of life.

There are lots of promises in the Bible, and some even wishfully; Psalm 37:4 says the LORD “will give you your heart’s desires”. Psalm 14:6 says: “God will protect his people”. Verses like that are ones we have to read with a spiritual not literal lens.

[www.365Promises.com](http://www.365promises.com) is a daily Biblical promise blog. A lovely picture and a lovely scriptural promise is published new every day. According to one person’s count there are 3,573 promises in the Bible, spiritual promises often taken out of context. The *word* promise is in the book of Hebrews multiple times, speaking to promises of the past and in the future. We are sometimes, especially in relation to Old Testament history, referred to as “heirs of the promise” (v. 7).

**OLD TESTAMENT PROMISES** set the stage, lay the foundation for what we *are* promised by God. God’s promises are a huge part of the Old Testament narratives and why we study them.

Two different types of promises are common. I found them categorized as carnal (physical) promises like battle victories and manna from heaven, and evangelical promises like “God will be with you and will send you a redeemer”.

Joshua began his leadership of God’s people by hearing this promise from God: “Do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9)”. He concluded his leadership, in his farewell speech: “You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God has given you has failed” (Joshua 23:14). He heard promises, lived them and proclaimed them.

Abraham, mentioned here in Hebrews 6:13, was promised that he would be the patriarch of God’s people. With that promise, he, and all his descendants, ***including us*** are “blessed to be a blessing to all peoples on earth” (Genesis 12: 1-3). With the promise of God’s blessing comes the responsibility to live as God’s gift to make this world a better place.

There’s another Old Testament promise depicted on the bulletin cover. Promises are like good memories: you hope they last forever. But of course memories are quirky, and we remember the goofiest things. I remember teaching a children’s Sunday School class one day many years ago. As it happened I only had one student, which was not atypical. Matthew was a smart little kindergartener at the time. I told the traditional Noah and the ark story (from Genesis 6-9) without a script, and concluded with “and the rainbow in the sky is our reminder: God promised never to destroy the earth again!” Matthew corrected me! “No, Mrs Weatherwax, God promised he would never destroy the earth with a ***flood*** again!” The kid knew the Biblical account better than I did. He was right, and theologically we tend to minimize that potential- God could give up on us again. When we see the rainbow we remember the promise but, and also should stand in respect and awe of the power and potential God holds!

There are lots of promises in the Psalms, too. They are often honest laments and realistic reminders of how life plays out. A favorite is Psalm 34, Hear verses 15-19

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,

and his ears are open to their cry.

The face of the Lord is against evildoers,

to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,

and rescues them from all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,

and saves the crushed in spirit.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,

but the Lord rescues them from them all.

But, snap. What *doesn’t* that Psalm promise? An easy life! Here’s what it does promise. “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.”, and “The LORD is *near* to the brokenhearted”.

Near? How about never, as in *never* brokenhearted? Nope. It even promises “many are the afflictions of the righteous”! “God has not promised skies always blue”, but has promised presence and direction and compassion.

As I went to [www.BibleGateway.com](https://www.biblegateway.com/) to copy and paste Psalm 34 to this manuscript, their verse of the day was there, from Isaiah 41:10, more promises:

Do not fear, for I am with you,

do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

We are people of the promises of God. Knowing, believing and trusting the promises are the basis of our faith. Faith is believing God’s promises, as recorded in the Bible. One of my favorite faith statements says the Bible is “inerrant in what it intends to teach”. It intends to teach us that the promises of God are to be trusted. It doesn’t intend to teach us to that God grants wishes like a fairy godmother or swoops in to save us from danger like Mighty Mouse.

The first promise in the Bible, in Genesis, is a “messianic” promise. Messianic, as in it’s “about the one who will save us”. Not messy, but promising that the mess sin caused will be made right by God (Gen 3:15). Messiah means “promised deliverer”. We find the messianic promises being explained and fulfilled in what the New Testament teaches.

**NEW TESTAMENT PROMISES**

For example, in Hebrews 6: 19-20, Jesus, the Messiah, on all our behalf entered “behind the curtain- the inner sanctuary” into the place where only the high priest was allowed to go, to sacrifice for sin. Last Sunday we heard in Hebrews 5 that Jesus took the role of the high priest and became for us the only and final high priest necessary and effective for removing our sin. Jesus is our “high priest forever”. That’s the promise- Jesus is the unique redeemer, without ever being relieved of that duty. Forever for us.

Interestingly the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John very rarely use the word promise. Jesus certainly predicted and explained a lot of things. To be sure there are great passages that tell of us God’s care and comfort, just like in the Old Testament. A local favorite is the “Beatitudes” found in Matthew 5. Like the Psalms, Jesus was also very frank about how life really works, that “God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45).” Jesus never promised life would be fair or that good, caring, giving people will be rewarded in this life. Most gospel promises are eternal promises!

**ETERNAL PROMISES**

The Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession (5.087) assures us that our faith’s promises “were then and are still now of heavenly and eternal things, namely divine grace, remission of sins, and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Divine grace, forgiveness and eternal life- these are the promises the Bible intends to teach us. Of these promises I found many examples. In 2 Peter 3: (9 and 13) “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.... But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

Hear this promise from Titus 1:2, we have: “the hope of eternal life, which God who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time”. And the conclusion to Hebrews 6. Today we live in the way we are instructed and promised that we could:

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

**MELCHIZEDEK**

And then, once again, Another “oh, by the way.” Melchizedek is mentioned again in today’s Hebrews passage. Yes, he’s back, but we’ve opted to continue to ignore him for now. We conquered the pronunciation. *Melchizedek*. We’ve caught that he was important in the Old Testament, as a specific high priest. He comes back again next week, and we can’t ignore him again. The next several chapters speak about him. I promise to have good answers about Melchizedek, and what this order was all about, and why, or even if he’s important when considering God’s promises through Jesus the Christ.

**SO**

Our scriptures are filled with promises, and with accounts of people who lived in them and proclaimed them. We can read them and experience them and trust them.

We sang it earlier. With and in faith we believe the promise of “forever”, every day of our lives:

I sing for joy at the work of Your hands

Forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand

Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.

Nothing compares to the promise I have in You. CCLI# 637582

Amen.