

**Promises, Promises!**

All of us have experienced broken promises. Maybe it was the promise of a weekend get-a-way with friends. Maybe it was a promise from mom and dad to be at a performance you had at school. Maybe it was a promise from your spouse to be faithful to his or her wedding vows. So many maybes, so many broken promises! No matter what the promise, it's painful when it's broken.

We have broken our promises to God so often and we have broken our promises to one another. However, because of the promise God kept to Abram, God will not break his promise to forgive us.

The story of Abraham is one of the greatest narratives in all of history. Think about it. God chose one man out of all humanity and set him on a course of blessing and adventure and faith that still reverberates through our time today. It is a story of faith and a story of remarkable blessings promised to Abraham.

Consider the circumstances of those promises that God made to Abraham. Scripture tells us that Abraham was one of three sons of Terah and that this family of nomads (wanderers) had set out on a journey from Ur to Canaan but when they came to Haran, they settled there. By the age of 75, Abraham's wife, Sarah, had proved to be barren. He was childless, an odd predicament for a man whose name meant "Exalted Father." One of his brothers had a son and died, and the other brother had a number of children, although the Bible doesn't say so at this point. However in Genesis 22, we are told that Nahor, Abraham's brother, fathered twelve children. Abraham alone, of all of his family, was without child and without heir. In that culture and in that day, being without a child was considered a curse, something one definitely wanted to avoid if at all possible.

Shortly, it appears, after his father had passed away, God steps into the picture and speaks to Abraham. We don't know if Abraham knew God or worshiped Him or not. People make assumptions and they may be valid, but may not be. The Bible doesn't say. It just tells us that the Lord told Abraham, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.*" God commands it and leaves Abraham no options. This required a great amount of faith. Abraham did not know where he was going and God wasn't telling him either.

Furthermore, Abraham was to leave his relatives behind. Why? Because his family members were idolaters and God wanted someone who would be faithful to him alone and that would not happen if Abraham stayed among his family. You understand that principle don't you? Place a good apple into a bushel of rotten apples and see what happens to the good apple. Parents, isn't that why you are concerned about the friends that your child keeps company with?

And so at this point in human history, God established a covenant with Abraham which was designed to change the course of events in heaven and on earth. God's promises have always been and continue to be the foundation blocks on which the world can safely build its hopes. God taunts no man with promises which He doesn't plan to fulfill. His words are sure and His faithfulness is unchangeable.

So to Abraham, first came the promise of land. To a nomad do you have any idea what that promise meant? It meant space in which to live; soil they could call their own; ground on which to build a kingdom. That fulfillment came 600 years later when Abraham's descendants, known as Israel, settled in the land of Canaan.

Next came the promise, "*I will make you a great nation*" which was the promise of children to carry on his name. To a man seemingly cursed to be without heirs, this was a precious promise. A great nation means many- many descendants. In fact, we are told in Genesis 15 that the number of Abraham's descendants would be "*as numerous as the stars in the sky.*" God kept that promise through Abraham's many descendants, who would be known as Israelites but call Abraham their father.

Abraham was also offered divine protection. *“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse.”* This is the sort of protection that only one can dream of, your friends are God’s friends and He will bless them, and those who set themselves against you have God as their adversary as well, and He will curse them. The blessing works in a number of ways: first, it is a great comfort to Abraham. Secondly, anyone who knows about the promise of God is warned, and guided by this promise, particularly if they believe in God or are superstitious – as many were in those days. Thirdly, anyone who befriended Abraham was bound to notice their blessedness for doing so, and, conversely, those who took action against Abraham would find their fortunes diminished, as did Pharaoh just a few verses later in Genesis 12.

The final promise God made to Abraham was this, *“In you, all families of the earth shall be blessed.”* The other promises God made to Abraham and his children meant so much to them but to us not so much. But this promise in verse three points us directly to Jesus. Jesus is the one in whom all who believe in him are blessed and justified by faith. That promise fulfilled in Jesus nearly 4,000 years and is still being fulfilled today, is our promise. When God promises, it is absolutely sure and long waits for the final fulfillment do not deter the fulfilling or the wonder of the fulfilling.

What a promise this is! It is the promise of salvation. You see, the promise of being a blessing to all families of the earth was ultimately fulfilled in the cross of Christ. It is there at the cross that we receive the forgiveness of sins for every promise we have broken to God and to one another. But there is even more. We have, by faith, the promise of the resurrection from our graves, and of life everlasting in glory with our Lord. It is wonderful and reassuring to know that these promises are absolutely certain and secure, sealed with the lifeblood of our Lord and Savior.

These many years later, God still keeps his promises for the spiritual descendants of Abraham; that is the church of Abraham’s descendants, Jesus Christ. We see God’s promise kept every time a child is baptized and every time an adult comes to faith in Jesus.

It is only because of the suffering and death of Jesus that the promise of blessing all the families of the earth has any merit. Apart from Christ the promises of land and a nation are meaningless, then and now. What good is it to promise a great nation if that entire great nation ultimately goes to hell? It is only through Christ that the promises made to Abraham 4,000 years ago have meaning and purpose.

God gave land and a great nation in order to bring Jesus into this world to die, not just for a nation, but for the sins of the whole world. That’s what Jesus told Nicodemus in today’s Gospel lesson with words that all of you know, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).*

Because of Jesus, we too are children of Abraham. And although we have often broken promises to God and to one another, God promises that He will always forgive those who humbly seek His forgiveness and want to amend their sinful living.

You may remember broken promises that have caused you pain, but that pain is nothing compared to the pain Jesus suffered for all the promises you have broken. The good news is that the blessing promised to Abraham is yours today through the cross of Christ! In Christ, we are forgiven all our sins and given not just the title “Sons of Abraham” but “Sons of God”! We have something much better than the promised land; we have heaven. In Christ, those promises are as sure now as they were 4,000 years ago. Amen.

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