

The Promise of Never Being Left

Zack Eswine, February 18, 2018

In the 1980's, a love story went "viral" (though the word, "viral," wasn't used at that time). Robertson McQuilkin, stepped down from his post as President of Columbia Bible College, to care for his wife Muriel. Married for over forty-years, Muriel received the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Robertson's leadership, teaching and writing blessed many. Robertson let his career platform go for her care.¹

The promise, "I will never leave you" eludes many of us. Growing up in houses with divorce, perhaps we've felt the deep sense that people who say they love each other, eventually leave each other. Others of us experience, "I will never leave you" in its corrupted form. Like a gang or predator or controller, someone used this promise with us to manipulate rather than love us. Still others, confronted with Robertson's choice, aren't sure they could make the same one.

But when true stories of "never-forsaking" come to our attention, most of us instinctively wake up to their power. Robertson and Muriel's story went "viral" in their day because deep inside each of us we long for such a story. We taste the pure beauty and we desire the deep belonging that a promise-kept reveals.

A true love that never leaves doesn't come cheaply. As Muriel no longer recognized her husband she could feel fear or antagonism toward him. Their oldest son died too. Robertson spoke of overwhelming grief, "my dearest slipping from me, my eldest son snatched away in a tragic accident, my life's work abandoned at its peak."

How then did Robertson get through? In order to keep his own promise, Robertson leaned heavy upon the promise that God made to him through Jesus.

Robertson's story finds its heritage in many Christians who have gone before him. In our passage today, for example, early Christians encountered trials that involved the loss of property, money and position due to their faith (Hebrews 10:33-34). It's as if, when they identified as a Jesus-follower on their resume, the employer or their fellow workers, overlooked them, or worse. How did they get through? By living according to God's promise that He will never leave them or forsake them.

⁵Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶So we can confidently say,

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/june/died-robertson-mcquilkin-columbia-president-alzheimers-ciu.html>

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6, ESV)

First, Follow the Pattern of Those Who've Gone Before You

The Christian does four things in order to apply God's promises to their lives.

1. Name the Stress that Confronts You

Unlike, Eastern Religious teachings, that identify stress as an illusion from which we must detach ourselves, Christianity teaches us that stress exists in reality, and oftentimes for legitimate reasons. The Christian begins by getting honest and clearly naming the circumstance that confronts her. In this case, economic loss.

2. Search God's Book and Find God's Promises

Then, the follower of Jesus searches the Bible to find a promise that God gave to others that matches our current story. In this case, the preacher quotes from Deuteronomy 31 and Psalm 118. God said to them, "I will never leave you or forsake you." We follow the same God. We seek the same promise as they did.

3. Turn from Cynicism to Feisty Faith

We've named our circumstances non-tritely. We've spoken honestly about our doubt, our worry, our questions, our pain and our hesitance. But we can't get stuck there. We take hold of the promise, even with tears if needs be. By faith, we turn from cynicism to testimony. We "confidently say, the Lord is my helper, I will not fear, what can man do to me (vs. 6)?"

"What do you mean man can't do anything to you? Men and women are taking your money!" says the critic.

"Yes," the Christian answers. "But they can't take the Lord or the Lord's help from us!" Money might leave us, but God never will!

This kind of faith sounded strange to the normative talk of the Roman world (and to our world too). But faith is what a Christian learns to bring to their circumstances. Faith in Jesus changes the way we do daily life in the real world.

4. Don't Go this Alone, Lean Upon a Community of Promise

Now we lean into the friendship and presence of other believers. This feisty faith in the promise of God isn't a solo activity (Vs. 6, "we"). This kind of non-trite promise talk that seeks feisty faith amid the very real trials of our lives isn't gullible or naïve talk. Such talk takes strength. Faith talks like this.

Second, We Remind Ourselves that Faith and Assurance aren't the Same

Faith, takes hold of what is true, even when we can't see or feel what is true. Assurance, refers to the felt experience of what faith believes.

All of us are called to faith in the promises of God through Jesus. Not all of us have assurance or felt experience of these promises.

Faith holds firm.

Assurance sometimes let's go.

Listen to how Christians talk, when they possess both, faith and assurance.

I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (2 Timothy 4:16-17)!

Paul was rescued from death (the lion's mouth). He knows that his death is near. Yet, he not only believes, but fully and sensibly feels, that no evil deed, even death, can keep him from God's safety, now and in the heavenly kingdom. Paul gives expression to a sense of doxology, the vibrant feeling of worship, even though death stares him in the face. He has both faith and assurance.

Now listen, to how our Lord talks when faith is present but felt experience of faith goes missing. In the fullness of his humanity, Jesus expressed his absence of assurance that God will never leave him or forsake him. "Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cries. Yet, faith does not waver. It is to God the Father that our Lord cries out in personal prayer and by faith, commits himself into the Father's care.

Why have you forsaken me? . . . Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

Our Lord feels the absence of God, but his faith takes hold of the presence of God. He paves the way for each of us to have his sympathy but also his teaching us what to do, when we too find ourselves facing trials with no assurance, just faith.²

Third, God Promises to Never Leave You or Forsake You

As followers of Jesus, when do we need to apply his promise most?

A. When Friends Flake out on Us, God Stays with Us

² For more on Assurance and Faith, see https://www.the-highway.com/assurance_Ferguson.html

Take a look at how our Lord and then his follower Paul talks when friends deserted them.

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. (John 16:32, ESV)

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me. (2 Tim. 4:16)

They honestly name the reality of friends abandoning them in their need. Then they take up the promise of God and apply it to that situation. On the basis of this promise they walk through the pain of friends loving poorly. Notice too, that in these two cases, both express assurance (the Father is with me) and testimony (But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me).

Have friends flaked out on you? Did they add the double wound like Job's friends? Did they leave you when you most needed a friend? You are not without promise dear one. Jesus your Lord tastes this pain too. Other of his followers, have likewise worn these hurtful shoes. In Jesus, you have a promise. Though they desert you, the Lord never will. Out of loneliness and abandonment, Jesus can mend us into testimony. We too can say with faith and oftentimes with assurance too, "the Lord was with me. He stood by me and strengthened me."

Have you flaked out on a friend? I'm not talking about the wise boundaries of safety we sometimes need. I'm talking about a friend in need and we left them there. For whatever reason that we now know was selfish, they had to manage it by themselves. Consequences abound. I don't know if friendship can find restoration. I believe it can. But what I now for sure is that you don't have to continue on in this way. The friend who needs healing has a promise and can forgive you by the grace. You who need forgiveness can look to Christ right now and confess the harm you did and the mercy you have no right to but desperately need. Jesus can heal you whole.

B. When Family Forsakes Us, God Stays with Us

Family can forsake us. Notice the promises given.

Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close.(Psalm 27:10, NLT; See also Isaiah 49:15)

Regarding in laws: "I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. (Gen. 31:5, ESV)

When Children abandon us, even amid the worst of betrayals, Jesus makes the promised presence of God clear to us. do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but

say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. (Mark 13:11-12; More positively, see also Luke 15:11-32, ESV)

Perhaps we never knew our biological Father or Mother. Or at their worst, a Father or Mother always want center stage. It was your graduation, your day of honor, your wedding, but Mom and Dad can't handle that. They create drama. They take attention. They accuse or declare condemnation. Your moments of highlight are tainted with pain. Your memory is full of hurt. Your future makes you anxious. It's Friday. You get to celebrate a good thing with friends. The text on your phone comes to shame you, not for anything you've done, but because Mom or Dad can't handle someone else having a moment to shine. You read the painful text on your phone but now you also take up the promise of God, "Even if my father and mother abandons me, the Lord will hold me close."

Or maybe, Mom and Dad can't forget or forgive your worst moments. Not in terms of safety and wisdom sometimes needed in light of our worst moments, but in terms of never letting the narrative of grace change their view of us. Maybe when we were younger we were always late to everything. We haven't been late in five years but that doesn't matter. To Mom and Dad we are always late, the butt of the sarcasm, the ancient pain from years ago that won't take a rest.

May I assure you God is not like a late-night talk show host. The mistake you made years ago still finds its way into their jokes. Maybe a family member will do this to you, but the Lord will not. Why is this?

C. When Our Sin is All We Can Remember, God Stays with Us

We take hold of the promise that our sins can't keep us from the love of God in Jesus. In Christ, our sins are paid for. By His grace we've confessed. By His grace, our guilt didn't rise just because we got caught, but because we came to our senses and saw the evil and harm of our ways. By grace we turned in faith to Jesus, with no entitlement or anything we deserved, He graciously and powerfully gathered us up into His arms and spoke peace to our raging conscience. He forgave us. The promise is ours:

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103; See also, Luke 15, The Prodigal son)

Friend who've flaked. Father or Mother, Spouse or Child, your forsaking your loved one, has a remedy. The Lord can forgive you and change you. Your damaging relationships don't have to stay what they are.

But, take this gentle but firm warning to heart. The one you forsake has an advocate in Jesus. He or she has a promise that goes deeper, wider, higher and longer than the wound you persist in afflicting. God opposes the proud, even among his own, and gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). He who exalts himself will be humbled. The one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:14). That's a promise.

D. When Circumstances Fail Us, God Stays with Us

Perhaps now, we begin to see why it is that followers of Jesus live in this promise-kind-of-way. We learn, that "in whatever situation" we find ourselves, we can experience present strengthening by the present God who has promised in Jesus, that no matter what, He will stay with us. Listen to how Paul talks about it. He writes from prison. He writes about having little or having much.

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13, ESV)

In the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sidney Australia, American Laura Wilkinson, found herself in 8th place after two dives in the platform diving finals. Remarkably, Laura overcame that crippling deficit to win the gold medal. When asked by her interviewer how she felt about being down so far and then winning, Laura said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."³

What the Apostle Paul teaches us is that even if Laura remained in 8th place and never overcame the deficit and didn't make the platform of medals, if she was interviewed her answer would be the same. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This is the promise every Jesus follower learns to take hold. No matter what, the Lord will not leave me. More than that, he will actively give me strength to handle what comes, good or bad. And this includes, even death itself.

³ <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/july-august-2012/striving-for-a-higher-goal/>

D. When Death Taunts Us, God Stays with Us

When my oldest son was about four years old, we both watched an Animated Bible series. One movie within the series depicted Stephen who spoke truth to power. Those in power responded by killing him, making him among the first Christian martyrs. Those in power threw rocks at Stephen until he died. As the cartoon tamely pictured the gruesome scene, my son grew more and more agitated until finally he jumped off of the couch and yelled at the television, "Dad, I wish Batman were there!!!"

His brave and longing young heart gave voice to what most of us feel. Batman would have swooped in, taken care of the bad guys and rescued the Stephen. This is the kind of power I too long for. But even those Batman saves (if the comic stories were true), would still die at some point in their futures. The last enemy is death. The circumstance all of us must walk through and for which we need the promise that He will never leave us or forsake us, even then.

And so, Stephen follows his master's footsteps. As rocks break his life, he begins to ask that God not hold this against them. As evil does its worst and death towers with pride, Stephen sees something unusual. He has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In the Bible, whenever Jesus is said to be at God's right hand, he is said to be sitting. But not here! Not when Stephen dies because of his faith in Jesus. As death towers over the scene, Jesus rises! In the court of heaven, the true king, the true judge of all things, stands and advocates for Stephen!

Death comes. Death taunts and takes Stephen's life. But Stephen will rise again! Why? Because death has an enemy! Death is outmatched. Death cannot stand once the true King rises. The One who made the promise will keep it. "Death where is your sting?" One greater than you now lives! Your time is short. You are about to come to an end. Your demise has been promised. The same King has promised that not even you can take us from Him!

Discussion for this Week:

- What about this message gives you hope?
- What small step of grace is Jesus asking you to trust him with today?
- Are there any doubts, questions or obstacles that are keeping you from acting on this message? What do you need in order to overcome this obstacle?
- Is there someone in your life this message could encourage?
- Is there anything in this message we've haven't discussed that you'd like to?