



**SERIES 3/WEEK 1 - PROMISES**

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. In your life, have promises generally been a source of hope, confidence and peace? Or has your experience of promises been one of disappointment, shame and regret?
2. You just explained whether your experience of promises has generally been positive or negative. What about your experience with the promises of God? How have you experienced God's promises in your life? Be honest.

**FOCUS**

When we think of promises that come from leaders, those of us who have been living on this planet for a while will feel some justified skepticism. In the political context, it seems as though promises are made to earn votes, and discarded as soon as they become inconvenient. In the business world, promises are often salesmanship, intended to seal the deal. Even in our personal lives, we may have experienced painful disappointments at the hands of parents, pastors, and others we considered leaders.

The Bible is a book of many promises. God provides hundreds, even thousands, of promises toward His people. Those promises begin in the very earliest Bible stories. "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Genesis 9:11). "All the land you see, I will give to you and to your offspring forever" (Genesis 13:15). These promises were made long before the Law was given to Moses. The Promise of God—His favor, love and unmerited grace—came before the Law. It came to Noah and then to Abraham, as God was forming a covenant with a family and a people.

His promises continued with those covenant people—for instance, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). And all throughout the Old Covenant, God promised a redeemer, a reconciler, who would inaugurate a new covenant. "Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16) is one of the most resounding promises in all of Scripture. "For those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28), and now nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

The trustworthiness of the promise depends on the trustworthiness of the promise-maker. The reason we cannot truly rest in the promises of so many politicians or earthly leaders is because they are frail men and women, people whose wills are fickle and shifting, people who can be overpowered by circumstances or overcome by temptation. Yet this is not so of God. As James writes (1:17), "there is no variation or shadow due to change" in God. The promises of God are completely secure because they rest in the will of an unchanging and omnipotent deity. God does not grow weary; He cannot be surprised or overpowered. God has entered into a covenant relationship with His people, which means He has made commitments to us through the Scriptures. Those commitments do not rest in our character, but in His character. They do not depend on us; they depend on Him. Which means that they are utterly dependable.

Still, sometimes believing in God's promises is hard. In fact, the times when it's hardest to believe in God's promises are often the times when it's most important to believe. In times of trial, believing in the promises makes all the difference.

## WATCH THE “PROMISES” FILM/VIGNETTE

## WATCH THE ‘TEACHING MOMENT’ VIDEO

***Would someone volunteer to read 2 CORINTHIANS 1:18-22?***

### CONSIDER

The trajectory of your life is largely set by the things you say you will do. Will you respond to Jesus' call of salvation? I will. Will you take this man to be your husband, or this woman to be your wife? I will. Will you take this job? I will. Will you have children? I will. Every time that life presents us with a critical decision, we are forced to say I will do something. Even refusing to choose is a choice.

You can tell a lot about a person by what he or she says they will do. In Isaiah 14, a satanic figure, a wicked leader, gives a series of “I will statements” that are all about glorifying himself. “I will ascend to heaven...I will set my throne on high...I will make myself like the Most High” (14:13-14). By contrast, in Genesis 12 (immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel, where a prideful people sought to “make a name for themselves”), God gives a series of I wills that are all about blessing others. “I will show you a land...I will bless you...I will make your name great.”

Similarly, we are always making promises. We might promise ourselves that we will make our names great, that we will achieve remarkable things in the eyes of the world, that we will win fame and honor and wealth. Or we might make promises to others, that we will bless them and guide them, that we will lift them up.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul speaks of all the afflictions and hardships he has endured. He wants the people in the Church of Corinth to know that God is faithful (1:18). No matter what else the world might strip away, God has given us Jesus Christ once and for all, and Jesus is the YES of God—the promise fulfilled, the hope realized, the seed full-grown. As Jesus himself and many books of the New Testament make clear, Jesus is the culmination, the fulfillment of the covenant promises God made to His people. Jesus is God’s faithfulness incarnate, God’s re-affirmation (God’s “Yes!”) of His undying love and unmerited grace toward the world. Jesus is God keeping His promises to us even now. God’s promises are for us and for our blessing—and those promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The question is whether we will say I will to God’s I will. Can we affirm God’s promises for us—and can we become agents of God’s promises to others?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you put in your own words what Paul means when he writes that Jesus Christ is “the Yes of God”?
2. What helps you learn to trust in a person’s promises? How can we learn to trust more and more everyday in the promises of God?
3. In verse 20, Paul writes that we “utter our Amen” to the Yes of Jesus Christ. What do you think this might mean?

***Will someone please read ROMANS 4:13-21***

### CONSIDER

Paul provides an overview of the history of God’s deliverance of His covenant people. The promise came first to the Jews, but extended to all who are children of Abraham through faith. We are the descendants of Abraham not through keeping the Law that was given to Moses, but through living in the faith Abraham lived. Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness, and we too are given the righteousness of Christ when we put our faith in God through Christ.

What does this have to do with generosity and leadership? A great deal! Truly Christ-like generosity always begins with what God has given us. We love because God first loved us. We give because God gave to us. We serve and sacrifice for one another because God served and sacrificed for us through Christ. We cannot simply “will ourselves” to be more generous. We become more generous when we appreciate the full height and width, breadth and depth, the full power and majesty of the extraordinarily unmerited generosity God has shown to us from the beginning.

In the same way that God’s promises focus on blessing others, our promises can focus on others too. And in the same way that God’s promises sometimes seem impossible—His promise came to Abraham when Abraham and Sarah were both extremely old—we may be called to believe in what seems impossible in others. Those who seem impossible to love, we believe are lovable. Those who seem impossible to redeem, we believe are redeemable. Those who seem beyond help, we step down to serve. “Against all hope,” writes Paul, “Abraham in hope believed” (Romans 4:18, NIV). He believed in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17). Believing in God’s promises can require enormous faith. God is not limited to our finite imaginations. **God delights in surpassing our paltry understanding of what is possible.** We believe in God’s promise in others because we know that God routinely accomplishes the impossible, bringing life where there is only death, hope where there is only despair. Can you say I will to God’s I will? Can you affirm God’s will for your life, and can you nurture the promise of God in others?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Some people have a special gift of faith, trusting simply and fully (Matthew 8:10), while others are like the man who cried to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Which are you?
2. How would your life look different today, if you were completely convinced that God keeps His promises?
3. If you were completely confident in God’s promises, are there particular ways you would give of yourself, ways that you’re not giving now?
4. Are there other people who need you to believe in them? Can you believe in the promise of God in someone else in your life right now?
5. In the film for this week, we begin to see Frank Donovan entering a period of trial that will dramatically transform his life. You can tell a lot about yourself by how you respond to experiences that are painful or humiliating. If God called you to “the declining life,” toward becoming “smaller” in the eyes of the world, how do you think you would respond?

### CLOSING THOUGHTS

Frank Donovan, like all of us, cannot decide whether or not he will suffer. He can only decide how he will respond. Will he steward his loss, his suffering, in the same way he has stewarded his success—for the glory of God and for the good of others? Or will he become embittered and despondent?

Re encourages the children at his Seedtime Garden Supply to ‘believe in the seed.’ Scripture often describes God as a Gardener or a Farmer who scatters seed across the soil, who cultivates a vine and branches, and so on. Each person is a seed planted by God, sometimes meant to be preserved through dark times and sometimes meant to grow rapidly and burst into bloom.

God has given many promises in His word, and one way in which we can be generous to one another is to carry those promises to others, to scatter the seed of God’s truth in their lives, and to help them grow into the people God wishes for them to become. We are promise-takers insofar as we receive the promises of God. We can be promise-keepers by showing a reflection of God’s faithfulness toward others. But we can also be promise-givers by sharing God’s promises with others and helping them cultivate the seeds God has planted in their lives. Sometimes a lost person, a person who is

beaten down by life, needs someone else to “believe in the seed” in them before they can believe in it too. Leading generously means, among other things, sowing deeply in the lives of others for their own sake.

### DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT

- When we talk about stewardship, we typically talk about stewarding the “good” things in our lives, like assets and resources, time and talents. But the way in which we steward our loss and our suffering is equally important. List two hardships in your life right now and how you might steward them for the glory of God and the blessing of others.
- Identify three people you “lead” in some way—whether that’s a formal leadership role (boss, parent, pastor) or an informal one (people over whom you have influence, people who might follow your example).

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- Now pray over how you might lead them generously, and lead them toward generosity, as we proceed through the Leading Generously study. Ask God to open your eyes to opportunities you might be missing, and to help you “believe in the seed” He has planted in their lives.
- In preparation for next week, commit to memorize the Memory Verse, Philippians 3:7-8: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”