

## HOW DOES GOD KEEP HIS PROMISES?

What if we have done our part by "believing," but we haven't seen any results? Is there something we don't understand? Is there something else we need to do to see God's promises fulfilled?

If you are searching for answers to these kinds of questions, I encourage you to read the following pages. In this booklet, RBC staff writer Kurt De Haan guides us through a study of what the Bible says about the promises of God. Use this material as a starting point for your own discovery of the vast wealth of promises we have been given by a faithful God.

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## BUT YOU PROMISED!

Have people ever let you down? That question belongs in the same category as: Do birds have wings? Do fish have fins? Is the sun hot? Is water wet?

But what about this question: Has God ever let you down? What if we rephrase it: Have you ever felt that God didn't keep His word? Think about it for a minute. Have you wondered, even complained, that He didn't come through the way you thought He said He would?

We know, for instance, that God has promised to protect and care for His children in this world. He has promised to make them strong, to fill their hearts with joy and a peace that passes all understanding. We know that God has promised to answer our prayers.

Yet at times those promises seem empty. Our prayers for a rebellious child or an unsaved spouse seem to go unanswered. A friend dies of cancer. Inflation chews at our paycheck. Neighborhood crime gets worse. Terrorists plague the world. And Jesus hasn't come back yet.

What happened to all the promises? Has God failed to keep His word? Have our expectations exceeded God's promises?

**What is a promise?** The way some people use the term, a promise is nothing more than a good intention--easily discarded if it gets in the way. They see a promise as something that is made to be broken. But when God makes a promise, He's doing more than just expressing wishful thinking. He is giving His absolutely trustworthy word!

The original language of the Old Testament does not have a specific word for the concept of *promise*, but that doesn't mean the idea isn't there. The Hebrew words (*amar, dabar*) that are translated by the English word *promise* have the meaning of "to say" or "to speak." When God and others in the Bible speak about what they will do in the future, the word *promise* fits well. In each case, the speaker's word, honor, and integrity are at stake.

The New Testament follows the same pattern as the Old. God stands behind what He says. Therefore the idea comes naturally from the Greek word *angelia*, which means "an announcement" or "a message."

The promises of God are the heart of the Bible. Everything God has spoken, every announcement, every message, is really a promise based on God's perfect, good, and trustworthy character.

**Why is there confusion about the way God keeps His promises?** At times, a gap develops between what we think God has said He would do and what we see happening in our everyday experience. This gap, however, says more about our failure to understand than about God's ability to remain true. Our confusion can be due to any one (or several) of the following factors.

**1. Faulty expectations.** At times we may fall into the trap of thinking that God will keep His promises in the way we expect. We might assume that He will do it in ways that are immediately obvious rather than in a manner that becomes apparent only in time. We may expect Him to change our external circumstances and environment when what He really wants us to see is that His promises can be fulfilled through inner changes in us.

We tend to be shortsighted. God is into long-range planning. We see only the surface, here-and-now events, and we do not know how God is working behind the scenes to fit the pieces together to form an overall pattern. The ways God has acted in the past, though, show that He fulfills some promises in stages or in unexpected ways.

**2. Faulty interpretations and applications.** We may simply miss the point of what God has said. Or we may understand a biblical promise *accurately* but fail to see that God gave the promise to *someone else* in a particular situation.

A small book of collected biblical promises states in the introduction: "Take each promise to mean just exactly what it says. Don't try to interpret it or add to it or read between the lines." That may sound good. We certainly must avoid reading "between the lines" of Scripture, but it is dangerous to say that we should not try to *interpret* the promises. That can be a huge mistake. Failure to understand a promise in its context can lead to some very bad conclusions. Too many people go around quoting Bible verses as promises to them as individuals when in fact the promises were given to specific biblical characters, a nation, or only to people of a certain time period.

**3. Faulty feelings.** Our emotions have a way of taking over the driver's seat of our lives. Wrong emotions can overrule right thinking. As a result, if we have been hurt, we blame

God for not doing what we think He promised. The death of a loved one can cause us to lose perspective if we allow our feelings to override the truth about God. A failed romance or a marriage on the rocks can trigger doubts. Personal rejection, failure, loss of a job, physical pain, or injustice can stir up feelings against God that become stronger than any force of reason.

**4. Faulty memory.** When it comes to remembering, we can all be like an absent-minded professor who forgets how to get home. We can get so wrapped up in the details of everyday life that we forget more than just anniversaries, birthdays, phone calls, groceries, and appointments. We even forget what should mean the most to us--the evidence of God's faithfulness in our lives and how He has fulfilled His promises to us in the past. As a result, we lose confidence in His ability to be faithful in the future.

**So now what do we do?** How do we bring our expectations and feelings in line with God's plans and truths? How do we live a fulfilling life by faith in God's promises? That's what the following pages will try to resolve.

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## HOW DOES GOD KEEP HIS PROMISES?

Every political campaign seems to be the same. Promises and platitudes pollute the air. (Maybe that's what is depleting the earth's ozone layer!) Each candidate tries to out-promise the other. And after every election, the results are predictably the same.

Some promises are quickly broken because the candidate never intended to fulfill them. Other promises, while well-intentioned, were beyond the candidate's power and ability to fulfill. Maybe an unforeseen string of events or new information changed the politician's mind about the wisdom of his original statement. Powerful special-interest groups may exert pressure, making sure that they get what was promised, while less influential people seem to get lost in the crowd.

God, though, is not like a politician, a corporate executive, a supervisor, a teacher, a student, an employee, a coach, a player, a father, a mother, or a child. Everybody--not just the politician--has a problem with keeping promises. We all have difficulty following through on our word. God, however, does not. He has all the power and wisdom in the universe at His disposal. He will never have to make an excuse for failing to fulfill what He has promised, and we have no excuse for not believing Him.

We've already mentioned some possible reasons for the seeming gap between our perceptions of God's promises and how life actually is played out. Together, let us search for answers that will help us correct our view of God and His promises. We will discover that God keeps His promises (1) [on His terms](#), (2) [to His intended audience](#), (3) [by His methods](#), and (4) [in His time](#).

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## How Does God Keep His Promises?

### ON HIS TERMS

Do you read product labels? If you do, you've read words like these: "This product is guaranteed for 5 years from date of purchase against defects in workmanship. The guarantee excludes damage caused by failure to follow label directions." Or you've read a recipe in a cookbook that guarantees a delicious dessert--if you follow the directions. You can't get away with substituting baking soda for flour, or salt for sugar.

God's terms for keeping His advertised promises are clearly stated. And what He promises, He will deliver. Some promises come with an unconditional guarantee. That is, He promises to hold up His end of the agreement no matter what we do. Then there are promises that carry with them directions (conditions) that we must follow if we are to enjoy all that He has offered. These conditional promises are dependent on our fulfilling certain requirements.

Psalms 100 reminds us of the character qualities of the One who makes promises on His terms. "Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations" (vv.3-5).

The One who made us continues to be the Lord over all of life. By His nature God is good, merciful, and forever true to His word. The rest of the Bible tells us how God's promises to mankind reflect those qualities. Because He is all those things, we do not have to fear when we hear that God keeps His promises *on His terms*.

**What kinds of conditions are attached to God's promises?** Many promises are like appliance warranties that hold true only if the customer does not do things that void the agreement. That was the case in the Garden of Eden. God promised that Adam and Eve would enjoy life in the Garden if they followed His rules, but they would suffer the death penalty if they disobeyed (Gen. 2:16,17).

The covenant that God made with Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai contained many conditions. Prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments, God said to Israel that if they kept the covenant agreement with Him and obeyed Him fully, He would care for them as His special treasure (Ex. 19:3-6).

The Ten Commandments state a few results of missing or meeting God's conditions. The Lord said that He would punish all who worshiped idols, but He

would show love to those who loved Him (Ex. 20:4-6). He promised to hold guilty anyone who spoke His name in a disrespectful or contemptuous way (v.7). He promised long life in the Promised Land to those who honored their parents (v.12).

In Exodus 23:20-33, God said He would wipe out Israel's enemies when they went into Palestine, He would take away sickness, and He would ensure long life and no miscarriages. However, the conditions included paying attention to and obeying the Angel of God, worshiping God, and not making a covenant with their enemies or allowing them to live in the Promised Land.

Here are some other examples of *conditional* Old Testament promises:

- God promised success, prosperity, and protection *if* the people obeyed the Law of Moses (Josh. 1:7-9).
- God told Gideon that *if* he followed His directions, he would win a battle (Judg. 7:1-25).
- God told Eli that His previous promise to bless his family and maintain his family priesthood was going to be nullified *because of* the sins of Eli and his sons (1 Sam. 2:27-36).
- When the Israelites asked for a king, the Lord promised good things *if* the people honored and obeyed Him, but warned of judgment if they rebelled (1 Sam. 12:13-15).
- *Because* Saul failed to measure up to God's demands, he forfeited the kingship (1 Sam. 13:13,14).
- *If* a person takes his advice from the Lord and not from wicked people, he will enjoy the Lord's favor (Ps. 1).
- A person can enjoy a close relationship with God *if* he does what is right, speaks the truth, does no wrong to his neighbor, despises the vile person, honors the righteous, keeps his word, and does not exploit others (Ps. 15).
- *If* a person puts his trust in the Lord and follows obediently, he will experience the shepherding love of God (Ps. 23).
- *If* you "delight . . . in the Lord," then "He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4).
- *If* a person reveres God, he will find wisdom and gain God's blessing (Prov. 2:1-8; 3:1-10).
- Isaiah reminded the people of the Lord's desire to give them the best He had to offer--*if* they would only obey Him (Is. 1:10-20).
- Ezekiel said that a person could expect judgment *if* he were guilty, and honor *if* he were righteous (Ezek. 18).
- Jonah announced judgment on Nineveh *if* the people did not repent (Jonah 3).

A few examples of New Testament conditions:

- God will bless *if* we become poor in spirit, mourn over sin, express meekness, hunger and thirst for righteousness, show mercy, seek purity, pursue peace, or experience persecution for God's sake (Matt. 5:1-12).
- *If* we seek what has eternal value, God will take care of our temporal needs (Matt. 6:25-34).
- *If* we put our trust in Jesus, we will be given eternal life; but if we reject Him, we cannot escape condemnation (John 3:16-18).
- *If* we submit to God and resist the devil, he will flee from us (James 4:7).
- God has given us everything we need to live in a way that pleases Him. *If* we take hold of what He has given to us, we will "never stumble" and we will be rewarded in heaven (2 Pet. 1:3-11).
- God will forgive *if* we confess (1 John 1:9).
- *If* we ask anything according to God's will, we will receive what we pray for (1 John 5:14,15).

**What kinds of promises are unconditional?** An unconditional promise is simply one in which God says He will do something, and nothing we can do will stop it from happening. The fulfillment of unconditional promises does not depend on the faithfulness of people, but only on God. Even if we are unfaithful, God cannot be anything but faithful to His word (2 Tim. 2:13).

Some examples of *unconditional* promises:

- God told Noah that He would never again send a worldwide flood (Gen. 9:8-17).
- God promised Abraham a son, a nation from his descendants, and a land (Gen. 15).
- David received assurance that his royal line would last forever (2 Sam. 7:16).
- God repeatedly told Israel of His unending love for them and His ultimate plan to restore their nation (Jer. 30-33).
- Jesus said He would return to earth to reward the righteous and punish the wicked (Matt. 16:27; 25:31-46).
- Jesus promised that after He ascended to heaven He would send the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-15).
- Jesus said that Satan's forces would never overcome the church (Matt. 16:18).
- Jesus promised to save, keep, and resurrect to eternal life all who trust in Him (John 6:35-40).

**Can God's promises ever be only partially fulfilled?** Yes. Some promises may be fulfilled in part because only part of the conditions have been met, or the promises may be fulfilled in stages according to God's plan.

For example, the Lord told the Jewish people who were coming out of Egypt that He would drive out the nations before them and give them the Promised Land.

They were to do this in stages (Deut. 7:22), but because of their failure to follow all His instructions they only drove out part of the people who inhabited the land, and they experienced only part of God's blessing.

Another good example is the group of prophecies about the coming Messiah. The Old Testament promises were fulfilled in part during Christ's first coming, and the others will be fulfilled when He comes again. The prophets spoke of a coming king who would be of the line of David, a king who would restore Israel's status as God's special nation (Is. 9:6,7; 11; Jer. 33:14-26; Zech. 9:9,10). Jesus fulfilled the part of the promise about the suffering Servant (Is. 53) and will one day return to set up His eternal kingdom.

**Should the book of Proverbs be interpreted as promises?** The proverbs are promises in the broad sense that they describe how God rewards those who fear Him and live wisely, and how He opposes those who disregard Him and live foolishly. We can run into problems, however, if we do not interpret the proverbs within the context of Old Testament wisdom writings and in light of all biblical truths.

The proverbs offer practical wisdom about the effects of certain kinds of actions. For example, a person who lives a life of violence can expect to be a victim of violence (1:18,19). Ignoring the wisdom of the proverbs will lead to a shortened, problem-filled life (1:19-33) instead of a life that enjoys the favor of God (2:1-8). Every proverb, though, cannot be understood as a promise of here-and-now results. Within the context of the whole Bible, we know that in many cases God reserves the right to delay perfect justice until the day of judgment.

Many verses in Proverbs 3 seem to promise wealth, health, safety, and happiness to those who follow the path of wisdom. Proverbs 10:3 says that the righteous person will not go hungry. A righteous person will be untouched by trouble, according to 19:23. No one would deny that these proverbs do reflect the general principles of how God has designed life to operate--we reap what we sow (Prov. 11:24-26; 22:8,9; 2 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 6:7). But life is not always so predictable--as the experiences of Job, David, Solomon, the apostle Paul, and other Bible characters demonstrate. In many cases, God has something better in store for a person than immediate here-and-now blessings-- such people are laying up treasure in heaven.

The proverbs, therefore, provide down-to-earth principles for everyday life. The person who wants to be wise and enjoy God's favor will read the proverbs and put their God-fearing instruction into practice.

**Thinking It Over.** How is God's ability to keep His promises different from our ability to keep our promises? Why does God keep His promises? Are you enjoying the full benefits of God's promises, or are there conditions that you are not meeting?

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## How Does God Keep His Promises?

### TO HIS INTENDED AUDIENCE

Has this ever happened to you? As you pull the envelope out of your mailbox, you read: "You are the winner of 10 million dollars . . ." For a moment you don't know whether to jump up and down or to call all your relatives. But when sanity returns, you decide to open the envelope first. When you do, you notice how the sentence continues (in smaller print of course): ". . . if your numbers match those selected by the sweepstakes computer." The promise of 10 million dollars applies only to the one person who received the right numbers.

When you read the Bible and you come across a statement that sounds like it would be a great promise, can you claim it for yourself? Maybe you are unemployed, having a hard time making your savings stretch, and you open your Bible to the place where God gives a great promise about being prosperous and living in a land flowing with milk and honey. Would you get excited? You might if you didn't read on to learn that the promise was intended for Israel prior to occupying the Promised Land, not you and your desire to move to Beverly Hills. Although such a promise is limited to whom it is addressed, it does reflect God's ability to prosper anyone He chooses to prosper.

The author of Psalm 145 recognized that while some of God's good promises apply to all people, other promises apply only to a select person or group: "The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. . . . You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. . . . The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them. The Lord preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy" (Ps. 145:9,16,18-20).

Before we can claim one of God's promises, we need to know if He is talking to us or not.

**What has God promised to all people?** A few of the promises that apply to all inhabitants of the earth include: salvation to those who believe and condemnation to all who reject Christ (John 3:16-18); the assurance that the earth will never again be destroyed by a flood (Gen. 9:11); a continuation of the cycles of nature as long as the earth exists (Gen. 8:22); history that will culminate according to God's master plan (Dan. 7-12); a day of judgment for believers (2 Cor. 5:10) and unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15); a promise that God's character will not change (1 Sam. 15:29; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17); rewards for all who diligently seek Him (Heb.



11:6); and the certainty that everything He says will happen will happen (Matt. 5:18; 24:34,35).

**What has God promised to all believers?** Second Peter 1 states that "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises" (vv.3,4). Among those great promises (conditional and unconditional) are the following:

- Provision for our needs (Matt. 6:25-34).
- Answer to prayer (Matt. 7:7-11; 1 John 5:14,15).
- All we need to live for Him (2 Pet. 1:3,4).
- Rewards for service (2 Cor. 5:10).
- Help in our praying (Rom. 8:26).
- Eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24).
- A home in heaven (John 14:1-4).
- Assurance of salvation (John 10:29).
- The Holy Spirit within (Eph. 1:13,14).
- Spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12).
- Forgiveness for daily sins (1 John 1:9).
- Peace of mind (Phil. 4:7).
- A way to defeat temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).
- Wisdom in times of testing (James 1:5).
- Power for living (Eph. 1:19; 3:20).
- Access to God through prayer (Eph. 3:12).
- Mercy and grace in times of need (Heb. 4:16).
- The illumination of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16).
- Freedom from sin's grip (Rom. 6:22).
- Loving discipline (Heb. 12:3-11).
- Ability to make Satan flee (James 4:7).
- Resurrection to glory (1 Thess. 4:16,17).
- Strength to do God's will (Phil. 4:13).

**What has God promised to Israel?** The history of that nation has been one of repeated promises and the people's failure to benefit from God's gracious offers. The entire Old Testament--the books of Moses, the Writings, and the Prophets--are full of promises. The promises come in the form of assurances of God's love and care for them, as well as prophetic statements about Israel's future and the future of the surrounding nations. A few of the many promises to Israel are: possession of the land of Palestine (Gen. 13:14-17); the Law's blessings and curses (Deut. 28); judgment, exile, restoration (the Prophets); a Messiah (Is. 52,53).

**What has God promised to specific individuals?** Many biblical promises have application to only one individual or a specific group. Here are a few examples:

- Pre-Flood inhabitants: death (Gen. 6).
- Noah and his family: rescue (Gen. 7:1).
- Abram: descendants (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6).
- Jacob's family: blessings (Gen. 28:10-16).
- Jews: a land of "milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8).
- Moses: miraculous signs (Ex. 4:1-17).
- Pharaoh and his people: plagues (Ex. 5-14).
- Joshua: a dry path through a river (Josh. 3).
- Gideon: victory in battle (Judg. 6:16).
- Saul: abilities needed as king (1 Sam. 10:6).
- David: a son to build the temple (2 Sam. 7).
- Solomon: wisdom and riches (1 Kin. 3:10-14).
- Hezekiah: 15 more years of life (2 Kin. 20:5,6).
- Mary: a supernatural conception (Luke 1:26-38).
- Disciples: Spirit-aided memory (John 14:26).
- Paul: strength to endure infirmities (2 Cor. 12:9).

**Even though some promises were given to specific people, can't the principles apply to us?** In some cases yes, and in other cases no. If the promise reflects an unchanging characteristic of God and how He relates to us, then we can reasonably assume that because He is unchanging (James 1:17) He will continue to reflect that promise in relating to other people. For example, when the Lord told the apostle Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness," He was addressing a specific situation in Paul's life--the "thorn in the flesh" of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Yet that truth applies to all people who recognize their weakness and reach out to God for strength (Eph. 1:19).

An example of a promise that we cannot rightfully claim is the one given to Joshua when the Lord said, "I will give you every place where you set your foot" (Josh. 1:3 NIV). That might sound like a great promise to claim if we were looking for a home and didn't have enough money, but we would be out of order to do so. That promise could remind us that God can give us anything He in His wisdom and power chooses to give us--including a home we could afford.

**Thinking It Over.** What is the danger of claiming for ourselves the promises that were given specifically to other people? Take time to reread the above list of promises given to believers. Thank the Lord for what He has promised. Can you think of other biblical promises that God has given to you?

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## BY HIS METHODS

While we sit and scratch our heads trying to figure out how God is going to answer a prayer or fulfill His promises, He is calmly and powerfully working out

His plans, oftentimes behind the scenes of life, and in ways and for reasons that we cannot comprehend.

In Isaiah 55, the Lord described our inability to understand His methods. He said, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (vv.8-11).

Although His reasons may elude us, and His methods may surprise us, God always fulfills His promises. As the apostle Paul said, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25).

**In what obvious ways does God fulfill His promises?** Most of the promises and prophecies of the Bible have already been fulfilled. In many cases the fulfillment of the promise was clear and undeniable, just as expected.

When God told Pharaoh that He was going to send a plague of frogs, He did just that (Ex. 8). When the Lord told David that his son would build the temple, Solomon was born and he later built it (2 Sam. 7:1-17; 1 Kin. 5-8). When God said that Judah would be judged for her unfaithfulness and be sent into exile, that is what happened (Jer. 25). God promised a Messiah-Savior, and Jesus came (Is. 53; Matt. 1). Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, and in AD 70 it was demolished (Matt. 24:2). Jesus promised to build His church, and it has been growing ever since (Matt. 16:18). Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, and on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit came (John 14:16,17; Acts 2:1-4). God told the apostle Paul that he would protect him while he was ministering in Corinth, and Paul was not harmed (Acts 18:9-11).

The Bible is full of promises that were fulfilled in obvious ways, just as one would expect. At other times, though, God's methods are a little harder to understand.

**In what mysterious ways does God fulfill His promises?** Sometimes we may have a hard time recognizing how God has fulfilled a promise or imagining how He will fulfill a promise.

When God promised in the Old Testament that He would send a Messiah, few people expected a Messiah like Jesus. No one could have predicted the way God brought both Jew and Gentile together into the body of Christ, the church. No one anticipated such a long time between Messiah's work as Redeemer and His work as Judge and King.

On many different occasions, the apostle Paul used the word *mystery* to describe the way God's plan of salvation has been fulfilled in Christ. The Lord revealed these truths: the inclusion of *both* Jew and Gentile in fulfilling God's promises of salvation (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 3:2-6), the manner in which Jesus provided forgiveness of sins (Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:24-27), the resurrection of believers in glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-54), the glory of the indwelling Christ (Col. 1:27), and establishing the church as central to God's plan to fulfill His promises (Eph. 3:8-10).

At the center of God's mysterious fulfillment of promises about our salvation, our present life, and the life to come is Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 1:20 states, "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us." Jesus Christ fulfills the heart of all that "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" spoke about (Luke 24:44). The Old and the New Covenant promises are based on and find their fulfillment in what Christ has done and will do (Rom. 9-11, Gal. 3-5, Heb. 7-10).

**How are some promises fulfilled in ways we may not expect?** At times in the Old Testament, the Lord used means that people could understand. He would send them into battle with a promise of victory, and He would give the strength to overcome an enemy. On other occasions, though, He would do something very unexpected. For example, the defeat of Pharaoh's army as they pursued the escaping Jews (Ex. 14), the collapse of the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6), and the killing of 185,000 Assyrians by the angel of the Lord (2 Kin. 19:35) demonstrated God's ability to fulfill His promises in unexpected and supernatural ways.

Another example, this time from the New Testament, shows how some promises are fulfilled differently than we might have predicted. Jesus told His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him up a mountain. There Jesus' appearance changed, and the disciples caught a glimpse of Christ's coming glory (17:1-8). They saw a partial fulfillment of what would be completely fulfilled in the future when Jesus would come in His glory to establish His rule over all the earth.

**How does God fulfill some promises in a spiritual way?** Although God sometimes fulfills promises in visible ways, at other times He demonstrates His faithfulness by providing invisible, spiritual blessings.

The Psalms contain many statements about the power of God to bless the righteous with protection, wealth, health, and long life. We would be wrong, though, to conclude that we can expect nothing but physical prosperity in this life. One look at the life of David contradicts that idea. His life was one of repeated conflict and ups and downs of physical well-being.

It is true that we will reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7,8), but that does not mean that we will reap all the benefits right now, in this life, in physical, tangible ways. Job knew that. His friends, though, made the mistake of assuming that right living always translates into a trouble-free life right here and now. Or look at the life of the apostle Paul. He went through all types of good and bad experiences, yet he found that in all of life he could be content because God was being faithful to him (Phil. 4:11-13).

My wife made a plaque for my office with the words of Isaiah 40:28-31 written on it. Verse 31 states, "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Since I like to jog regularly, it would be great if I could take those words to mean strength for running a 25K race without getting tired. But the Lord wasn't speaking to me about running in a physical sense.

What those poetic verses promise, however, is God's strength to do what He wants you and me to do. In that sense, the words are echoed by Paul's statement: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah 40, then, comes primarily through the provision of inner spiritual strength.

**Thinking It Over.** What kind of conclusion did Job come to after he had questioned God's method of dealing with him? (Job 42:1-3). Why do we sometimes have trouble understanding God's methods of keeping His promises? How have God's promises been fulfilled in your life?

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## How Does God Keep His Promises?

### IN HIS TIME

Preschool children have trouble comprehending time. (I know. I have preschoolers!) You can't tell a child, "We're going to the zoo in 2 weeks," and not expect him to ask you every day for the next 2 weeks if "today" is the day to go to the zoo.

Adults also have trouble with time. We have difficulty understanding God's timing and how He fulfills His promises. We can't wait. We expect results today or tomorrow, not years from now.

The author of Ecclesiastes, however, put God's timing into proper perspective. He wrote, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven . . . . [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. . . . God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there shall be a time there for every purpose and for every work" (3:1,11,17).

In Ecclesiastes 3, the writer points out that the time-bound people of planet earth cannot grasp God's eternal purposes (v.11). The perpetual changes of life are part of God's pattern, His plan for all the ages. From the human perspective, though, it looks like a bunch of tangled thread on the back of a piece of tapestry. We cannot see how God is working it all together.

As a result, we sometimes question God's timing. If we don't see His promises becoming reality right now, we become impatient. We need to teach ourselves that God's timing is best.

**How does God delay in keeping His promises?** Hebrews 11 gives us a sampling of Old Testament saints who came to realize that God fulfills His promises according to His time plan. They lived by faith, believing that God would eventually do all He promised, even if they did not understand why the Lord delayed action for several years or beyond their lifetime.

Abraham is the preeminent example in Hebrews 11. When God told him to pack his bags and travel to the land of promise, Abraham went, though he didn't know where he was going. The Lord told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child, yet the Lord waited until their old age to fulfill His word. And Abraham had to imagine the future when his descendants would inherit the Promised Land.

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph knew of God's promise for their descendants, but they did not see fulfillment (vv.20-22). Moses knew that the Lord would rescue His people, but he had to wait until he was 80 years old before the Lord used him to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses even chose mistreatment in the short run so that later He would be rewarded by God (vv.25,26).

The writer of Hebrews 11 also lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Their lives were a combination of immediate blessing and delayed fulfillment. Verses 33 through 35 list several ways in which they saw God's blessings. But verses 35 through 38 list the terrible torture, imprisonment, and death that many faced. And then the chapter ends with these words: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (vv.39,40).

The writer of Hebrews saw how all the promises were ultimately fulfilled in Christ--in what He has done to provide salvation and what He will do to bring

God's plan for earth to fulfillment. Faith is being able to wait and trust the Lord to fulfill all He has said He will do, even if life is hard for us now.

**How have people responded to God's delays?** The people of the past have responded like you and I might have. Some grew impatient. Others kept the faith. Still others mocked those who looked to the future.

*Abraham* had his moments of doubt even though he was a man of faith. When his wife Sarah grew old without bearing a child, Abraham and Sarah began to get creative about fulfilling God's promise. The birth of Ishmael by Hagar was the result (Gen. 16). But God, in His time, brought about the miraculous birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:1-7).

*The Hebrews* who came out of Egypt complained and griped against Moses and against God because everything didn't turn out just as they expected after they escaped slavery in Egypt. As a result, they ended up wandering around in the desert for 40 years--and a whole generation of people missed out on the promise of entering Palestine (Num. 14).

*David* was anointed king while Saul was still on the throne. Yet David was a fugitive from Saul's "hit men" for many years. When he did become king, David saw much evidence of the Lord's goodness to him. But David's kingship was far from tranquil, with betrayals and turmoil (1 Sam. 16-31; 2 Sam. 1-24).

*Job* came to realize that perfect justice was not to be experienced during our lifetime. He learned that God's timing and God's program are perfect and wise (Job 42).

*The disciples* had to learn that Jesus was not immediately going to reestablish the nation of Israel and inaugurate the millennial kingdom (Acts 1:6-8). They had to learn that there was going to be a period of time between His first coming and His second coming (Matt. 24,25). Because Jesus was not the conquering king that many people expected, they rejected Him, and only a few believed in Him until after the resurrection.

*Paul* wrote encouraging words to believers who were in danger of despair in the face of persecution and the prospect of not seeing immediate relief (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 4).

*Unbelievers* in the last days will ridicule the promise of Christ's second coming. The apostle Peter said that these scoffers would say, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). Peter responded with these words:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness,

but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8,9).

*Believers*, those who profess faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, have a life that can be far from glorious. We can be plagued with impatience and doubts. Like the psalmist, we may wonder why God allows the wicked to prosper and why He doesn't fulfill His promise by bringing judgment right now (Ps. 73). We too can become so distracted by the present world that we lose sight of the world to come.

We can also benefit from what the apostle Paul wrote at the close of his first letter to Timothy. He warned about a preoccupation with the present--the riches and the pleasure of life. Paul encouraged Timothy to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness," and to "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:11,12). The apostle then said about Christ's second coming: "He will manifest [it] in His own time" (v.15).

**Who is wiser than God?** Nobody. All of the promises of God are fulfilled in His perfect timing, according to His wisdom. Many of those promises are fulfilled now. Many await fulfillment.

All who trust Christ for forgiveness of sins receive that forgiveness and new life immediately--along with all the spiritual benefits (John 3; Eph. 1). And while some people experience the evidence of God's love and care through prosperity of life and good health, others experience the love and strength of God through poverty and sickness. In all cases, though, God is true to His word. He fulfills His promises.

**Thinking It Over.** What promises of God would encourage a follower of Christ to keep on living for Him? How do people in the world mock the hope of Christians? What fulfillment of biblical promises can give you and me confidence that God will keep His promises to us now and in the life to come?

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## PROMISE CHECKLIST

If you want to follow the advice of the great hymn "Standing on the Promises," you need to be sure you are on solid footing. As we've seen in this study of God's promises, our spiritual lives must be founded on what God has said--not merely on what we wish He had said or what we think He might have said. We need to be sure we are not misquoting the Lord when we claim a biblical promise for ourselves.

The basic rules of proper interpretation that apply to the whole Bible also form the starting point for our interpretation of biblical promises. The rules of interpretation can be summed up in one word--*context*. Two principles from the



RBC booklet [\*How Can I Understand the Bible?\*](#) are especially relevant to this study.

1. *The context of immediate setting*: Look at the verses that immediately precede and follow the promise. Does your interpretation fit the context?

2. *The context of the whole Bible*: Consider the passage in its relation to the whole Bible. God does not contradict Himself. The interpretation of the promise must be in keeping with all of Scripture. This step requires a growing knowledge of God's Word and a dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide your understanding of the Bible.

In this booklet we have examined the promises of God in four categories. As we read the Scriptures, we can learn how to interpret and apply those promises. Use the questions listed on the next page as guidelines.

1. The **terms** of the promise.

- Does the promise have conditions to fulfill?
- Do you meet the conditions?
- What will happen if you fail to measure up?
- What characteristics of God can increase your confidence in His promises?

2. The **people** of the promise.

- Is the promise given to all people of all time?
- Is a specific individual mentioned?
- Are only believers in view?
- Is the promise to obedient believers only?
- Are you included?

3. The **method** of the promise.

- Does the Scripture imply obvious fulfillment?
- Could the promise be fulfilled spiritually?
- Could the promise be fulfilled physically?
- How is God's faithfulness demonstrated?
- What are some of the options in your situation?

4. The **time** of the promise.

- Can fulfillment be expected soon?
- Will it be fulfilled in heaven?
- Can God fulfill this promise a number of times?
- Why would God possibly delay fulfillment?

- Are you willing to trust God's timing?
  - Could the promise be only partially fulfilled?
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## **TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?**

In the world of shopping, if the product sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Whether it's a vegetable chopper, a weed whacker, or the latest automobile, the advertised image is more likely to be a mirage than reality. What you think is a bargain can turn out to be a major disappointment.

God never advertises more than He delivers. He's not out to deceive us. He wants us to have the best He has to offer--the joy of a close relationship with Him now, and heaven later.

To enjoy God's best, though, you and I first need to take Jesus at His word. He said, "He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

His offer is conditioned only on our acceptance of His free gift. Does it sound too easy? Too good to be true? It's not. Jesus has proven that He can be trusted. He came to earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and rose from the dead. If He can't be trusted, nobody can.

If you've never done so, choose now to take God at His word. Admit that you deserve God's judgment for sin, believe Jesus died for you and rose from the dead, accept His offer of new life, and then build your life on the promises of God.