

“Promises: Ours, and Gods”  
Union Chapel, Nuangola July 11, 2010

This morning, I will be talking about promises. We are used to promises; they are part of everyday life. Some matter more than others. “I promise that I’ll call you back.” Perhaps you have said that your self. Suppose you said, instead, just “I’ll call you back.” Is that a promise? Let’s consider something more serious. How about, “I promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses...” Have you heard something like that? I think you probably recognize that as the beginning of a vow taken in marriage. Or “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” Hopefully that’s something you have only heard on TV or in a movie, without having to say it in court.

Whether we use the word “promise” or not, all of these are promises, or commitments, to what we say we will do. In the simplest case, just saying “Yes” or “No” the promise is implicit. We assume that people will recognize us as having the integrity to take us at our word. Saying “I promise” adds emphasis. It is a way of showing that we take the promise seriously. We can even add more emphasis than that. We can make an oath, for example, “I swear before God, that I will repay this debt.” Very serious indeed.

Often, these more serious forms of promise are not something we initiate, but are asked for. Consider the courtroom situation, a witness being “sworn in.” Does the witness ask to have to swear an oath? No, it is expected by authorities. And, having given a sworn statement, if that statement can be shown to be false, the witness can be charged with a crime, perjury. Even in less serious circumstances we encounter this. How many times have you heard, or perhaps used, a statement starting with “Promise me.” Maybe, “Promise me that you will be home by midnight.” “Promise me that you will not put me in a nursing home.” “Promise that you will always love me.”

We, as human beings, have a hard time keeping promises. Sometimes it’s a matter of lapse of attention; forgetfulness. That was the one I had a lot of trouble with when I was a child. One weekend I had to write, I believe it was 500 times, “I will not lose my coat.” It was a promise, emphasized by repetition. A promise, sad to say, I did not keep. Sometimes promises are not kept because they get in our way. Or we choose, under the circumstances, to set aside an unwise promise. Or perhaps keeping the promise is beyond our ability. This happens. A promise to repay a debt may become impossible if we lose our job. A death bed promise, made in the emotions of the moment, with the good intentions toward the person who is dying, may prove to be beyond what we can do.

If we have reinforced the promise with an oath, if we have sworn our promise by God, then breaking the promise is not only a transgression against the other person, but a sin before God. Maybe the oath is “by the hair of my head” or something less serious. But still we are brought lower if for any reason we fail to keep the promise.

There are also those people who use promises to manipulate others. “Promise me...” often proceeds from the mouth of someone asking for something that is going to

be onerous. Our sense of civility may lead us to accept the obligation, rather than refuse the person to his face.

We, as broken human beings, have problems coping with promises. We use them for emphasis when unnecessary. We use promises to get someone to take our word more seriously. We use promises as tools to manipulate others. Our promises are often broken. Unwise promises are sometimes kept when they should be broken. Even when a promise is kept, the situation that called forth the promise can breed resentment and alienation.

In contrast, consider the promises of God. Now, we humans will try to manipulate God like we do each other, “God, I promise that I will tithe faithfully if my daughter is healed.” Just as we might promise to pay a debt. A promise we may or may not be able to keep. But we can’t coerce promises from God as we may try to do with others.

Also, we don’t usually find God, in the Bible, asking for promises. God is the one making the promise. He may state what is expected, and perhaps what will happen if the conditions are not met. Consider God’s promise to Abraham, in Genesis 12.

Genesis 12: 1-3: The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.

We know from the Bible, and history since, that this promise has been fulfilled.

Later there’s God’s promises to Moses. To David. To the Israelites when they were in captivity, by way of His prophets. And, ultimately God’s promises to us through Jesus Christ.

All of these promises are made by God, unilaterally. Because he Loves us. He wants the best for us. And He wants, through us, to bless others.

Let’s return to human promises. Jesus gave us some advice, in the Sermon on the Mount, about how to deal with promises, or more specifically, those involving an oath. I’m reading from Mathew, Chapter 5, Verses 33 to 37, from the New International Version.

Matthew 5: 33-37: “Again, you have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for

you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your ‘No’ be ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (NIV)

Jesus is saying that instead of focusing on keeping promises made by invoking God, the oaths mentioned from ‘long ago’, we should abstain from making these oaths in the first place. As people of God, we should be truthful, and should not need to make oaths.

As an illustration of how we humans use and abuse promises, I’m going to read from the Old Testament about Solomon’s succession to the throne of Israel. Listen for all of the promises, and requests and demands for promises.

I expect you know most of these characters: David, the great king, is now dying. Bathsheba is one of his wives. Yes, that one, who figures prominently in an earlier story most everyone remembers. Solomon is David’s son by Bathsheba. Solomon is son number 10. Number one, Amnon, was murdered by number three, Absalom. Absalom was himself killed in a revolt against his father David. We don’t know what happened to number two. Son number four is Adonijah, the eldest surviving son. His mother’s name is Haggith. Adonijah expects that he will be the next king. But Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan remind David of a promise made to Bathsheba, that Solomon is to be chosen instead. One other character needs to be introduced. I’ll read 1 Kings, Chapter 1, Verses 1 to 3.

1 Kings 1: 1-4: When David was old and well advanced in years, he could not keep warm even when they put covers over him. So servants said to him, “Let us look for a young virgin to attend the king and take care of him. She can lie beside him so that our lord the king may keep warm.”

Then they searched throughout Israel for a beautiful girl and found Abishag, a Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The girl was very beautiful; she took care of the king and waited on him, but the king had no intimate relations with her. (NIV)

In those days, electric blankets had not yet been invented. But, if you are a king, no matter. A substitute can be found. So, Abishag becomes, in effect, the king’s hot water bottle.

In the days that follow, David crowns Solomon as co-regent. This advanced coronation surprises Solomon’s older brother Adonijah. Adonijah knows that the older brother of a king is a liability. We read later in Chapter 1, verses 50 to 52:

1 Kings 1: 50-52: Then Solomon was told, “Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon and is clinging to the horns of the altar. He says ‘Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.’”

Solomon replied, “If he shows himself to be a worthy man, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground; but if evil is found in him, he will die.” (NIV)

Notice the use of promises. Adonijah demands a promise from Solomon. A promise reinforced by an oath. This case may be more dramatic than what we usually see. But, we are used to this kind of thing. We look for angles, wiggle room, and loopholes. Ways of evading or mitigating the promise. You heard Adonijah say “Let King Solomon swear to me that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.” I couldn’t help thinking: don’t oriental despots have ways of killing people other than with swords? I mean, what about spears? Arrows? Or stoning, a particular favorite among the Israelites? Maybe Adonijah should have demanded a bit broader coverage. The warranty he’s asking for has too many uncovered conditions.

Adonijah is finally coaxed down from the altar by Solomon’s promise. But, even here Solomon shows his wisdom. He makes his promise conditional.

We now skip forward to a time after David’s death. Again, look for promises, and demands for promises. Think about how they are being used by these all too human characters. Reading starting with Chapter 2, verse 13:

1 Kings 2: 13-24 Now Adonijah, the son of Haggith, went to Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother. Bathsheba asked him, “Do you come peacefully?”

He answered, “Yes, peacefully.”

Then he added, “I have something to say to you.”

“You may say it,” she replied.

“As you know,” he said, “the kingdom was mine. All Israel looked to me as their king. But things changed, and the kingdom has gone to my brother; for it has come to him from the Lord. Now I have one request to make of you. Do not refuse me.”

“You may make it,” she replied.

So he continued, “Please ask King Solomon – he will not refuse you – to give me Abishag the Shunammite as my wife.”

“Very well,” Bathsheba replied, “I will speak to the king for you.”

When Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah, the king stood up to meet her, bowed down to her and sat down on his throne. He had a throne brought for the king’s mother, and she sat down at his right hand.

“I have one small request to make of you,” she said. “Do not refuse me.”

The king replied, “Make it, my mother; I will not refuse you.”

So she said, “Let Abishag the Shunammite be given in marriage to your brother Adonijah.”

King Solomon answered his mother, “Why do you request Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? You might as well request the kingdom for him – after all, he is my older brother – yes, for him and for Abiathar the priest and Joab son of Zeraiah!” [These others are backers of Adonijah in the succession struggle.]

Then Solomon swore by the Lord, “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Adonijah does not pay with his life for this request! And now, as surely as the Lord lives – he who has established me securely on the throne of my father David and has founded a dynasty for me as he promised – Adonijah shall be put to death today.” So King Solomon gave orders to Benaiah son of Jehoida and he struck down Adonijah and he died.

As you may have noticed, there are promises littered all over this sordid story. On the surface, it seems like a small thing Adonijah is asking. In light of his tragedy, and maybe as a small favor in compensation, Adonijah asks for a leftover concubine, one who is still a virgin. So it would be within the Law of Moses for him to have her as his wife. He maneuvers this seemingly reasonable request through Solomon's mother. He's still not afraid to demand promises. And he calculates that Solomon will be trapped into a promise made to his mother. Sure enough, up to that point, he succeeds. Solomon says, when his mother asks that her request not be refused, "Make it, my mother; I will not refuse you."

But, Solomon, once he hears the request, is aware that this seemingly small thing is not at all innocent. A king's wives are part of the inheritance passed on to the next king to care for. This was very recently important when Solomon's brother Absalom sought to displace David.

You see, Adonijah is trying to steal a piece of legitimacy as the person who really should have been the next king. He already has a piece of that by being the eldest. Oh yes; and he's handsome. That always helps. He has another piece of that legitimacy by the sinful circumstances under which Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, became queen. Marriage to one of his father's concubines, the beautiful Abishag, who was intended to be a wife of his father David, would be another small step toward what his heart really wants: the throne. His tool is manipulated promises, to maneuver Solomon into a corner. He surely figured that Solomon would find no ulterior motive. This is just a small request. Even the king's mother Bathsheba is supporting him.

Solomon recognizes what is going on. He breaks his promise to his mother. He recognizes that the condition of his earlier promise to his brother Adonijah is broken. Solomon pronounces a death sentence. He does so using an oath. This form of extreme oath, "The Lord do so to me, if..." is found elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, Jezebel uses that form of oath when expressing her determination to kill the prophet Elijah.

So, here we see how we, as broken, sinful, and willful human beings, use promises. We use them to manipulate others, as Adonijah does. We use them under threat of seeming to be unreasonable, as perhaps Bathsheba does. We use them to posture, by loudly proclaiming our resolve, as Solomon does. Perhaps we can think of times, in our own lives, when promises have been demanded, or made, in ways that are manipulative. Sometimes with good intent, at other times not so. Promises that are often broken, even as the circumstances that call them forth are broken.

But, in contrast to all of that, let us return to the promises of God. Consider Solomon, to whom God makes such a promise. We remember how God invited Solomon to ask for whatever he wanted, and Solomon asked for wisdom. God responds, as we read in 1 Kings 3: 10-14:

1 Kings 3: 10-14: It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, “Because you have asked for this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

God kept his promise to Solomon. He did not demand that Solomon promise anything; God simply stated the conditions. Yet, God in his mercy remembered Solomon, even in his old age when Solomon strayed, and followed his many wives in worshiping idols.

Now, I do not mean to say that making promises is always wrong. Marriage vows, for example, add a public, serious, and binding commitment to perhaps the most important of all human relationships. This is the basis of the family, and civilization as we know it. Failure of the institution of marriage threatens the continued purpose of individual lives, and of our nation. Other important promises include vows accepting a commission in military service. Promises made by pastors, elders and deacons, to be faithful in the Lord’s service, are by all means appropriate. These are all commitments entered into willingly, for noble purposes.

Promises forced on, or blackmailed out of someone, are something else. When I was in industry, we did work for the Federal government. As one of my conditions of employment, I had to sign a promise to be ethical. There was a list of what that was supposed to mean. I didn’t have any particular problems with the statement, and I signed. But I did wonder how signing such a statement would make someone more ethical. Someone inclined to act unethically would probably not be bothered by signing such a statement. Interestingly, the mandatory ethics training leading up to signing the statement was only partly paid time; four hours was on a Saturday morning unpaid for, but absolutely required to stay employed. I heard that later on all of the ethics training, not just half of it, was done on unpaid time.

God knows that we have problems living up to what we ought to be. He calls on us to love him and do his will, even as he did with Solomon, knowing that sometimes we falter. Notice that in God’s promise to Solomon, he said, “If you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” Now, I ask you, did David always do what was right? Solomon’s own mother Bathsheba is a reminder that the answer is “No.” But David did love God. And God loved David, and held him up, faults and all, as an example for Solomon, and for us.

God does make promises, promises he keeps. Jesus, David’s and Solomon’s descendant and heir, reveals the wideness of God’s mercy and love for us. Jesus is the

fulfillment of God's greatest promise. It is no accident that Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus's promise to his disciples, and to us:

Matthew 28: 20b: "And surely I am with you always, even to the close of the age." (NIV)

So, we should be careful what we promise. We should try to avoid extra emphasis by reinforcing our commitments with an oath, unless it is of the most serious matter. Neither should we coerce promises out of others, promises that may cause resentment, and in failure, perhaps broken trust and alienation.

But most of all, know that the promises of God are not like human promises, that often fail. The promises of God are trustworthy, and flow from His love for us, and His intent that we join Him as His children. God kept His promise to Solomon. He will keep his promises to us of liberation from sin, and ultimate salvation.

I believe Paul gave us as good a summary of God's promises as I know of in his letter to the Romans. I read excerpts from Chapter 8 verses 31 to 39,

Romans 8: 31b "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, give us all things? 38 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.