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Finding God in His Promises

Introduction

“God made me.” These words came from the four-year-old sitting in the backseat. The words shocked the Mom and Dad who heard them. Neither parent believed in God and both were certain they’d never spoken about God to their pre-school aged daughter. The mother describes her initial disorientation with how to handle this moment in an article posted by Time Magazine. In the article she points out, as a person who doesn’t believe in God, that parents have a difficult time of talking with their kids about two, three-letter-words. The first is S-E-X. The second is G-O-D. But as she and her husband thought through this decision about God talk, they discovered what for them became a helpful way to get through the situation. “Relax,” they said, “it’s just God.” What they meant was this: Since it matters what a person does with their life not what a person believes, parents can invite their children to explore all religious symbols and stories. How the child ultimately decides on her beliefs about God is less relevant and important than how the child will live and who the child will become.¹

The approach these neighbors take as parents sounds reasonable if god is a fairy tale. No relationship is on the line. What one believes doesn’t ultimately matter. Yet, we would not easily apply this same principle if we thought the relationship was real. What do I mean?

Imagine a father who all his life says to his daughter, “It doesn’t matter what I believe about you. What counts is that I do good for you.” Those of us looking in will give thanks that good was done. But we are not surprised when the daughter looks to a therapist for help. She has a life of provision but no relationship. She doesn’t know if her Dad believes she exists or not, is ugly or pretty, talented or inept, a liar or as having integrity. What a stranger or distant acquaintance might believe about her doesn’t matter so much. But what her Father believes about her does. Performance without identity and relationship creates a loss that takes years to overcome.

Or imagine the scenario in reverse. She relates to her Dad as if it matters little what she believes about him, only that she do good for him. While her provision is greatly appreciated, and offers him real help, the same loss of relationship emerges. It matters to him if she thinks he exists or not, if he is inept or worthy of respect, safe or not, wise or good or otherwise. In both cases, because these persons are real, they both long for more than doing good to each other. They long for relationship and they experience its loss. Because each person is real, to act as if the other doesn’t exist, or that it doesn’t matter how they exist, causes damage.

I’m asking us to consider that if God exists, it matters what we believe. Real relationship with an actual being is at risk, creating consequences in the real world and in our lives.

God’s Promise isn’t the same without God’s Presence

Imagine a boy waiting after school. He holds a note that promises his brother will pick him up. Hours later a school teacher takes the boy home. When asked why he didn’t pick up the

¹ Wendy Thomas Russell, “How to Talk to Your Kids About God,” *Time*, (April 6, 2015) author of *Relax, It’s Just God: How and Why to Talk to Your Kids About Religion When You’re Not Religious*.

boy, the older brother answered, “He had my promise, its right there in his pocket! What else could he want?”

Or imagine, a young bride with her wedding ring. She travels a great deal. Whenever her husband seeks to make plans so they can travel together, she always declines. “I have the ring you gave me,” she says, “what more could I ask for?”

We’d rightly react and say, “this is silly, what good is the ring with no love or relationship? What good is the note with no relational action to get the boy home from school? The promise is supposed to connect us to relationship.

It’s like this with God and can explain why Moses responded the way he did when God offered to fulfill His promises but to withhold Himself. “Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you,” God said.

Moses said, “no way!” “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here” (Exodus 33).

What would you say? If you could have money or status or a land of plenty or all of your hearts desires but you couldn’t have God, which would you choose? The question matters because according to Jesus, the most important thing in life is that we love God, and this love rises up from our entire being.

The testimony of those who love God regularly prioritize this first love. “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Ps. 84:10). The Apostle Paul echoes this love. Whether he had little or he had much, what did it matter as long as he and Jesus were together. With Jesus, Paul felt he could handle anything (Philip. 4:12-13). When Jesus asked some of his disciples if they too would prefer to leave him in order to have a different life in the world, Peter responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go . . . you are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:68-69).

Moses himself, refused to be called Pharaoh’s son, “choosing rather to mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the approach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt . . . “(Heb. 11:25-26).

The wealth of God in Christ is likened to a treasure that will not rust and cannot decay. Jesus says that we are like those who sell all that we have in this world in order to buy a field the world considers empty—knowing as we do, that buried in the field is a treasure beyond measure. This kind of thinking sounds foreign to many of us. We begin to say with Jim Elliot, the missionary to the Auca people, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he can never lose.”

Let’s take hold if this foundational principle of living by promise. We look from the promise to the One who gave it. Like a rocket sheds its initial boosters in order to propel the capsule into the vast beauty of space, so God’s promises ignite our life and enable our lift off.

Because a life of promise is a God-saturated life, a life daily given to First Love, we resist any “promise talk” that puts us rather than God at the center, and offers us everything in the world but God Himself. We who live by promise in Jesus take our cue from the Levites of old, whose treasure and portion in life was God Himself (Deut. 10:9).

At this point, you and I are called to what our young people in love sometimes call, “DTR.” We have to define the relationship. In our case, we look afresh at God and ask what our

interest in God truly is. We ask Him what these things mean about him? And so the question comes to you. Are you content to have the ring but not the relationship? The promise but not the Promise Giver? Can you say, "I'd rather not have to choose, but if I must, I'd rather be poor in this world and have God than to have wealth without Him." If you can say this, what a wonder of grace, God has given you! You have the safeguard you need in order to freely dive into a life of God's promises. True joys and treasures await you!

If you can't say this, all is not lost. This is simply a time to get honest about this before God. Simply say to him, "God, I don't know what this all means. I really like the idea of you promising me things, but I'm not sure I love you more than the stuff I hope to gain. Please reorder my loves. Help me if you would, I need your grace." Then, take hold of the promise Jesus made. If you ask, seek and knock, about such things, you will receive, and find and come to an open door with God.

Without this, our loves are out of whack and we might find our story resembling Demas who started out with Jesus but left him and deserted Paul in prison, choosing the love of the world over God's love (2 Tim. 4:10). Or we might turn out as Judas, who for thirty pieces of coin set Jesus aside.

Jesus calls out to save us from such a story. Remember, he says, "Seek first, the kingdom of God, then all these other things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). "For What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Mk. 8:36).

But how, do we look from the promise to the Promise Giver?

Begin to Notice what the Promise shows you about God

Sometimes God plainly tells you about who He is? He opens right up and lets you in on his life. Take Exodus 34:6 as an example. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Or John 4:24, Jesus tells us plainly, God the Father is "spirit." You can begin to circle or put a star on or underline with a particular color, every time the Bible tells you something about who God is. Because God is real and invites us to a relationship with Him, He is who He is, rather than who we imagine or want Him to be.

At other times, we look from the promise itself in order to see what God is showing us about himself. God desires to show His character to those who are heirs of the promises (Heb. 6:17). As you look at the next verses notice what we learn about who God is by the way He made promises to Abraham all of those years ago.

[13] For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,

[14] saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." [15] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

[17] So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,

[18] so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul . . . (Heb. 6:13-20)

Notice what you learn about God. God made a promise, he puts himself on the line as collateral. God speaks. God has desires. God has a purpose. God wants to show you something in his promise. God's character is steadfast and faithful in this purpose. God makes a guarantee.

God cannot lie. God tells the truth. God is one in whom we flee for refuge. This God is such that those who spend time in relationship with Him find themselves strongly encouraged and given hope deep in their souls.

As you take note of what the Bible in general and the promises in particular reveal to you about who God is, you begin to furnish your soul with nourishment.

Are there any snack bowls in your life? A place you can go and you know it will have some kind of food in it? The kids at our church know that our Church secretary keeps a bowl of candies in a drawer near her desk. Perhaps where you work such a bowl exists. Maybe at home you have a bowl in which fruit waits to be eaten or a friend whose home has chocolate kisses or peppermints free for the taking. Spiritually speaking, when you look from the promise to the God who gave it, you are accumulating spiritual snacks. Through the day, you get to reach into that bowl and take out a promise and what it tells you about the attributes and traits and personality of God.

Think about that for a moment. When you take a good look at how you go through a day, do you think about God much? You are invited to! You get to learn about who God is and derive pleasure and nourishment from knowing Him. Maybe you don't know how to start filling such a snack bowl in your life. May I suggest a little book such as A.W. Tozer's "Knowledge of the Holy" or J.I. Packer's "Knowing God" or take a few verses from the book of John each day. Highlight everything it tells you about who God is.

But why does furnishing your soul with the knowledge of God matter? At minimum, it begins to expose anywhere in our life in which we live no differently than an atheist or agnostic would. Here is an example of what I mean.

In my first pastorate, I learned a great deal from a very gifted teacher of the Bible named Vicki. One time, Vicki asked us to draw a picture of a situation we were facing that felt stressful or overwhelming. If we didn't want to draw it we could use words to describe the situation, its stress and our fears. After we had all drawn and described our challenging circumstances, Vicki asked us to look it all over. Then she asked us a simple question. "What do notice is missing from our drawings and descriptions?" Everyone looked around and thought, looked again and shrugged their shoulders. Then after a pause, Vicki simply said, "God." "God is missing, do you see?" "Look at our drawings and writings. Notice that none of us included God in the picture or in the description of the situations that trouble us. No shame or guilt existed here. The point was invitation not condemnation. This able teacher graciously helped us to see that our default to God was still forming and in need of growth. We followers of Jesus were able to function like an atheist when it came to how we entered the situations that challenged us most. We could talk about them, draw a picture and describe them without reference to God.

Apply the Character of God to Your Situation

Can you relate to this? I can. I see it in my own life too. There is hope for each of us. Even early disciples like the Apostle Peter needed grace to grow. One time, Jesus described the situation in which he was going to die on a cross. Peter barked out reasons why this won't happen. Jesus responded by raising Peter's point of view to include the supernatural—that God had things purposed that must take place (Mk. 8:33). Peter viewed the situation the way human beings and even the devil would view it. Peter didn't have God in his view. It wasn't that

Jesus wanted to walk through this brutal situation. He would pray that if possible God would take it from him. But Jesus took the circumstance to God. He placed the whole situation into the care of His Father. He thought through the worst thing that could happen in this situation and then reasoned that God would have the last word. “For the joy set before Him,” Jesus “endured the cross” and overcome the grave (Heb. 12:2). It was if Jesus brought the phrase, “But God” into the situation. A larger joy, a more expansive story would have the last word. The cross could be conquered.

The Apostle Paul learned this kind of reasoning from his Savior. He tells us about a profoundly difficult situation in his life. He pulls no punches. Living by promise makes us more honest about life, not less honest. “When we came into Macedonia,” Paul says, “our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within” (2 Cor. 7:5). But then Paul puts the situation into the light of God’s character and presence. “But God” Paul says. “Who comforts the downcast, comforted us . . .”

Why not begin in this way? What situation are you facing right now that seems too much to handle? What if you were to get honest about it and then say, “But God!”

- I don’t know what will happen to my child, but God!
- I don’t know how I’ll make ends meet, but God!
- I hear all of this news about political fighting, but God!
- I’m full of shame, guilt and regret that I can’t shake, but God!
- I don’t know how to get through this sickness, but God!

In the fullness of his humanity our Lord reasoned about the joy set before Him, brought it into the brutality of the situation, and endured into overcoming. Paul knows a truth about God. God is a comforter! Paul experienced this in relationship with God.

And we can also suggest that we put our delights into God’s presence in this way too.

- I found hope, because of God!
- I got a job, because of God!
- I made it through the day, because of God!
- I felt joy for the first time in a while, because of God!
- I experienced forgiveness, because of God!

The followers of God who see Him as their first love, teach us to put our situations into the light of God’s character in this way. The Bible encourages this way of relating to our circumstances. “Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises to be fulfilled,” (Rom. 15:4, NLT).

This is why, Peter handles the challenges of critics, in this way. “They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” In other words, you keep talking about God’s promises Peter, but all we see is a world that keeps going as it always has.

Peter then urges Christians to reason from this situation toward what God has revealed about himself. Don’t let this “one thing escape your notice,” Peter says. Then Peter, reminds them of who God is as it relates to time. “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a

thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some understand slowness.” God does not look at time the way we do.

Then Peter begins to reflect on the patience of God, the purposes of God, the desire of God for those who do not have relationship with Him. We look at the world and the promises aren’t fulfilled and we remember that God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance,” (2 Pet. 3:4-9, ESV)²

We situational atheists and agnostics are recovered by grace and taught in Jesus how to face our circumstances by finding God’s character revealed in His promises toward us and factoring God’s character and purpose into the equation.

Pray the Character of God as if You both Love Each Other

As we begin to take hold of the character of God in our situations and circumstances, our prayer life changes. Because you have a relationship with God you get to act on it! Listen to how those who’ve gone before us learned to pray! Notice how bold and relational the prayers are.

- Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise; then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word. (Ps. 119:41-42, ESV)
- Look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget your law. Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise! (Ps. 119:153-154, ESV, see Jesus, Hebrews 5:7)

Notice the character of God they meditate on and appeal to. You are love! You never quit! You are my savior! You are the God who sees me! You are my deliverer! You are my advocate, my attorney, my redeemer, my life giver! You have promised!

In contrast, consider this recent headline. “Bless-U2 is a Robot Priest That Will Forgive Your Sins”³ To commemorate the Reformation, a church in Germany has provided a robot who will speak God’s promises and blessings to you. You can choose the kind of voice (male or female) and the blessing or promise you need.

I don’t pretend to know the context or motives of the church. I assume the best of intentions. I also do not doubt that God in His tender mercy can minister to someone who received a print out from the robot. But as you listen to the relational prayers of those who seek God in His promises and as you begin to love God in all of His attributes and traits and personality, you feel the difference between our seeking a machine programmed by skilled human beings, in contrast to seeking the God who created you, who knows you by name, and who loves you with an everlasting love?

Listen in as a Christian pastor in the 19th century boldly took hold of the relationship God promises us in Jesus. He suffered mental depression and physical disease at a time when medicines for either one was minimal in comparison to our current times.

² See this method also in Romans 4:21 (convinced God had the power); Hebrews 11:19, (reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead) or Psalm 105 (God’s promise to Abraham, kept with Moses, and is now ours).

³ *Popular Mechanics* (2017). See also, “Robot Priest Unveiled in Germany,” *The Guardian* (Tuesday, May 30, 2017).

We shall have power with God in our times of greatest weakness if we can cry, "Abba! Father!" I can never forget a certain illness when I had been racked with pain and brought very low with heaviness of spirit through the nature of the complaint from which I was suffering. I felt driven almost to despair, one night, until I laid hold of God, in an agony of prayer, and pleaded with Him something like this, "If my child were in such anguish as I am in, I would listen to him and relieve him if I could. You are my Father, and I am Your child, then will You not treat me like a child?" Almost at the very moment when I presented that plea before God, my pain ceased and I fell into a sweet slumber, from which I woke up with, "Abba! Father!" on my lips and in my heart! I believe that this is an invincible plea, because, when God calls Himself our Father, He means it. There are some fathers in this world, who do not act at all as fathers should—shame upon them! But that will never be said of our Heavenly Father. He is a true Father and He has a heart of compassion towards His children. And He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men—and when we know how to appeal to His Fatherhood, we shall prevail with Him!⁴

Notice that our fellow friend in Jesus didn't say he was healed. Nor did he say that this kind of immediate answer came every time he prayed. All is not yet made right. Life under this sun isn't heaven yet. But, notice the testimony of God's tender care for him. Notice the aid to hope and help it became for him. Notice how he looked boldly in relational prayer, as if God loved him and he loved God. And notice that He took God at His word regarding who God is. He is an intimate and personal Father to his children.

Can you imagine learning to pray like this? Jesus has in mind to teach you. The grace to live a life of promise is part of what He lived and died and rose from the grave to purchase for you.

Conclusion

The historical records that reveal to us what took place when the Apostle Paul was on trial, recount Paul's words offered in his defense. "I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers . . ." (Acts 26:6)

As a Jewish man, Paul converted to Jesus, because he saw that all the promises that God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, came to pass in the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise at the beginning, that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).

A Christian's life is a life of promise. We learn to look from the promises to the God who gave them to us. With our snack bowl full of God's attributes for our nourishment, we begin to do damage to our situational atheism. Gradually, Jesus teaches us to reason our circumstances in light of God's character and to pray boldly and relationally with the love for one another that God has pledged to us. We stand in our generation, buying a field no one who doesn't treasure Jesus would ever want to buy. We do so because of our hope in the promise made by God at the beginning of all things! Grace upon grace!

Questions for Discussion

1. Moses said that He didn't want God's promise if He couldn't have God. The promise is like a boy's note or a woman's wedding ring, it points off of itself to relationship and presence. Do you feel this way about God? Why or why not?

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, "In His Love"

2. We look off of the promise onto God by looking for what the promise shows us about God's character. Do you have any experience with practicing this? If so, share it with us. If not, what encourages you or feels challenging about this?

3. Zack shared about a teacher who invited us to draw or describe God in the picture of our trying circumstances. He then talked about the phrase, "But God!" What is this like for you? Can you imagine beginning to apply God's character to your moment-by-moment circumstances?

4. Talk about how the robotic priest and the prayer of Charles Spurgeon differ from each other. What bothers you or inspires you about this difference?

5. We can begin to pray those aspects of God's character revealed in His promises. What do you think about this? Can you imagine trying to pray in this way? Can you describe how your prayer life might look different than it does now?

6. In light of this study, if Jesus were to invite you to praise God for something, what would it be? If Jesus were to invite you to ask something from Him, what would you ask for?