
LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

Luke 2:29-32

Today our text is Luke 2:29-32: “God Keeps His Promises.” We are studying the Christmas songs of the gospel of Luke. This is our third Sunday, and today we come to the song of Simeon. Simeon was in the temple when Jesus came to be presented, dedicated by his parents, Joseph and Mary. He sings a song. It’s called the Nunc Dimittis, which again is Latin, taken from the first phrases of the Latin translation of the New Testament. He sings a song of praise. His whole life has been about the promise of God on his life – that he would see the Messiah before he died. And there, in his old age, Simeon has this encounter with the Baby Jesus.

Let’s begin by reading in verse 22 of Luke 2.

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of

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many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Simeon received this promise from God that he would see the Consolation of Israel, the Messiah, before he died. That's a pretty remarkable promise that this would happen in his actual lifetime when you consider the fact that this is a once in history event. He believes God. The Holy Spirit is upon him. Joseph and Mary come in to the temple and he takes the Baby Jesus in his arms and sings this song and pronounces this blessing. In essence, his song praises God for accomplishing his word, praises God for fulfilling his promises.

There are really two layers to his praise and to his experience. There is the grander message that Jesus saves, that salvation is found in Jesus Christ, and that God has made a promise to save us from our sin, to provide salvation, and that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. Simeon is pronouncing that this is the child who is the fulfillment of that promise, who will save us from our sin.

Just linger for a moment with me here, because this is really the most important message of scripture and it's critical for us to grasp it because of its eternal consequences. **The message of the bible is that you were made as the crown of God's creation. You were made in the image of God. And God has given you the purpose of representing him as the crown of his creation. Universally, without exception, we have sinned.** Scripture says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," Romans 3:23. Scripture tells us that the consequence of that sin is death, "For the wages of sin is death." **The consequence for our sin against God is death and eternal separation from God.** It's a subject we don't talk a lot about, but it is hell.

I suppose that that's an unpopular thought in our day – the idea that God would actually judge people and that the consequence of that judgment would be eternal, in the place designated as hell in scripture. But it's a clear biblical message, and it's an important biblical message. **If you stop and think about it, though very popular in our day to push back against the concept of judgment, the idea, the truth, the reality of judgment is something that really resonates in our own hearts.**

Dylann Roof was found guilty of killing nine people in a church, praying. We now await the sentencing of this young man who has openly said that his motivation was one of racial hatred and bigotry. It's one of the most horrifying events of this year. I think without exception we understand

that when sentencing takes place, we believe that there should be a just rendering, a just verdict -- that there should be a penalty that matches the crimes that this young man has committed. **The idea of the absence of judgment is inherently and intrinsically objectionable.**

So we may struggle with the concept of hell. We may struggle with the whole idea of judgment. We may find (and there is certainly some biblical support for this idea) that a judgmental, a religious, a self-righteous, an overly critical attitude is offensive and un-Christ-like. But make no mistake about it, the scripture tells us in the book of Hebrews, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment." **We will stand before God in judgment.**

The consequences of sin are before us. They are all around us. We are experiencing the decay and the corruption, the brokenness of sin. Sometimes we see it in the breaking down of our bodies and in physical death, but we see it in our souls. We see it in our relationships. We see it in the obstacles that oppose us daily in life. We see it in our daily, personal weaknesses. If we get real with ourselves, we talk about the fact that sometimes life is not easy, and yet the torment of it is found in the simple reality that within my heart is a desire for more. There is, as Ecclesiastes tells us in Chapter 3, "eternity within my heart." There is a desire for that which is lasting, which is permanent, which does not decay, which is incorruptible.

So here I am, facing the reality of sin, longing for the eternal, and the message of Christmas interrupts. God announces: "Salvation is here! I have come to free you from your sin, the bondage of sin, the corruption of sin, the judgment of sin, the eternal separation and death and penalty of sin, to free you from hell itself." That is the message that Simeon praises God for, announcing that that salvation is for Jew and Gentile, in fulfillment of God's promise. He is a light to the nations, the glory of Israel.

Then there is a very personal level where Simeon experiences this reality. He has been given this promise. It's like a burden almost, where he is going to see the Messiah before his death. Now, this is an *amazing* layered reality and promise and fulfillment that are taking place, where his own personal life is built on this promise that reflects the larger promise of God's salvation. The joy that must have filled his heart in that moment when he held the Christ child! "I'm not crazy after all!" And there he exalts the Lord, and the echoing theme and reality is: **God accomplishes his word. God fulfills his word. God keeps his promises.**

That's our theme for today. I want to, if I can, communicate to you about this one simple word, the word "promise." I think the word promise is a very important word for us in terms of how we understand life and experience the power of God and live by the power of God in the New Year, starting January 1. This year Christmas falls on Sunday, which means New Year's falls on Sunday. And I want to encourage you that January 1 is not on the calendar as "Optional Worship Sunday." What an opportunity we have on the first day of the year to be together and to worship the Lord.

I don't know about you, but I will probably not see midnight. I will kiss my wife Happy New Year at 6 in the morning, or something like that. But if you are one of those people who will be up celebrating New Year's, and up till 2 or 3, then just stay up and come to church. But be here and worship the Lord, because we are going to start a series of messages on January 1. We are going to talk about vision and mission -- very specifically our vision as a church, but the mission of God calling us to know and grow in Jesus Christ, calling us to be progressing, maturing spiritually in our knowledge of Jesus and our growth in him, and very importantly: making disciples, helping others to know and grow in Christ.

A part of that will be to talk to you, for all of us to grow together in our personal experience and time with God in our own devotional time. This message is a nice advertisement for when we get there because the word "promise" is really important when we sit down to open God's word.

- Maybe I could ask it in this way: **When you read God's word, are you seeing the promises of God?**
- Asked another way: **What is it that God has promised you?**
- Again, in another form: **How, like Simeon, is your life personally reflecting the greater promises of God?**

So, today our bible study is really going to be on the subject of the promises of God. And I just want to tell you by way of introduction that I think that there are four key passages on the subject of "promise." It's a subject that's dealt with a lot, and I'm going to give you this for reference, if you want to go back and look more in depth at some of these passages:

- All of Romans 4. Abraham is given in Romans 4 as the great example of what it means to live by faith. Promise is a key word throughout that entire chapter.

- Significant parts of Galatians 3 and 4, again referencing Abraham and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.
- Hebrews 6, specifically verses 13 to 20.
- And then one very important reference: 2 Corinthians 1:19-20.

These references form a background for this topic. Let's get started. We are going to answer three questions: What? Why? and How? Let's start with #1.

I. **What.**

Here we are talking about the general nature of God's promises. I'm giving you five statements here to try to give a description.

1. **God's promises are very powerful.**
2. **God always keeps his promises.**
3. **Promises by definition involve waiting.**
4. **God's promises save.**
5. **God's promises give us hope in this life.**

What I would like to do is go to Hebrews 6 and ask you to turn to that passage. This is the only larger text that we are going to look at in addition to Luke Chapter 2. Turn to verse 13 of Hebrews 6 if you would, please. "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise."

You see so far the whole idea that God gives a promise and that waiting is involved. Abraham patiently waited and received the fulfillment of the promise. If I'm going to give you something in this moment, I don't promise to give it to you. I just give it to you. The nature of a promise is that there is some kind of delay involved.

If you are here today and you don't know Jesus Christ, there is a promise that if you will trust in Jesus, you will receive the gift of eternal life. You will receive forgiveness of sin. You will receive a new life. The Spirit of God will come in and make all things new as you trust in him. You don't

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receive that and then wait, but there has been a waiting that's involved. Perhaps someone else has been praying for you, trusting God for you. Certainly, over the ages those promises have been there for hundreds and thousands of years, waiting for a moment of fulfillment.

Abraham is the most referenced Old Testament figure in the New Testament. His life is repeatedly given to us as a pattern of what it means to live by faith. He waited on the fulfillment of the promises of God in his life. Verse 15:

And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Here is the author of Hebrews' point. He is saying that when God has told you he's going to do something and then he makes a promise, you have two assurances that this will happen. Because God never lies, it's completely unnecessary for God to make an oath or to give a promise because his word is always accomplished. There is a key phrase here in this passage: "The unchangeable character of God's purpose." God gives us promises because he wants us to see the unchangeable character of his purposes, of his will.

I illustrate this in a really silly way and I apologize, but it's how it came home to me. When my daughter was still in high school and playing soccer, our new worship leader's wife was actually a captain with my daughter on the soccer team. And after all these years, I need to apologize to her for the way my wife and I acted at my daughter's soccer games, which this story is going to illustrate, I'm afraid. We were terrible soccer parents, especially soccer mom, who was out of control, I'm afraid.

We were there at a particular game, and our daughter had scored two goals. And in a really thoughtless moment, we started thinking, "Well if she gets one more goal, she gets a hat-trick." If you follow hockey or soccer, a hat-trick is three goals in a game. This is some level of

accomplishment. So, not thinking about the team that's now losing very badly, or the rest of our team which is playing, we were shouting at our daughter, "Come on! Get a third goal! Get a hat-trick and we'll take you out to your favorite restaurant afterward!" I'm sure it looked as bad as it sounds.

So there we are and, you know, she is as competitive as her Dad, and now she has been encouraged, and she gets this third goal. Well, as it turned out, I had a meeting to be at immediately after the game across town. I remember the feeling of getting in the car and saying to her, "You know, I know I promised you that I was going to do this and in the excitement of the moment I really did intend to do it, but I'm going to have to ask you if I can wait, because I can't do it right now, like I said I was going to. I wasn't thinking of the circumstances." She was super gracious to me in the moment, but as silly as this is, there was this light that came on: This never happens with God. **He is never unable to fulfill his word. Never. Circumstances are never beyond his control. He is never undone. He is never overwhelmed. He is never, "Oh, I forgot that." He always fulfills his word.**

Now, there is another dimension to this. You know, when we try to obligate people through a promise, you see it with your children as they grow up. You tell them you're going to do something and they are like, "Hmmm, do you promise?" What are they saying? "Yeah, you may intend that in this moment, but you may get wiser tomorrow, or something may change, so I want to obligate you with a promise. I want to bind your will to what you are telling me you will do." Right?

That never has to happen with God because of the unchanging character of his purpose. **God is not promising you something that he is reluctant to do. This is his unchanging purpose. His purpose is to bring salvation. It is the purpose of the ages. It is the purpose of God before the foundations of the earth. God delights in showing you mercy. Call out to Jesus and be saved, and have no concern about God's desire.**

1. **God's word is very powerful.** Romans 4:17: "God's word raises the dead and brings into existence those things which do not exist."
2. **God always keeps his promises because they are aligned with his unchanging purpose and will.**

3. Promises, by definition, mean that we have to wait. There is a delay. We are not to lose heart during this delay as we wait on God for the fulfillment of what he has promised to us. Oftentimes, some of the most magnificent, greatest fulfillments require us to wait the longest, as in the case of Abraham. He is 100 years old when Isaac is born. The delay, obviously, magnifies the supernatural in his life, and many times in our own lives.

4. God's promises save. God's word goes forth, bringing us to the forgiveness of our sin, the gift of eternal life, the grace of God. It's very clear here in this Romans 6 passage.

5. God's promises give us hope in this life.

As we are tempted to be discouraged, to lose hope, to look at our own, perhaps, weakness and struggle against sin, the strongholds of our own life, the reality is that the strongholds of our own life can really dismantle our will and bring us to a point of tremendous discouragement, where we go through cycles of sin and defeat. We try to overcome and find ourselves confessing the same sins over and over and over again. Whereas there may have been a moment where I experimented with some sin, now I feel like I have no choice in that. It owns me. It dictates my life. There is this sense of helplessness in it and hopelessness; the reality of 10 years of a bad marriage, and 20 years of a bad marriages, and 30 years of unfulfilled emotional life or struggle against the same problem - - whatever it is - a battle with depression or ongoing sickness.

Those realities can just empty us of energy and deplete us, but the promises of God, Hebrews 6, serve as an anchor to our souls. They tether us in the storms of life. God *always* keeps his word. He *always* fulfills his promises. His word raises the dead. His word brings into existence those things which do not exist. Do not lose hope. Trust in God. He will not leave you. He will not fail you.

So this is #1 -- What: The General Nature of God's Promises.

II. Why.

Why does God give us promises? I just acknowledge that today is a little intensive on the bible study side. I believe it's going to serve you if you can get this whole idea in your thinking about how we want to live by the power of the promises of God. I believe it's going to bless you.

Romans 4 is an important passage of scripture. Here's how Paul lays it out. Paul introduces his theme in Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. He says, "I am not ashamed of the good news of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe." He says we live from faith to faith -- first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. This is his theme. **He is saying that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the power to bring change in your life. If you feel powerless, if you are powerless in this life, power is found in the good news of Jesus Christ. It's not just a one-time experience where you respond and trust in Jesus, then detach yourself from that and live by your own strength thereafter. You live by the power that is in Jesus Christ. That's his theme for the whole book of Romans.**

His first major subject is the subject of sin. From there until the end of the third chapter he talks about why we need this power, why no one is excepted from this need. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and Jesus Christ is indeed the answer.

When he gets to Romans 4, he spends an entire chapter illustrating that we lay hold of this power by faith. And to do that, he brings forward the great example of Abraham. He spends a whole chapter talking about it. Basically, he says, "Listen, Abraham has taught us that we do not fulfill the purposes of God by our own strength, our own ability, by our own religion, by our own traditions. It all comes by the grace of God." Here are the three points under why God gives us promises. Why does he want us to live by his promises? Because:

1. **They call us to live by faith.**
2. **They bring us God's grace.**
3. **They bring us complete security.**

Romans 4:16: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that (so that) the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his (that is Abraham's) offspring (both Jew and Gentile)."

Here is what I want you to see from this. That's why this teaching brings life to us. There you are, spending time with God. You open your bible and you are reading God's word. God wants you to see that he is meeting you with the promise of his grace, his sufficiency, his wisdom, his strength, and that all of that comes to you in Jesus Christ. It's all God's gift. It is his act of mercy. It's free. It's grace. That's how we are saved and that's the good news of the power of God. We receive it by faith. It is all by faith.

I'm not insinuating for a minute that we live life apart from human effort, but that human effort is insufficient to overcome. We need the strength of God. We receive it by grace. We receive it by faith. Therefore, because it is God's gift received by faith, we have complete assurance. We have complete security. That's #2 -- the Why of why God gives us promises.

III. How.

Galatians 3 and 4, which we're not going to go to today, but you may want to look at on your own time, and 2 Corinthians 1:19-20, just to share verse 20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus. That is why it is through him (through Jesus) that we utter our Amen to God for his glory." There are two ideas here.

1. **Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises.**
2. **Jesus is how I say "yes" and how I receive God's promises.**

The first idea is there in the first part of verse 20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him." **Jesus is the fulfillment of what God has promised. He comes to us and when we say "yes" to him, when we say "amen," we by faith are receiving those promises.**

So Simeon, in a very literal, tangible way has been given a promise. How many times he must have wanted to give up on that promise from the Lord. How many times did he go to the temple? How many times did he live with this sense of a lack of fulfillment and asked, "What have I given my life for?" until that moment of fulfillment, which is literally fulfilled when he holds up Jesus in his arms?

I want you to see the two layers here as we kind of draw our message to a close. Most important: No doubt, there are individuals here in this Christmas season and the reality is that you are not, as scripture defines it, a follower of Jesus Christ. You may have a Christian tradition. You may try to be a good person. But the teaching of scripture is that you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless you are born again, unless Jesus Christ gives you a new life and you receive as a gift the grace of God, the gift of God, the salvation that is found in Jesus alone. **My encouragement to you today is that God has made a promise, a promise of salvation, a promise of the forgiveness of sin, a promise of eternal life, a promise to give you a new life where he is the center of your life. Trust in him today.**

The second layer is: If you have done that and you are here, do you see the dynamic of living your life out in a way where your life mirrors that larger message? You are living by the promises of God.

My life seems to be a pattern of waking up at times, thinking about things, anxious, and getting up and praying. How many times in those moments God has met me with a specific promise from his word. Like Jacob wrestling with God, you are there in prayer saying, “God, I am just so concerned about this particular child. I see this. Though this is small now, I see it could become this, and that could be come this, and I’m concerned, Lord.” You are just battling spiritually, opening God’s word, reading God’s word, and the Spirit of God breathes on his word so you see the reality of God’s salvation. “I’ve paid for sin. I’ve paid for the bondage. I’ve broken its power. I’ve paid its penalty. Now you are seeking me to manifest that power in this specific situation that feels so out of your control.” And you allow the Spirit of God to bring you to a point of faith by trusting in the word of God. Are you with me? It’s glorious! It’s wonderful!

You are saying, “Brian, I like the way you started off. You started off about the power of God, God’s word, but now you are talking about this struggle, this wrestling, waking up in the middle of the night. You are sounding like an old man who can’t sleep at night.” For 2000 years the Church has sung the Nunc Dimittis. Maybe not here, but there have been churches that have sung this song in Latin. You know what they don’t sing? We haven’t sung the rest of the message that Simeon gives to Mary. “Mary, this child is going to bring the rise and the fall of many. He is going to turn the world upside down. This is going to be an offense. This is going to be a sword piercing your own soul.”

You see, Jesus comes. He brings new life. But all of the universe is involved in this cosmic struggle. Here’s the good news. Here’s why this is not the downer part of the message, or of the message that Mary received. God is saying to her, “I’m redeeming what is mine. I’m fulfilling my plan and my purpose. Mary, sweet Mary, I want you to know that the trials and the difficulties before you are ordained by me, and they have a purpose, and they are all a part of my plan, so that they will all weave into the fulfillment of what I am doing in your life. Your life will mirror and reflect this.”

You read that, and then you go forward in the gospels. Remember where Jesus’ brothers come to him and say, “Jesus, we think you’ve lost your mind.” Initially his family members did not trust him. They come and they are outside the house. They are trying to get Jesus out to talk to them. Mary

is there, but the siblings are trying to intervene. Have any of you had that family dynamic? You know, “Go talk to Dad. He’s just out there.” Right? So that’s the dynamic, and Jesus stands up and announces: “My mother, my brothers, my sisters – do you know who they are? They are the ones who hear and do the word of God.” If you are Mom standing outside, that is a sword, isn’t it? Jesus is saying, “This is about the salvation of God for the ages. *Nothing* deters me from the fulfillment of this promise.” So if you say “yes” to Jesus, yeah, there’s a struggle.

Tim Keller tells the story about a young police officer who gets converted. In their precinct there were pimps every year at Christmas who brought financial gifts. It was never stated, but the understanding was that it was a payoff for them to be left alone for the rest of the year. Initially this young man took the cash, but when he gets saved he is no longer free to do that. He doesn’t cause a stink. He doesn’t blow the whistle on anyone. He just doesn’t take the cash. Immediately, one or two guys start coming to him saying, “Hey, what’s up? What are you doing? You know, some guys are talking. They don’t like what you’re doing.”

When you look at that, you are thinking, “The light of the world has shown up in Jesus, and the moment you identify with Jesus, it may just be this tiny little night light, but the room is so dark it’s beaming. And your life begins to, in the words of Simeon, “reveal the motives of men’s hearts.” You just can’t avoid it. Your friends are like, “Hey, how come you’re not doing what you used to? We used to go do this, and do that, and how come you’re not doing that anymore?” All of a sudden your life is shining for Christ and revealing where other people are, right?

You say, “Hey, I didn’t bargain for this!” Listen, you were a part of this when you were living in darkness. You were just the wrong part. You were in this battle. You were just giving agreement to the wrong thing before. Now you are giving agreement to the right thing. You didn’t ask for it. It’s okay.

Jesus is speaking this word: “My promises never fail. I will never leave you. I will accomplish what I intend to do. And know this: Right now, this offense, this struggle is my purpose in your life. Don’t be dismayed by it. It all weaves into this understanding that God alone saves. God alone can do this. And you will be singing, celebrating Christ in the fulfillment of it.”

Amen? Let’s bow our heads.

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