

CHAPTER 1

God's Great and
Precious Promises

GOD'S PROMISE

[God] has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.

—2 Peter 1:4

The contrast between the rabbi and the king was stark. The Jew was old and bent. He had no bodily advantage. Two years in prison had left him gaunt, his cheeks hollow and smudged. His purse had but a few coins and his entourage but a couple of friends. Baldness laureled his head. His beard was full yet gray. He wore the simple cloak of a teacher, a traveling teacher. Compared to the king, he was simple, impoverished. Of course, compared to this king, most people were simple and impoverished. King Agrippa entered the court that day with great pomp. He and his sister were arrayed in purple. Roman legionnaires followed. Agrippa was the appointed ruler, the curator of religion, and the overseer of the area.

Paul, by contrast, was a simple missionary. He had every reason to fear the judgment of this monarch. The king was the latest in the Herod dynasty, the last of the Herods who would meddle with Christ or his followers. His great-grandfather attempted to kill baby Jesus by slaughtering the children of Bethlehem. His granduncle murdered John the Baptist, and his father, Agrippa I, executed James and imprisoned Peter.

You might say they had it out for the people in Jesus' circle.

And now Paul stood before him. He was in prison, and in trouble, for preaching a new religion. How would the apostle defend himself? Appeal for mercy? Call for a miracle? In what was arguably the most important speech of his life, how would Paul present his case? After a word of introduction, he said, "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today" (Acts 26:6).

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

Paul's defense included no reference to his accomplishments. ("I have been known to call a person back from the dead, you know.") He demanded no preferential treatment. ("I am a Roman citizen.") He didn't attempt to justify his actions. ("I was only being open-minded.") None of that. His only justification was this: "I believed in the promises of God."

So did Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Add to that list Noah, Mary, a prophet named Isaiah, and a preacher named Peter.

The heroes in the Bible came from all walks of life: rulers, servants, teachers, doctors. They were male, female, single, and married. Yet one common denominator united them: they built their lives on the promises of God. Because of God's promises, Noah believed in rain before *rain* was a word. Because of God's promises, Abraham left a good home for one he'd never seen. Because of God's promises, Joshua led two million people into enemy territory. Because of God's promises, David conked a giant, Peter rose from the ashes of regret, and Paul found a grace worth dying for.

One writer went so far as to call such saints "heirs of the promise" (Heb. 6:17 NASB). It is as if the promise was the family fortune, and they were smart enough to attend the reading of the will.

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. . . .

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. . . . He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. . . . And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. . . .

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. (Heb. 11:7-17)

The list goes on for several verses. Jacob trusted God's promises. Joseph trusted God's promises. Moses trusted God's promises. Their stories were different, but the theme was the same: God's promises were polestars in their pilgrimages of faith. They had plenty of promises from which to pick.

One student of Scripture spent a year and a half attempting to tally the number of promises God has made to humanity. He came up with 7,487 promises!¹ God's promises are pine trees in the Rocky Mountains of Scripture: abundant, unbending, and perennial. Some of the promises are positive, the assurance of blessings. Some are negative, the guarantee of consequences. But all are binding, for not only is God a promise maker; God is a promise keeper.

As God was preparing the Israelites to face a new land, he made a promise to them.

Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you." (Ex. 34:10)

God did not emphasize the Israelites' strength. He emphasized his. He did not underscore their ability. He highlighted his. He equipped them for the journey by headlining his capacity to make and keep his promises.

From the first chapter of Scripture, the Bible makes a case for the dependability of God. Nine times the text reiterates "God said." And without exception when God spoke, something happened. Something wonderful happened. By divine fiat there was light, land, beaches, and

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

creatures. God consulted no advisers. He needed no assistance. He spoke, and it happened. The reader is left with one conclusion: God's word is sure. What he says happens.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
 their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
 he puts the deep into storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
 let all the people of the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
 he commanded, and it stood firm. (Ps. 33:6–9)

When God cleared his throat, the cosmos appeared. His authority was certain.

The same power is seen in Jesus Christ. On one occasion an officer in the Roman military asked Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus offered to go to the man's home. The officer refused, saying,

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. . . .”

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment. (Matt. 8:8–10, 13)

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

Why did Jesus applaud the faith of the centurion? Because the man believed in the power of Jesus to keep his word. In fact, this story gives us Jesus' definition of faith: *faith is the deeply held belief that God will keep his promises*. The Roman soldier understood this simple truth: God will not—indeed he cannot—break his promises. His covenants are contractually inviolable, written not in sand but carved in granite. What he says will happen.

It must happen! His promises are irrevocable because of who God is:

- He is unchanging. He sees the end from the beginning. He's never caught off guard by the unexpected. He makes no mid-course corrections. He is not victimized by moods or weather. "He never changes or casts a shifting shadow" (James 1:17 NLT).
- He is faithful. "God can be trusted to keep his promise" (Heb. 10:23 NLT).
- He is strong. He does not overpromise and underdeliver. "God is able to do whatever he promises" (Rom. 4:21 NLT).
- He cannot lie. "It is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18 NLT). A rock cannot swim. A hippo cannot fly. A butterfly cannot eat a bowl of spaghetti. You cannot sleep on a cloud, and God cannot lie. He never exaggerates, manipulates, fibs, or flatters. This verse does not say it is unlikely that God will lie or improbable that God will lie. No, the statement is clear: it is impossible! Scripture could not be more forthright. "God . . . cannot lie" (Titus 1:2 ASV). Deceit is simply not an option. "He doesn't break promises!" (Titus 1:2 THE MESSAGE).

This theme of God as a promise keeper stirs a childhood memory. When I was around twelve years old, I tagged along with my father as he went to buy new tires for the family car. Dad was from a small town

and simpler times. He was unadorned of fancy dress or wealth. He was a reliable oil field mechanic who loved his family, paid his bills, and kept his word. He was insulted by those who doubted his integrity. He was certainly insulted that day in the tire shop.

He selected the tires, and we waited as they were being mounted. When it came time to pay the bill, I stood by Dad's side at the counter as he wrote the check. The salesclerk looked at the check and then requested that my father produce some identification. Such a practice is common and unquestioned today, but in the 1960s a merchant seldom asked for verification.

Dad was taken aback.

"You don't believe I am who that check says I am?"

The clerk was embarrassed. "We require this of all customers."

"Do you think I am dishonest?"

"It's not that, sir."

"If you don't think I am good for my word, you can remove those tires."

I remember a long moment of awkward silence as the clerk weighed his options.

We went home with the tires. And I went home with a lesson on integrity. Good people are serious about keeping their word. How much more serious would a good God be? What was said about God's faithfulness to Israel can be said about his faithfulness to us. "Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (Josh. 21:45).

The question is not, will God keep his promises, but, will we build our lives upon them?

I have many quirks, not the least of which is a shaky left thumb. For the last decade or so, it has quivered. It's as if my thumb lives on a caffeine drip. Were I to secure a glass of soda left-handed, I would slosh it everywhere. But I'm not left-handed, so the quiver doesn't

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

bother me. I actually use it as a conversation starter. (“Hey, can I show you my shaky thumb? Now you show me your oddities.”)

I’ve grown accustomed to the localized tremor. At first, however, I wasn’t so calm. The shaking shook me. I thought something had come unwired. Because my father passed away from ALS, my imagination assumed the worse. The situation was especially unnerving because my left thumb follows me everywhere I go. When I comb my hair, there’s Old Wobbly. When I putt, guess who can’t settle down? If I raise my left hand to make a point in a sermon, you might not trust what I say because of the knockety knuckle.

I set up an appointment with the neurologist and entered his office with a dry mouth and dread. He reviewed my blood work and examined me. He had me walk, balance, and spin a few plates on my finger. (Just kidding. He didn’t make me walk.) He tapped my knee with a rubber hammer and asked me some questions. Then after an interminably long time, he said, “No need to worry.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“No treatment?”

“Nope.”

“No wheelchair?”

“Nope, not from what I can see.”

“You sure?”

He then did something profound. “I promise,” he assured me. “The tremor in your thumb is nothing to worry about.”

So I hopped down and thanked him and walked out. I felt better. I climbed in the car and began the drive home. While stopped at a traffic light, I noticed my left hand on the steering wheel. Can you guess what my thumb was doing? Yep. It was shaking.

For the first time since the tremor had appeared, I had the opportunity to look at it differently. I could ponder the problem, or I could

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

remember the promise. I could choose anxiety, or I could choose hope. I opted for hope. As corny as this might sound, I can remember saying to my thumb, “You’re not getting any more of my attention. The doctor made me a promise. You are harmless.” From that moment on, each time the thumb has misbehaved, I’ve thought of the promise from the doctor.

What is shaking in your world? Not likely your thumb, but possibly your future, your faith, your family, or your finances. It’s a shaky world out there.

Could you use some unshakable hope?

If so, you are not alone. We live in a day of despair. The suicide rate in America has increased 24 percent since 1999.² Twenty-four percent! If a disease saw such a spike, we would deem it an epidemic. How do we explain the increase? We’ve never been more educated. We have tools of technology our parents could not have dreamed of. We are saturated with entertainment and recreation. Yet more people than ever are orchestrating their own deaths. How could this be?

Among the answers must be this: people are dying for lack of hope. Secularism sucks the hope out of society. It reduces the world to a few decades between birth and hearse. Many people believe this world is as good as it gets, and let’s face it. It’s not that good.

But People of the Promise have an advantage. They determine to ponder, proclaim, and pray the promises of God. They are like Abraham who “didn’t tiptoe around God’s promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong” (Rom. 4:20 THE MESSAGE).

They filter life through the promises of God. When problems surface, they can be heard telling themselves, “But God said . . .” When struggles threaten, they can be seen flipping through Scripture, saying, “I think God said something about this.” When comforting others, they’re prone to ask, “Do you know God’s promise on this topic?”

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

The promises of God serve as an apothecary shelf of remedies. Just as the doctor might prescribe a medication for your body, God has given promises for your heart. He shares them as gifts from friend to friend. “Friendship with God is reserved for those who reverence him. With them alone he shares the secrets of his promises” (Ps. 25:14 TLB).

For every problem in life God has given us a promise. Make it your aim to get so acquainted with these promises that you can write yourself a prescription.

- I’m feeling fearful today. Time for me to open up a bottle of Judges 6:12: “The LORD is with you.” I will lay claim to the nearness of God.
- The world feels out of control. Time for a dose of Romans 8:28: “All things work together for good” (NKJV).
- I see dark clouds on the horizon. What was it Jesus told me? Oh, now I remember: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

After forty (!) years of ministry I’ve discovered that nothing lifts the weary soul like the promises of God. This book contains some of my favorites. Many of them are go-to promises I’ve turned to throughout the years to encourage others. And to encourage myself. We desperately need them. We do not need more opinions or hunches; we need the definitive declarations of our mighty and loving God. He governs the world according to these great and precious promises.

The circumstances of life or the promises of God—upon which are you standing?

Jesus told a story about two home builders. They had similar supplies and plans and identical aspirations. Each wanted to build a house. But one preferred the cheap and easily accessed land of sand.

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

The other opted for the more expensive yet more durable foundation of stone.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matt. 7:24–27)

What separates the wise from the foolish? Both men hear God's words. But only the wise man builds his house upon them.

How is your foundation holding up? I wonder if a modern-day version of the parable might read like this:

Two people set out to build their houses. The first went to RPF Home Supply: Regrets, Pain, and Fear. He ordered lumber that was rotted by guilt, nails that were rusty from pain, and cement that was watered down with anxiety. Since his home was constructed with RPF supplies, every day was consumed with regret, pain, and fear.

The second builder chose a different supplier. She secured her supplies from Hope Incorporated. Rather than choose regret, pain, and fear, she found ample promises of grace, protection, and security. She made the deliberate, conscious decision to build a life from the storehouse of hope.

Which of the two builders was wiser? Which of the two was happier? Which of the two is most like you?

By the way, I'm standing on a promise as I share these words.

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

As the rain and snow come down from heaven and stay upon the ground to water the earth, and cause the grain to grow and to produce seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry, so also is my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It shall accomplish all I want it to and prosper everywhere I send it. (Isa. 55:10–11 TLB)

Note the certainty of God's promise. God's word "always produces fruit. It shall accomplish all I want it to and prosper everywhere I send it."

Picture God's words falling like rain from heaven on you. Imagine these promises as gentle spring showers. Receive them. Allow them to land on you, to soak you. I'm trusting that God's words will prosper in your life. Will you join me in believing this promise?

According to Peter, God's promises aren't just great; they are "very great." They aren't just valuable; they are "precious" (2 Peter 1:4). To bind them around your neck is to adorn yourself with the finest jewels of the universe. It is through the *great and precious promises* that we participate in the divine nature of God. They lead us into a new reality, a holy environment. They are direction signs intended to guide us away from the toxic swampland and into the clean air of heaven. They sit like golden stones in the pathway to God's world. They are strong boulders that form the bridge over which we walk from our sin to salvation. Promises are the stitching in the spine of the Bible.

The American evangelist Dwight Moody said it this way:

Let a man feed for a month on the promises of God, and he will not talk about his poverty. . . . If you would only go from Genesis to Revelation and see all the promises made by God to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to the Jews and the Gentiles, and to all His people everywhere; if you would spend a month feeding on the precious promises of God, you would not go about . . . complaining about how poor you are, but you

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

would lift up your heads with confidence and proclaim the riches of His Grace, because you could not help it.³

Let's be what we were made to be—People of the Promise. Keep this declaration handy. Say it out loud. Fill your lungs with air and your heart with hope, and let the devil himself hear you declare your belief in God's goodness.

*We are building our lives on the promises of God.
Because his Word is unbreakable, our hope is unshakable.
We do not stand on the problems of life or the pain in life.
We stand on the great and precious promises of God.*