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## WHAT IS A PROMISE?<sup>1</sup>

*There is something more necessary than the effort to exercise faith in each separate promise that comes to our attention. That is the cultivation of a trustful attitude toward God—the habit of always thinking of Him, of His ways and of His works, with bright, confident hopefulness. In such soil alone the individual promises take root and grow up.*

ANDREW MURRAY

IT HAD BEEN A HECTIC DAY. The phone started ringing at six in the morning and I had been going nonstop since. Meetings with people—comforting some and exhorting others—had filled my day, and now I was ready for some time alone to relax and recharge my mental and emotional batteries. The delicious dinner was just settling and I had begun to look for some interesting reading material when my daughter, Amy, approached me and said, “Well, Dad, what game are we going to play tonight?”

I groaned inwardly and tried to plead some excuse about being tired, but to no avail. Her entreaties were now joined by the chorus of her two brothers, Michael and Stephen, all suggesting possible activities for our family fun night. Still I was slow to respond to their enthusiastic suggestions, thinking more of my own needs than theirs, and they were quick to perceive my reluctance.

“But, Dad, you promised!” they said in unison.

They were right; I had promised to spend the night playing with them, and they had the right to expect me to comply with that promise. Remembering that the image children have of their heavenly Father is formed to a great extent by their relationship with their earthly father, I put down my reading material and enjoyed an evening playing Monopoly with my family.

The Bible contains God the Father’s promises to His children, along with other types of teaching and guidance to help us come to know and serve Him better. In fact, there are three main types of Bible content that we should note in our personal devotions and Bible study times: commandments, principles, and promises. These are given to us that we might know more of God’s character and that we might demonstrate this character in our daily lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 from Yeakley, Tom, *Praying over God's Promises: The Lost Art of Taking Him at His Word*, (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2015) , <https://www.tyndale.com/p/praying-over-gods-promises/9781631463785>. Used with Permission.

## Commands, Principles, and Promises

Let's look briefly at each of these categories and consider how to apply each one to our lives.

*Commands* are God-given laws and instructions. They demand obedience from us. The most well-known are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Other examples are

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)

“Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”  
(1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

Principles differ from direct commands. Principles are spiritual truths from the Bible that are found using accepted rules of interpretation. When interpreting a passage of Scripture, we observe the facts of the passage and then derive the meaning for the original audience, always being careful to note the historical, cultural, and literary context of the passage. Then we ask ourselves what application, if any, this interpretation has for us today, remembering that there is one interpretation, but many applications for a given passage of Scripture. This three-step method of Bible study—observation, interpretation, and application—will help us discover many biblical principles that we can apply in our daily lives.

An example of a biblical principle is found in Romans 14:23: “The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” The context concerns whether or not a believer should eat meat or become a vegetarian. Paul declares that all food is clean and therefore may be eaten by Christians (verse 20). But in addition to considering the effect on others if we eat meat, we must also examine ourselves to see if we have doubts about it. If we do have doubts, it is better not to eat meat, for it would be sin for us to do so. The principle for us today is this: When facing practices in which our participation is morally dubious, we must examine ourselves to see if we have doubts about participating. If we have doubts, we should not proceed, for to do so would be sin for us.

Besides commands and principles, the Bible also contains numerous promises for believers. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines a promise as a "declaration that gives the person to whom it is made a right to expect or to claim the performance or forbearance of a specified act." Thus, a worthy promise is a statement we can trust, one in which we can put our full confidence. But promises are only as good as the character and resources of the promise maker.

Suppose that today I were to promise to give you one million dollars tomorrow. No doubt you would be excited about the possibilities of spending or investing the money. However, you're in for a disappointment. I may have had the best intentions in making my promise, but unfortunately my resources are not adequate to fulfill it.

But praise God; His promises are different! A promise from God is a pledge or declaration made by the living God. It gives us, as believers, the right to claim in our prayers His faithfulness to His pledge. We can expect that God will fulfill His promises because His perfect character and infinite resources back up what He has promised. He will be faithful to His Word. We can depend on it!

God gives promises that we might grow in Christlikeness and that we might live victorious lives above the current of sin in the world. Ask the Lord to help you become more proactive in pleading the promises in His Word.

## **Types of Promises**

There are a couple of different ways of categorizing promises, but let us note first that all promises require faith for their fulfillment, for as Romans 4:16 reminds us, "The promise comes by faith." Faith is necessary in order to receive God's promises, but not a great amount of faith. What we need is faith in a great and faithful God. As we grow in our knowledge of God—His character and greatness—our faith will also grow.

One way to categorize the Bible's promises is to divide them into general promises and specific promises. General promises are given to many people and for all time. Key words in some general promises are "whoever," "he who," "believe," and "obey," indicating the conditions for the fulfillment of these promises. Some examples of general promises are:

"Whoever believes in him [God's Son] shall not perish but have eternal life."  
(John 3:16)

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them . . . will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." (John 14:21)

“Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”  
(Galatians 5:16)

“Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” (Ephesians 6:2-3; see also Deuteronomy 5:16)

I can’t tell you how precious my wife and I found God’s general promises during the months rapidly approaching the delivery date of our first child, Michael. We lacked all of the necessities for a new baby. As struggling graduate students with little money, saving as much as possible to pay the anticipated doctor and hospital bills, we had no extra funds for those essential baby items. We were brand-new at this; we needed everything. What should we do?

As Dana and I prayed together about this, the Lord reminded us of His promise in Philippians 4:19: “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” We made a list of all the things that we needed—genuinely, desperately needed—for our new addition. Everything from two dozen diaper pins to a bassinet, from a changing table to rattles. We daily prayed and asked our heavenly Father to provide for us as He had promised. And one by one these items were given to us until everything on our list was provided. God cared not only for the physical provision for our child, but also for our confident peace of mind. Our faith took another step of growth through that experience.

Besides general promises, God sometimes gives us specific promises that relate to our unique situations and times. The Holy Spirit impresses these special passages of Scripture on our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that this is part of His special leading. The immediate context of the passage may seem unique to a biblical person in ancient times, but today’s recipient hears God’s voice speaking to his or her heart concerning his or her current situation.

Though such personal promises are a means by which God reveals and confirms His will to us, we must always remember that this is a very subjective process. “The heart is deceitful above all things,” Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, and we are capable of reading into certain passages of Scripture what we want to see. We can deceive ourselves if we are not careful.

General and specific promises are given to believers for guidance and encouragement. Though general promises are many, specific promises are few. We should not expect to have specific promises given to us very often, and when we do find one, we must be certain that it is God speaking to us. A key is to have an attitude of expectancy as we approach the Scriptures, longing to meet with God and to hear His voice, expecting to fellowship with Him through His Word. Most of the

time we will find encouragement and comfort from the general promises in the Word. But occasionally the Lord may also impress upon our hearts some passages of Scripture that will be very specific for our current situation or need, involving an interpretation that most people would not take from the passage. We are also to believe and act upon these special promises.

Another way to categorize the Bible's promises is to divide them into *conditional* and *unconditional* promises. Some promises are conditional upon our fulfilling certain acts of obedience before we will see God's fulfillment. Without our meeting these conditions, the promise will not be fulfilled. Abraham was given a great promise of blessing from the Lord, yet he still had to leave his home, extended family, and friends and go to a place that would later be shown to him. The great potential of the promise would have gone unrealized had he not acted upon it. The promises of God are ours as well, full of potential blessing and encouragement. Yet we sometimes have to act upon them if we are to experience the potential.

For example, in Galatians 5:16, the promise, "You will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" is dependent on the condition that we "live by the Spirit." And the promise "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" will be fulfilled when we obey the associated command, "Honor your father and mother" (Ephesians 6:2-3; see also Deuteronomy 5:16).

In contrast, unconditional promises will be fulfilled for the believer in Jesus who simply accepts them by faith as being true. For example, the one who has placed genuine faith in Jesus need do nothing more in order to be assured of eternal life (John 3:16) or any of the spiritual blessings listed in Ephesians 1:3-14. That said, even though we are freely given these unconditional promises, we still must choose, by faith, whether or not to live in the full experience of their assurance and enjoyment. Pleading these promises in prayer is one way to enter into their fullest blessing.

## **Promises and Discerning God's Will**

Knowing how to discern God's will for us and finding His path forward can be challenging. With so many options and competing voices, the cacophony can be distracting or confusing at best. How can we know His will for us?

Specific promises are helpful, but, because discerning such promises is a subjective process, this type of guidance should be used in conjunction with the five other means the Lord uses:

- *Clear commands and principles from the Word of God.* Since God is always truthful, no subjective guidance from Him will ever lead us in a way that would contradict His revealed Word (Psalm 119:105).
- *Inner conviction and peace from the Holy Spirit.* When we pray about our situation, God's Spirit, who dwells within us, will confirm with our spirits that we are on the right path. This does not mean that we will have all the answers for our questions, but there will be quietness within our souls that He is leading us (Isaiah 30:21).
- *Wise counsel from mature believers.* In the abundance of counselors is much wisdom (Proverbs 15:22). Therefore, we seek a general consensus from those who are mature in the Lord, who want God's best for us.
- *Critical thinking.* I often write out pro-con lists when making a major decision. Dawson Trotman, the founder of The Navigators, said that "God gave you a lot of leading when He gave you a brain. So use it!" Proverbs 3:5-6 doesn't tell us not to use our understanding; it says not to lean on it—that is, don't place your total confidence in your ability to think or use logic alone for discovering God's will. His will for us can be counterintuitive or illogical from the world's perspective.
- *Providential circumstances.* The Lord can direct through open doors as well as closed doors. But we are not necessarily expected to walk through every open door. Our adversary can also open doors of opportunity to get us off track. Paul was directed by God on his second missionary journey when he ran into three closed doors, finally receiving a vision that directed him to Europe (Acts 16:6-10).

God wants us to know His will. He designed us to accomplish it. Thus He will direct us if we ask Him and use discernment to ensure it is His voice we're hearing, not just our own desires. As Romans 12:1-2 confirms, the key to knowing God's will is our willingness to obey it. God, being God, has no trouble communicating; He can easily cause all five of these guidance methods to align and point to a common pathway. The challenge is in following the path! For God's path requires faith and often sacrifice, and those can scare us.

I remember facing just such fear at a key turning point in my life. It was the fall of 1979, and I was two years into my veterinary medicine practice at a central Indiana equine clinic. For some time I had been wrestling with the idea of leaving the practice to join Navigator staff full time. We had been involved with a ministry to married couples at Purdue University for about seven years, and God seemed to be leading us into a full-time ministry position. As I thought through this decision, one of the nagging questions that persisted was how would I provide for my family? Or rather, how could God provide for my family? At that time we had two children, and I knew that joining The Navigators meant living by gift income. The

Navigators, being a faith mission, do not guarantee a salary for their staff. All staff live by faith on the donations of interested friends and churches. Poverty—even a lack of the necessities of life—was a major concern as I considered this calling.

One morning in my devotional time I was studying and meditating in the book of James. God spoke to my heart as I read James 2:5:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

It was as if God was saying, "Tom, what's the worst that could possibly happen?"

Well, I thought, we could become poor, not having enough money for what we need. But actually, James says that God has given the poor great faith; so in reality poor would be a blessing rather than a burden. A lack of money would become an opportunity to grow in faith as we see God provide.

From that day I began to pray over this passage, asking God to make me rich in faith as we stepped out from a regular salary and began to live by faith from gift income. The Lord used this passage, along with several others, to help confirm His will in leading me out of a career in veterinary medicine and into a career in missions. And I can now testify to God's faithfulness; He has increased our faith as well as provided very well for our family for the past thirty-six years.

The more we use the five means of guidance, the more confidence we can have that God is leading us. If, for instance, I had a specific promise and inner peace about something, yet godly counsel and circumstances were against it, it would be unwise to proceed. It may be that I have misinterpreted God's leading, or it may simply be wrong timing. In either case, waiting would be the best solution. Time tends to clarify the uncertainties. Those people who press ahead in situations like these usually regret it afterward. As Proverbs 19:2 reminds us,

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,  
nor to be hasty and miss the way.

Or, said another way, "There are good decisions and fast decisions, but few good, fast decisions." Impatience is often a sign of spiritual immaturity.

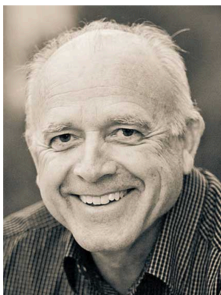
It is not difficult for God, being sovereign and omnipotent, to lead us, and He knows our difficulties in discerning His will. We have Jesus' promise that the Holy

Spirit, who lives within us, will guide us (John 16:13; Psalm 32:8). A sincere believer, who is truly seeking God's will, can be certain of being led by Him.

### FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

Think of a scriptural promise you would like God to fulfill in your life. Is it a general promise, or is it specific to you? Is it conditional or unconditional for you as a believer in Christ?

In light of your answers, what is your next step in this journey of faith as you trust Him and His promises?



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Tom's primary passion is helping leaders live and lead like Jesus. He is author of *Praying Over God's Promises*, *Growing Kingdom Character*, and *Growing Kingdom Wisdom*. He served as General Editor of the *Collegiate Devotional Bible*. Tom frequently speaks at conferences, leadership symposiums, and is actively involved in mentoring leaders. He is also the author of a weekly leadership blog – "Developing Kingdom Leaders."

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