

HOW GOD'S PROMISES WORK

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ December 18, 2016



¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.” ¹³ Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:10-14)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us walk in the light of the Lord,

Just imagine what it would have been like to be an Israelite 3,500 years ago when they were wandering about in the Sinai Peninsula between Egypt and Canaan. Oftentimes, we focus on the hardship that they had to go through, the wandering about in the desert for 40 years, not really having a permanent home. But there were positives to that time as well. One of the positives is that God's presence was visibly seen among you every day in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. What a wonderful comfort that the God who led you out of Egypt was still there. What a reminder that God was serious about the law that he had given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Those laws he gave to the Israelites not only governed how they were to worship him, but how they were to interact with one another. One of the laws that he clarified for the people of Israel was about marriage, and the promise contained within marriage, and the serious consequences that came as a result of a broken marriage promise. I say he clarified this in the 10 commandments, that's only because he set up the promise of marriage all the way back in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve. It was when he put Adam and Eve together that he set up the first marriage. **“And for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. What God has joined together let man not separate.”**

It was this commandment of God that was rolling around in the mind of Joseph the carpenter, the intended husband of the Virgin Mary. Like we heard in our gospel reading for this morning, Joseph had suspected some unfaithfulness going on when he found out that Mary was expecting a child (and not by him). Unfaithfulness was and still is the only God-given reason to seek a divorce, which is what Joseph was contemplating. He was contemplating this that is, until the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in a dream. It was the Angel Gabriel that took him back to the promise of God made to Isaiah 700 years before. A promise of God that we consider closely this morning. It is this promise of God that gives us a simple but pertinent reminder of HOW GOD'S PROMISES WORK

1. He makes them and
2. He keeps them

We rewind 700 years before the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and Joseph, to when God made the promise through the prophet Isaiah. A little background to this promise, not only because it helps set the stage, but because it's also quite interesting how this famous prophecy came to be. In many of the prophecies we heard from Isaiah over the past few weeks, we been reminded about how much Israel and Judah had abandoned God, we've been reminded about how much the kings of these two nations had abandoned God. But that didn't mean that God had abandoned his people or their kings. And this is what is going on here.

Ahaz is the king of Judah at this time. A wicked king by God's standards, who was so afraid of two nations ganging up against him, that he was prepared to ally himself with Assyria. But it was Isaiah who was sent there by God to remind Ahaz that there's a far better option available. Instead of allying himself with Assyria, he could ally himself with God, something he had been reluctant to do in the past. He was even given an awesome opportunity to ask God for a sign that he could do what he was promising to do (protect the nation of Judah). **"Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."**

But Ahaz had his mind made up, not even God performing an incredible and powerful miracle would get him to change his mind as to what he was going to do. Ahaz had his mind made up to ally himself with Assyria, and asking God for a sign, and God fulfilling said sign, would have been an indictment against him and his plan. It would have revealed to everyone that Ahaz had completely abandoned God. So instead, Ahaz acts all pious, "I could never ask God for a sign, I wouldn't want to test him."

It's easy for us to see the foolishness behind Ahaz's words and actions. He wasn't concerned about testing God, because as Isaiah points out, he has been testing God this entire time! Just like he has been testing the patience of foreign rulers, flip-flopping allegiances for his own personal benefit. But God was not going to let an opportunity to give a promise go by so quickly. God was going to give Ahaz, and the generations of Israelites after him a sign, a sign of a ruler from the house of David who *would* align himself with God's Word. A sign that, **"the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."**

God gave a reminder to Ahaz about HOW HIS PROMISES WORK. He made a promise, even when Ahaz didn't want him to. This was certainly not the first promise God had made, and it wouldn't be the last either. God had made promises to individuals, he had made promises to entire nations, he had made promises to the world. And something that Ahaz needed to remember, and something that is worthwhile to remember today, is that God makes promises. Why is this important for us to remember today? It's important to remember that God makes promises and not just suggestions or recommendations. We should not ignore when God makes a promise. We should not treat it as something unimportant. We should not bypass it as something we don't need to listen to. But remembering that God makes promises and taking them seriously is something easier said than done.

I think it's easier for us to act like King Ahaz than we really think. I think it's easy for us to take for granted God's promises, or to forget that they really are his promises. I think it's easy for us to get sucked into how the world's promises work than remember HOW GOD'S PROMISES WORK. In the first commandment with a promise God says, **"Honor your father and mother that it make go well with you and you will live a long life on the earth."** Yet, how often do we find ourselves not respecting father and mother, how often do we find ourselves not respecting other positions of authority?

God gave his promise to the Israelites that if they obeyed him, they would live long in the land of Israel. How quickly did for the Israelites to forget God's promise, or at very least, not take his promise seriously? God has given us the promise that he will watch over our steps, that he will not leave us, that he will not give us more than we can bear. But how quickly do we forget those promises, or at very least not take those promises seriously? God has given us the promise that whoever believes will be saved, and whoever doesn't believe will not be saved. But how quickly do we forget that, or at very least not take it seriously when we see an individual or family member who by their actions show they don't believe? God promises that faith comes from hearing the message, his Word. But how quickly do we forget that promise, or at very least not take it seriously when we neglect hearing, reading and learning God's Word?

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What a good reminder it is about HOW GOD'S PROMISES WORK. A good reminder that he not only makes promises, but that he also keeps promises he has made. It probably was easy for Ahaz to blow off the promise of God that a virgin would bear a child. Because he would never see it. But generations of Israelites would hear that prophecy, and a generation of Israelites would see that prophecy be fulfilled.

It would be Mary and Joseph who were most directly affected by this prophecy. It was Mary who knew that she had not been unfaithful to her husband and yet found herself pregnant. It was Joseph who had to believe that this was God's promise being fulfilled inside of Mary and not just her way of getting out of it. Because God not only makes promises, but he keeps them as well.

We may get so used to hearing this promise that it doesn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. But think about how crazy this promise sounds. **"The virgin will be with child and give birth to a Son."** This is physically speaking impossible. As if this weren't impossible enough, think about how crazy the next line of prophecy was: **"and she will call him Immanuel."** "Immanuel" is Hebrew for "God with us." And it's talking about more than when we say "God is with us always," no, it is saying, "God will be here with us, living among us." The infinite God of the universe made himself a microscopic embryo in the womb of a young virgin mother. Our infinite God became one with us, not just to know what it was like to go through what we go through, but to protect us from our enemies, anyone or anything that would separate us from God.

Our infinite and powerful God not only makes promises, but he keeps them as well, just like he would keep the promise for the virgin to be with child, just like he would keep the promise for the child to be "God with us." This is the wonderful reminder we get this week in God's Word. It's a wonderful reminder for all of the promises God has made in my life. It is the wonderful reminder of the promise to watch over us, to guard our steps, the promise he has given to save all those who believe. All of these promises are kept in Christ.

Think about how precarious God's plan was from a human standpoint. Placing his new-born son into the hands of a Jewish teenager. How easily Joseph could have chosen to abandon Mary. But even though there seems to be so much that could have gone wrong with this plan, with God in charge, he saw to it that everything would happen as he planned it.

This is a promise of God that we will celebrate this upcoming week. We will celebrate it with a Christmas Eve service Saturday at 4pm (Vail), and a Christmas Day service on Sunday (8am - Benson, 10am - Vail). I hope this promise of God made by the prophet Isaiah is a good reminder for you about HOW GOD'S PROMISES WORK. That he makes them and he keeps them. He also promises that his word would not come back empty. I encourage you to use this week to invite people to hear and believe the miracle of God's promise. A miracle that changes everything. Amen.