

Living By God's Promises¹

CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Promises of God

We love the Puritans and enjoy reading their writings. They have had an unmistakable influence on our lives and ministries. One reason they are so impressive is because God blessed them with profound insights into the truths of Scripture, which, in turn, produced appropriate and thorough applications. The Puritans sought to unfold the essence of truth for our understanding even as they drew attention to the wide-ranging influence of this truth for our practical application.

This is precisely the strength and enduring blessing of their treatment of God's promises. The Puritans do not speak about the applications or uses of God's promises until *after* they have instructed the mind and educated the understanding with regard to those promises. "Before we can *apply* the promises," they reason, "we must first *understand* their nature and various kinds, and appreciate their excellence and worth; we must know the foundation on which they are built and the spring from which they gush forth; we must be certain as to whom they belong and the various properties or characteristics inherent in them that urge both our faith in them and our use of them. Only with these track lights in place can we traverse such a broad terrain, avoiding both neglect and presumption, and encouraging both faith and use."

So our love for the promises of God begins with the Puritan understanding of their nature, their kinds, and their excellence and worth, for we are certain that the best structures begin with the best foundations. The tree left standing when the storm is passed is the one with the deepest roots.

The Nature of the Divine Promises

Edward Leigh began his treatise on the divine promises by saying the Word teaches us in three ways: through *precepts* or *commandments*, which teach obedience; *threats*, which restrain

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This book draws from Puritan treatises on divine promises and offers them in contemporary language for today's readers. Based on the writings of three Puritan authors, Edward Leigh (1603-1671), William Spurstowe (1605-1666) and Andrew Gray (1633-1656), the quotations are drawn from the following three volumes:

- Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of the Divine Promises. In five Books. In the first, A general description of their nature, kinds, excellency, right use, properties, and the persons to whom they belong. In the four last, A declaration of the Covenant itself, the Bundle and Body of all the Promises, and the Special Promises likewise, which concern a mans' self or others, both Temporal, Spiritual, and Eternal* (London: A. Miller for Henry Mortlocke, 1657)
- William Spurstowe, *The Wells of Salvation Opened: Or, A Treatise Discovering the nature, preciousness, usefulness of Gospel-Promises, and Rules for the right application of them* (London: T. R. & E. M. for Ralph Smith, 1655).
- Andrew Gray, "Great and Precious Promises," in *The Works of Andrew Gray* (repr., Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 115—168.

disobedience; and *promises*, which confirm our obedience.² The promises of God must be distinguished from His commandments and threats because the promises do not tell us our duty or what God will do if we fail in our duty. Rather, they confirm what God, motivated by His sovereign mercy and good pleasure, will do for us. Thus, a promise reveals a truth that will benefit us in particular. It declares God's will concerning the good with which He will bless us or the evil He will remove from us. The promises of God are a storehouse of blessings and a chest of goodwill bequeathed to us by our heavenly Father.

Leigh says the promises are “the grounds of our hope, the objects of our faith, and the rule of prayer.”³ We hope for what God has promised us because we are unable to look for anything besides what He has already declared He will bestow. If we hope for the things the Lord has promised us, our hope is solid. Without God's promises, we are either hopeless or overly hopeful.

The promises of God are likewise the objects of our faith in that we may believe whatever is promised because of the One who promised it. We may believe the promises of God because they are the promises of *God*, not the promises of man. Balaam urges this belief in God's promises in Numbers 23:19, saying: “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” The promises of God are sure words to be believed because God stands behind them. Whatever is believed without a promise is only presumed (Hebrews 11:11).

Finally, the promises of God are the rule of prayer. Just as we hope for and believe what God has promised, so we must pray for what God has promised. David makes this evident in 2 Samuel 7:27, when he prays, “For thou, O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house: therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee” (cf. Luke 1:38). Having the promise of God in hand not only emboldened David's hope and strengthened his faith, but it also fed and informed his prayer. Truly, we do not have a prayer without the promises of God.

Andrew Gray, in the first of five sermons on God's promises, defines a promise as “a glorious discovery of the *goodwill* of God towards sinners, and withal, a *purpose* and *intendment*, and, if we may say, an *engagement*, to bestow some spiritual or temporal good upon them, or to withhold some spiritual or temporal evil from them.”⁴ In other words, a divine promise declares God's goodwill, purpose, and intention toward sinners. It reveals what the Lord our God *will* do on our behalf; not what He *hopes* to do or will *attempt* to perform, but what He has already committed and bound Himself to *accomplish* for us. Gray goes even further in using the word *engagement* to stress that the Lord, by making a promise, so binds and engages Himself to it that

² Leigh, 1.

³ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴ Gray, 117, emphasis added.

it will assuredly come to pass. This agrees with Leigh's point that the promises of God are promises of *truth*, for the certainty of their fulfillment rests in the One who made them and bound Himself to them.

William Spurstowe indicates much the same regarding the nature of God's promises when he says that a promise is "a declaration of God's will, wherein he signifies what particular good things he will freely bestow, and the evils that he will remove."⁵ In this sense, a promise is a kind of "middle thing," Spurstowe says, between God's purpose and performance, between His intention of good and His execution of it upon those whom He loves. This is so inasmuch as the good that God purposes and intends to do for us, He reveals to us ahead of time by way of a promise, to grant us present comfort and to draw forth hope and expectancy. Thus, a promise is both the ground of present comfort and the expectation of future blessings.

Like Leigh, Spurstowe understands the importance of distinguishing God's promises from His threats and commands. A promise is different from a threat in that in a promise, God declares good rather than evil, and it is different from a command in that it concerns good things freely bestowed rather than a duty to be done.

Furthermore, Spurstowe suggests that the promises are "irreversible obsignations [seals] and declarations of God, which he has freely made" to believers.⁶ God's promises are objects of our faith and hope, for faith believes those things that God has promised are true, and hope expects the performance of what faith believes. We believe what God has promised because He has committed and bound Himself to act for us. We hope for what we believe because our faith is rooted in the sure Word spoken by Him who cannot lie.

As if singing three-part harmony, each of these Puritan friends sees God's promises as sovereign declarations of good to be bestowed or evil to be removed, which God makes known to us *prior* to their performance, so that we might enjoy comfort and assurance as we await the fulfillment of His Word. However, while the divine promises enjoy this essential unity as to their nature, there is a great diversity in the kinds of promises the Lord has made. We should know and understand that diversity so that we might profit from the promises as the Lord intends.

The Various Kinds of Divine Promises

In a most exhaustive yet helpful outline, Leigh suggests that the divine promises are legal or evangelical, general or particular, principal or less principal, direct or by consequence, absolute or conditional, and pertain either to this life or the life to come. Similarly, Gray distinguishes the promises as absolute or conditional; temporal, spiritual, or eternal; and extraordinary—given to a particular believer as a singular privilege—or common—promises to which every believer in Christ has a right.

⁵ Spurstowe, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

Legal promises are conditioned on perfect righteousness. An example of such a promise can be found in Jeremiah 7:23: “But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.” Given our sinful nature and inability to keep a single command of God, this class of promises would be ineffective for us had not Christ, as our Head, Representative, and Savior, rendered the righteousness on which they depend for fulfillment. Through faith in Christ, we uphold the law of God (Rom. 3:31; 8:1–4) and thereby become heirs of these promises (Gal. 3:14, 29).

Evangelical promises are conditional on believing and repenting (John 3:36; 2 Cor. 7:10). Leigh says these promises are given “to the worker, not for the merit of his work, but for Christ’s merit, in which both his person and work are accepted.”⁷ These promises are fulfilled, not for the sake of the person who believes or repents, as if those were meritorious acts in the sight of God, but rather because of Christ, the One in whom we have meritorious acceptance before God.

These two kinds of promises—legal and evangelical—are the root of all others. They not only show the importance of faith but make plain that the faith of those who inherit the promises of God must be in Christ, who alone has satisfied the righteous requirements of God’s law. These promises are not for Christ but for those He came to save and to make partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Any other faith is misplaced and is therefore useless.

General promises are indefinite declarations of good that God offers to all. There is no limit on who may believe and receive such promises because God designed them as the refuge of many and a primary means of drawing sinners to Christ (John 6:44–45). Those who by the grace of God see their sin and great need for Christ are wooed by these unrestricted promises to believe that *even they* may look to Christ and find salvation. John 3:16 states such a general promise: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” By contrast, *particular* promises are directed to special groups of people. In Exodus 20:12, God promises long life only to those *children* who honor their fathers and mothers. Likewise, in Numbers 25:12–13, the Lord promises a perpetual priesthood only to zealous *Phinehas and his descendants*.

Principal promises are spiritual and therefore are of the greatest concern. They include the promise of righteousness (Rom. 4:5) and the remission of sins (1 John 1:9). *Less principal* promises are temporal and include promises such as deliverance from affliction, safety in danger, health, and wealth. Isaiah brought such a promise to Hezekiah when the Lord said, “Behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years” (Isa. 38:5).

Direct promises are made to individuals, such as Paul on his tempestuous voyage to Rome (Acts 27:22–25), when an angel said to him, “Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee” (v. 24). Promises implied or deduced by

⁷ Leigh, 11.

consequences are evident in the examples or prayers of faithful saints, since what God promises to one He promises to all who are in an equal state. For example, in James 5:11, James encourages us to remain patient in suffering by promising God's blessing to those who remain steadfast. He grounds that promise in the Lord's dealings with Job. In the same way, we discover promises in the prayers of the saints by considering those things for which they prayed and afterward obtained. As Leigh says: "The faithful calling upon God and God's gracious hearing of them are as much as a promise that God in such and such things will hear us calling upon him. David made this a ground of his faith [in] Psalm 22:4–5."⁸ In addition, some promises can be distinguished as pertaining either to *this life*, whether spiritual or temporal, or to *the life to come*, such as the promise of eternal life.

Finally, and most importantly, we must distinguish between absolute and conditional promises. An *absolute* promise declares what the Lord determines to accomplish without any reference to what we do. Such a promise was indicated in Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin birth of Christ (7:14). The Lord made this promise absolutely and sovereignly. Another example is the absolute promise of a flood that the Lord made to Noah in Genesis 6:13.

Conditional promises, by contrast, are "no further promised than God in wisdom sees to be best for his own glory and his children's good."⁹ In this conditional way, subject to His glory and our good, the Lord promises all temporal blessings (which Lazarus lacked), freedom from all crosses and troubles (which Job suffered), freedom from temptation (which even Christ faced), less principal graces and the common gifts of the Spirit (which are variously distributed, 1 Cor. 12:8), and sanctifying grace (which varies among saints). All of these blessings are promised, but they are conditional on what God knows to be best for His glory and our good in particular situations.

Thus, absolute promises make known a certain and sovereign purpose, while conditional promises reveal what God will do if the fulfillment of those promises glorifies Him and is best for His people. We might say that with absolute promises we are passive recipients of God's sovereign pleasure, while with conditional promises something is first required of us. If we fail to meet this requirement, we may lose much spiritual comfort.

In discussing the important distinction between absolute and conditional promises, Gray says that absolute promises, such as God's sending His Son into the world, have no condition annexed to the performance of them, while conditional promises, such as the promise that he who believes shall be saved, require some condition to be met by the Christian before the promise is fulfilled. Gray then reminds us, "Yet there is not a conditional promise that is in all the covenant of grace, but it may be reduced into an absolute promise, in regard that the *thing* promised ...is an absolute free gift, and the *condition* of the promise is another."¹⁰ In other words, the root of

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Gray, 117, emphasis added.

divine promises is the sovereign goodness of God by which He purposes and engages Himself to do good to sinners, not because of any merit in them, but out of free grace, since even the condition required (faith, repentance, or the like) is itself of God (2 Tim. 2:25; Acts 13:48; John 6:44–45, 65). Gray’s words remind us of what Augustine prayed: “Command what Thou wilt, and give what Thou wilt command.”¹¹

What is the benefit of distinguishing between all of these kinds of promises? Leigh says that as “tradesmen sort their commodities, by which they live; so should believers sort their promises, upon which they trust.”¹² Some promises, such as Isaiah 40:31, offer encouragement; some, such as 1 Corinthians 10:13, give comfort; some bring rewards (Ps. 84:11); and some, privileges (John 1:12). Knowing what kind of promise we are dealing with not only guides us in appropriating it but also guards us against the evil of presumption.

The Excellence and Worth of the Divine Promises

Nothing is so excellent, so precious, and so sweet as a promise of God. The Scriptures call the promises the unsearchable riches of Christ, the bonds of love, and the inheritance of God’s people. They are “a rich mine of spiritual and heavenly treasures; a garden of [the] most precious flowers [and] medicinal herbs; they are as the Pool of Bethesda for all diseases, for all sorts of persons, and at all times.”¹³

Leigh says the promises are precious because God is the Author who gave them and Christ is the One who purchased them. They are precious in the free manner in which they are given and in the great and inestimable profit that flows from them. They are also precious because they promise eternal glory and virtue, and because through them we become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Gray identifies eight respects in which the promises are exceedingly precious. They are precious, first, because of the great price that was laid down for them, which was the blood of Christ. Second, they are precious because of the great things that are promised in them. Third, they are precious because of the great advantage afforded to a Christian who enjoys them. They are “the pencils that draw the . . . lineaments of the image of Christ upon the soul.”¹⁴ Fourth, they are precious because of their close relationship with Jesus Christ, for what are the promises but streams and rivulets that flow from Him? As Gray asks, “Can this fountain that is sweet in itself, send forth any bitter waters?”¹⁵

¹¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/juneweb-only/6-24-53.0.html>

¹² Leigh, 16.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gray, 157

¹⁵ Ibid.

Fifth, the promises are precious because they are the objects of faith, the precious mother of all graces. Sixth, the promises guide and lead us to Christ, for there is not a single promise that does not cry out to us in a loud voice, “O, come to Christ!” and there is no access to Jesus but by a promise. Seventh, the saints of all ages have found great sweetness and unspeakable delight in the promises. Eighth, the saints have a high and matchless account of the promises and thereby commend them to us. How can we doubt the preciousness of God’s promises when these arguments surround us like a cloud of witnesses?¹⁶

Spurstowe summarizes the excellence and preciousness of the promises in three main points. He says, first, the promises are precious because Christ is the root and principle from which the promises spring. Second, they are the objects of faith, through which they feed, nurture, and sustain every other grace. Third, the promises are precious because of what they contain to interest believers and give them a right to believe. Thus, we come full circle out of Christ and back to Christ: from Christ to the promises, from the promises to faith, and from faith to the things promised, the chief of which is Christ Himself, in whom are all other blessings!

Finally, as to the great and immeasurable worth of God’s promises, Spurstowe suggests that while the principle of every believer’s life is faith in Christ, the means of its preservation are the promises.¹⁷ From our implantation into Christ at the first to our full enjoyment of Him at the last, God’s promises are the chief aids to our life and our growth. Using 1 John 2:12–14 (“Little children, young men, and fathers”) as three stages of the Christian life, Spurstowe shows how the promises are suited to all phases of life. He says:

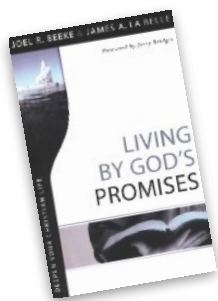
The promises are the *babe’s* milk by which they are nourished, the full breasts from which they suck both grace and comfort; they are the *young men’s* evidences, by which they are animated to combat with the wicked one, and assured of being crowned with victory over him; they are the *old men’s* staff, upon the top of which like aged Jacob they may safely lean, and worship God; it being a staff for power like Moses’ rod, and for flourishing like Aaron’s [rod], budding, blossoming, and yielding precious fruit. So that it is of more than ordinary concernment unto every one of them that look upon themselves as frequent use, and due application of the promises.¹⁸

We have now sketched with a Puritan pen the nature of God’s promises, the various categories into which they are grouped, and why they are so precious to us. With these three points in mind, we already have a better understanding of the divine promises than we did before. Yet we have barely scratched the surface of what the Puritans taught. If such gems and treasures are so readily apparent on the surface of our study, what diamonds will be found in its source? What sweetness can we expect at the fountainhead if the waters that flow from it are so profitable? Let us then follow the stream to its source.

¹⁶ Ibid., 157–58.

¹⁷ Spurstowe, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2-3



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