

02/12/12

God's Precious Promises

- well, did you enjoy the Super Bowl last Sunday?...
- I'm assuming I'm speaking to mostly Christians here this morning and therefore, you were cheering for the Giants...so you should be a fairly happy group this morning...
- of course part of the fun of the Super Bowl is not just the game, but the commercials...at least some of the commercials...
- did you have a favorite?...
- here's mine...

- **[Chevy truck commercial]**... There you have it - from the beginning of your work day to the end of the world – Chevy runs deep...

- now, let's see – I've been speaking for less than 5 minutes and I've already alienated Patriots fans and Ford drivers...that might be a new PV record...

- but that commercial does illustrate a point that is important for our time together this morning...and that is – our world's fascination with predictions, prophecies, and promises...
- and sometimes it's just something to laugh about...but on the other hand frequently it's something that is very, very serious...
 - for example, the last time someone asked you for your credit card number, or your social security number...
 - they were making a promise...a prediction...a prophecy if you will...
 - you can trust us with that information...we promise we'll keep it secure and it won't be shared with someone else...
 - that decision is anything but a laughing matter...because right then and there you have to decide who you're going to believe...who you're going to trust
 - and I'm sure we could hear some horror stories from people right in this room who were the victims of identity theft and would say in retrospect...I believed a company's promise and they let me down...

- every time you get out on the interstate – there's an implied promise by the other drivers that they will pay attention...that they know the driving laws and will keep them...that's the roads are safe and passable...
 - and we saw a little over a week ago how badly things can go when cars are driving at a high rate of speed...in the tragedy down in Florida...when officials decided it was safe to travel and it turned out not to be...
 - every time you get in your car, you are putting your trust and your family's safety into the hands of other people, humanly speaking...

- there's larger issues too...whose promises are you going to believe regarding the most important questions of life?...where did I come from?, why am I here, and where am I going?...
- there's a lot of discussion right now in our community involving creation and evolution...and you can decide how much of that is even helpful...
 - but a retired Purdue professor who I'm sure knows 100 times more about biology than I ever will said in the paper this week that you can't use the human eye as an example of an "irreducibly complex system" as Michael Behe did in his book Darwin's Black box because "**biologists have shown that its parts, anatomical,**

physiological, and biochemical pre-existed the complex completed structure because they had different roles in the lives of extinct organisms. Natural selection works to reassemble and redefine the existing parts (gene products) thereby creating new species.”

- now again, I'm not saying I'm some kind of expert in science...but it would appear to me that believing that the various aspects of the human eye existed in other organisms that couldn't see---but in a different role than that of providing sight --- requires an incredible amount of faith...
 - and it really does come down to that – who or what are you going to believe about the issue of the origin of man?...
- then there's the issue of the nature of man...why are we here?...what is our purpose?...how do we live?...how do we solve problems?...where can we find meaning and fulfillment?...
 - the possible answers to those questions are everywhere...
 - and they are constantly changing...
 - so how we're supposed to parent our children today is a lot different than what the so-called experts said 10 years ago...
 - what we're supposed to eat is constantly changing...are eggs good or not?...is oatmeal good or is it going to clog our veins?...please tell me bacon's good...
 - and how are we supposed to view ourselves...do you have to love yourself first and most – do you find joy by sacrificing yourself and giving your life to others?...which is it?...
 - and remember that the Scripture says that the world is ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth...
 - coupled with the explanation that the unregenerate mind actually suppresses the truth God gives us in creation and our own consciences in order to justify rebellion and unbelief...
 - and you're left with – there's a lot of promises out there regarding the nature of man and the way you're going to live today...
 - who are you going to believe?...
- we could make the same argument about the future of man...all these ideas, all these promises, all these predictions, all these prophecies – who do you believe...and what's the price of getting it wrong...
 - and the key question for our time together this morning – what does all of this have to do with your core strength?...that's a very good question...
- with all that swirling around, let me invite you to open your Bible to Luke chapter 1...page 44 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
 - Our church's theme this year is **Building Core Strength**...
 - what's it mean to make the main thing the main thing?...
 - what's involved in being sure we're shoring up the fundamentals in our personal lives and the ministries of our church?...
 - and how can we be sure we're doing all of that at the level of the heart?...
- last week we studied the first four verses which explain the process Luke followed in assembling this gospel...he really is the poster child for reliability...
- in the rest of the chapter, he tells how the story of Christ's ministry on earth began...and the focus is all about the issue of promises...

- [read selected portions of Luke 1:5-80]

- we're talking this morning about God's Precious Promises...and with the time we have remaining, let's think about **3 reasons to find your core strength in the promises of God.**

I. God Often Delights in Making Promises to Ordinary People.

- the Bible is filled with promises...
- it would be very accurate theologically to say that our God is a promise making God...there is something about His very character that delights in telling us what is going to happen in the future...
- wow and He's certainly not obligated to do that – He chooses to do that...He delights in it...
- and this isn't just a minor biblical point that comes up randomly from time to time...
- frequently, in the Scripture the most important interactions between God and man involve Him making promises to His people...
- that's what the biblical covenants are...promises...
 - so when we see a rainbow in the sky...we ought to think about one of God's promises....
 - when we think about Abraham and his critical place in Scripture...we should think of Genesis 15 when Abraham was placed in a deep sleep and then He and God walked in between the separated carcasses of several animals just like people in that day did when they were making agreements...
 - signifying that God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation though he had no children at the time in his old age, and that He would give them their own promised land, and that He would bless Abraham and his descendants...
 - all of that was done that way, at God's initiative to emphasize the unconditional nature of that covenant...
 - and we could give biblical illustrations like that for a long, long time this am...
 - that's why Peter said -- **2 Peter 1:4 - For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.**
 - see, that's an essential aspect of the character of God, he delights in making promises...now, what kind of people received them in this passage?...

A. People who are trying to please God

- it is interesting that all three of these individuals were heading in the direction of trying to be what God wanted them to be...

1. Zacharias and Elizabeth

- **Luke 1:6 - They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**
- **Luke 1:8 - Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division,**
- he was already doing what God wanted him to do...

2. Mary

- **Luke 1:7 – But they has no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.**
- **Luke 1:30 - The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.**

- now, the Lord can make promises to whomever He wants...but frequently in Scripture they are made to a person who is at least trying to head in the right direction...
- and just to be sure that we're clear about where all of this is going – I'm certainly not suggesting that God is going to whisper some kind of audible, specific promise in your ear...but if there is any hope for you and me finding our core strength in the promises of God's Word and applying those written promises to specific situation and opportunities we face today – there has to be some desire and movement toward being like Zacharias, and Elizabeth, and Mary...please note this as well...
- something else that drew these three together...they were...

B. People who were hurting in some way.

1. Zacharias and Elizabeth

- **Luke 1:8 - Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division,**
- **Luke 1:25 - This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked *with favor* upon *me*, to take away my disgrace among men.**
- you can hear the pain and now the relief in that statement – a promise that if fulfilled, would remove “my disgrace among men”

2. Mary

- Mary and Joseph were poor...
- that's alluded to in her song in verse 53...**Luke 1:53 – He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed.**
- it comes into clearer focus when Mary and Joseph come to present the baby Jesus at the temple 8 days after His birth...
- **Luke 2:24 - and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”**
- that's based on a provision in the OT for people who were poor – the typical offering in this situation would have been a lamb...
- **Leviticus 12:8 - But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.**
- the imagery was incredibly rich – God was providing the lamb...but the point here is that God chose to make promises to people who were hurting in some way...

- isn't that too how the Lord often works?...

- when was it that God told Paul repeatedly that His grace was sufficient and that His strength would be made perfect in weakness?...
 - it was in the midst of the pain of the thorn in the flesh...
- when was it that Hannah received the promise concerning her son Samuel?...
 - it was when she was pouring out her heart to God...
- the Psalmist said...
 - **Psalm 18:6 - In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears.**

- and I realize you might say this morning – hey, that's me...I'm an ordinary person who's hurting in some way...
- here's the truth – God has promises for you...there's no question about that...

- or you might say – I have a friend or a loved one who is hurting in some way – God has promises for that person as well – promises that are truly precious...
- now, let me ask you this this morning...
 - regarding the questions you have, and regarding the ways that you hurt...
 - where are you going to find your core strength?...
- and what really are your options?...when it comes to direction about where did you come from, and why are you here, and where are you going?
 - for yourself and those you love?...what are your options?...
 - you could say – I'm going to trust in my job...many have found that to be an unreliable source in this economy for sure...
 - or, I'm going to find my joy in my house or my material possessions...with ¼ of the mortgages in America under water, where the homeowner owes more than the home is worth...where's the peace and security in that
 - or I'm going to trust science...
 - and on the one hand – we promote good science and the exploration of God's created world...but we certainly don't advocate scientism...that was C.S. Lewis' point in his book *The Abolition of Man*...the belief that science has answers for the ultimate questions gives the pursuit more responsibility than it can possibly fulfill...
 - or I'm going to trust other people, or I'm going to trust fate...
 - the lesson from Luke 1 is – you also have the option of trusting God's precious promises...

II. God is Powerful Enough to Keep the Promises He's Made Long Ago

- this chapter isn't just about what the Lord said to Zacharias, and Elizabeth, and Mary...
- what's being emphasized is the connection of these events to what has already been promised hundreds and in some cases thousands of years before...where God promised...

A. To draw people to Himself.

- **Luke 1:17 - It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**
- that was a quote from the book of Malachi, given at one of the darkest periods of Israel's history...in rough terms about 450 BC...
- and you can imagine Malachi and all those who came after him, even a priest like Zacharias saying – how is that ever going to happen?...
- he's about to find out exactly how that promise is going to be fulfilled – of course it's going to be a while before he's going to be able to talk about it because of his unbelief...but the way the promises all weave together is what's on display in this passage...

B. To provide salvation for our sins.

- that's what everyone was waiting for...
- the sacrificial system taught them that sin demanded a sacrifice...
- the prophets told of a Messiah who would come and bear their sins...
- but how could another sinful human being possibly do that?...
- what did Isaiah mean, for example, when he said that the Messiah would be...

- Isaiah 53:5 - But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.

- that's a great promise – but how could a human being, conceived through the normal process of procreation and therefore possessing a sin nature himself, possibly pay for their sin when he had his own sin problem to deal with...
- it was a great promise – but an impossible one...there was no logical way that could ever happen...
- unless God was able to orchestrate not just any birth...but a virgin birth...
- and what is repeatedly emphasized in this text?...
 - and remember, Luke was a doctor – he got the whole birds and bees thing...
 - and he also carefully interviewed the eyewitnesses in this story...
 - God fulfilled what seemed to be an impossible promise by choosing...

1. A virgin

- **Luke 1:35 - The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.**
- you can imagine the lights at least beginning to come on as Mary understands how the promise of the sins of man being borne by a Messiah could possibly occur...this wasn't just any child...no wonder the angel said – nothing will be impossible with God...

2. His name

- **Luke 1:31 - And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.**
- Matthew adds these words that were later spoken by the angel to Joseph...
 - **Matthew 1:21 - She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.**
- that's why Mary later said in her song...
 - **Luke 1:47 - And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.**
- that's one of the many reasons we don't worship Mary...she knew she needed a Savior just like everyone else...and she was moved that God's centuries old promises were coming true...that's why Zacharias said...
 - **Luke 1:68 - Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,**
 - **Luke 1:69 - And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant—** look at the amazing way he's kept His promise...
 - referencing the Davidic covenant...made 1000 years before these events occurred...
- that's why the focus here is on God...

C. To honor His Word.

- **Luke 1:70 - As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—**
- **Luke 1:72 - To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant,**
- **Luke 1:73 - The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,**
- and here's one way to summarize what we're seeing...

III. God Often Accompanies Old Promises with New Ones.

- you have the old ones about a forerunner coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, and a Messiah who will save his people from their sins and sit on the throne of David...ones that they have heard all their lives...coupled with new ones...about exactly how God intended to use them in the accomplishment of that plan.
- now what are the take-aways for people like you and me?...

A. Be humbled that the person who should have believed these promises the most in fact believed them the least.

- who was the priest?...who was the one who worked day in and day out around the promises that had already been given?...
- Zacharias – and the lesson is – there’s a difference between knowing Scripture and believing it/acting on it in real time...
- when’s the last time you can point to a choice of yours that made absolutely no sense unless God’s promises are true?...I hope you have a lot of examples...

B. Understand that believing God’s promises is at the core of the gospel message.

- **1 John 2:25 - This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life.**
- this gets to the very heart of our answer to the question of the nature of man...
- psychologists have all sorts of answers to the problems of daily living...
- our message is that all the other problems stem from the main problem – our sin has separated us from a holy God...and without faith, it is impossible to please Him...
- that’s why our counseling is Christ-centered and gospel saturated...
 - it’s not just a matter of – here’s three principles to improve your parenting...but instead, could it be that your challenges with your children reveal a fundamental lack of a personal relationship with the one who gave you your children?...

C. Realize that appreciating God’s promises is an antidote to legalism.

- it’s interesting that one of the books in the NT where the word promise is most frequently used is Galatians...in verses like...
- **Galatians 3:18 - For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.**
- because Paul makes it clear that we are either trusting in ourselves and our own righteousness...or we’re trusting in the promises of God...

D. Let’s God’s promises motivate your growth.

- **2 Corinthians 7:1 - Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**
- like the student who decided they were going to complete that assignment without cheating because it pleased God...
- that choice might not have made sense in the short term – it was more work or maybe resulted in a lower grade...but that person believed that there is more to life than what happened right now...they let promises motivate sanctification

E. Become confident in ministry because of God’s promises.

- **2 Corinthians 1:20 - For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.**
- we can say that to every person in our community to whom we have potential ministry...

F. Understand God’s promises in the light of His patience.

- **2 Peter 3:9 - The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**