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THE
SHELTER

OF

GOD'S PROMISES



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PROMISES, PROMISES

I Need Something to Hold On To

THE PROMISE

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

—2 CORINTHIANS 1:20

When you think of promises, you don't want to think of what's broken, of brokenness. It's human nature to want a sure thing and for someone to back up the certainties, guaranteed, no questions asked. But it's just like God to think of the unthinkable, to show us that the impossible is possible, that there is one kind of brokenness that holds everything together and in which promises are kept.

But I am jumping ahead of myself.

For me, choosing to study the promises of God in depth began with

a letter. I get very few actual delivered-to-my-mailbox letters these days. Most of my friends communicate via e-mail or text message, so a handwritten envelope on my desk was something of a novelty. I picked it up and tore at its seams with curiosity. Then I began to read.

I have never met the woman who wrote to me, but apparently she heard me speak at an event and sensed a connection with me. She wrote about some of the struggles she had been through in the past few years. These were not small things: illness, financial hardship, and the breakup of her marriage. Amid all these hardships, one line arrested my attention because of its profound simplicity:

“I would not have made it this far without the promises of God.”



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without the promises of God.”*

I read her letter again. On one hand, there was enormous human pain. On the other, words on paper from a God we can't see and the invisible help of the Holy Spirit. To some, the scales might have seemed imbalanced; the tangible hardships of her life left her body, heart, and soul stripped bare. Yet her confidence was compelling—beautifully and almost heartbreakingly compelling. Her words didn't read like wishful thinking but as a proclamation that has been lived out in an *I know that I know*, tear-bathed way.

I thought of friends and others I've met in my thirty years of speaking to women around the world. I remembered people who have faced similar, difficult circumstances and struggled to find hope in the middle of their messes. I've read through notes left on my Facebook page, notes slipped into my hand at the end of a speaking

event. From the darkened caves of countless hearts, I have heard the same primal cry, the same questions over and again:

Has God forgotten me?
Does my life matter?
Is there a plan somewhere in all of this mess?
How am I going to make it?
How do I know God cares about my family?
What will happen to me when I die?
Will I die alone?
What if I outlive my children?
Why won't God heal my depression?
Why hasn't God healed my marriage?
How do I know that God even heard my prayer?

We want to believe that God sees everything, our comings and our goings, our slumber and our days, as Psalm 121 says. And we desperately need to know and feel that His promises hold true in the darkest of nights. We believe that God loves us, but bad things happen anyway. There are aftereffects and consequences, damage and wounds—pain that runs so deep that its presence, a reminder of the storms, invades our lives over and over.

The failures, disappointments, and regrets keep us questioning: Do God's promises hold fast when everything else is falling apart? What exactly does He promise us? Can we trust Him to keep His promises?



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THE PROMISE FOR KEEPS

Our deep, soul-level need for a “yes” to those questions hit home for me during the time my father-in-law, William, lived with us. Although we never verbalized it, my husband, Barry, and I assumed his mom would outlive his dad since William was twelve years older than Eleanor.

That’s not what happened. Eleanor was diagnosed at sixty-seven with cancer, and she lived just two more years.

I have a vivid picture in my mind of William on the day of her funeral. Barry had taken our son, Christian, to the car, and William asked for a few minutes alone at the grave site after everyone else had left. I sat down under a tree covered in moss, its leaf-covered branches spreading in every direction like a divinely designed umbrella. I wanted to rest a moment and savor not only the peace there, the quiet, but the beauty after the hard-hitting emotions and unmooring of death and uncertainty in previous weeks. When I looked up, William was standing in his dark suit, silver hair all in place, hands crossed in front of him, like a little boy who was lost and didn’t know what to do next.

We settled it that day: William would move from his home in Charleston, South Carolina, to live with us in Nashville, Tennessee.

“What if you get tired of me being here?” he asked one morning at breakfast.

“Pop, we’re not going to get tired of you,” I said. “You belong here. We were a family of three. Now we are a family of four.”

“What are the house rules?” he asked.

“Oh, we have a very long list,” I said with a smile. “Be kind to each other, and if you fall down, roll over, laugh a lot, and get back up.”

Barry, Christian, and I loved having William in our home. He

was funny and sweet and a great cook. His okra soup became a thing of legend! We were so glad that we could watch over him and simply enjoy him. Then one day something happened that caused him to—mentally, at least—pack his suitcases. We were discussing something at dinner. I don't even remember what it was now, but whatever I was saying, William disagreed with me and said so. I was a little surprised by the edge in his voice, as this was not like him, but I supposed maybe he was irritable because his knees were bothering him and causing him enough pain to lose sleep. We were all quiet for a moment, then he pushed back his seat from the table and went upstairs to his room.

When he didn't come down after an hour, I decided to see if he was feeling okay. I knocked on his bedroom door, and William invited me in. Sitting on the edge of his bed, with his hands folded on his lap, he looked like that same lost little boy who stood by the grave site not sure what to do next. I sat down beside him.

“So, what now?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“So, do I leave now?”

I was stunned. “Of course not. Why would you ask that?”

“Well, I know you said I could stay forever.” He paused. “But I broke the rules.”

I thought back to his comment at dinner, and I guess to him, his leaving the table registered as unkindness toward me. Watching his hopelessness, my heart ached for him, and I needed to help him understand. “Pop, rules might give us some order, but love and grace make life worth living. You belong here now. You are allowed to mess up just like any one of us. You are family, and we're not going anywhere without you. We threw away the sales receipt when we brought you home. We're keeping you.”

THE PROMISE OLDER THAN MOSES

Keeping is what we long for and what God promises us. We hope, we wish, we pray for promises that we can count on, come rain or shine, to shelter our hearts and our being, our dreams and our doings. We want these promises to be kept whether we mess up (or think we did) or someone else does.

It's an age-old longing, older than Moses, this yearning for promises made and promises kept. In fact, it is Moses I think of when I think about promises: Moses, who was called to lead God's people out of slavery and to the promised land. Moses, who was called a friend of God. Moses, who would talk with God as a man talks with a friend (Exodus 33:11). But there's also Moses the doubter (Exodus 3:10–4:13) and murderer (Exodus 2:11–14), the very human Moses who got angry and afraid, felt disappointment and discouragement. I think of the Moses who experienced—just as William found in our home, and I discovered one stormy night in the Cairngorm Mountains—that God makes and keeps His promises to us, regardless of our faithfulness to Him.

The moment of Moses' story that stands out to me is when he pleaded with God to remember His promises (Exodus 33:12–17). Moses had been given God's Ten Commandments and had brought them down from Mount Sinai only to find that the people were not ready to receive them.

Tired of waiting in the wilderness on God and Moses, the people had made a golden calf from their bit jewelry—rings and earrings. They were worshipping their own creation, looking for promises they could control themselves or make and break as they saw fit instead of trusting in the promises of God, the promise to be led to a promised land.

Moses came upon the scene and, enraged at seeing the golden calf, threw down the Commandments written on tablets of stone. *How could the people not wait on God? How could they not see that even*

now God was bringing about all He'd offered? Pebbles and dust, shards and splinters of stone were strewn like broken promises at Moses' feet. Having just come from the glorious presence of God, he was heart-broken and devastated.

God was devastated, too, so shattered that He told Moses that maybe He should leave His people.

Oh no, no, Moses begs. If You don't go with me, with us, how can I lead? Where will we go? Let me know Your ways. Let me see Your glory so I can know You. "Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?'" (Exodus 33:15–16).

God, moved by Moses and unable to leave those He loved or resist their cries, had already planned a way to stay and to keep them. In the dust and the rubble of the broken tablets, His Word remained true, His promises would be kept. God looked on Moses as he begged not only to stay in God's presence but to see all of God's glory. God, whose heart was broken like those tablets of stone, began picking up all the pieces.

Imagine God, after having witnessed the rejection of the people He just rescued, saying to Moses, "I will have mercy . . . I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19). It is as if God, having watched the people desecrate and decimate the shelter of His covering, was willing to offer those pieces of Himself again, collecting them, repositioning them. Then, in an act of great mercy, He told Moses to get new stones for new tablets on which the Word would be written for the people. Even when they had proven to be totally faithless, He remained willing to start all over again.

The shelter God made for Moses was the cleft of Horeb, a cleft meant not only for protection from the storms but for the chance to see His glory. What we learn from Moses, though, extends beyond

the scene with the Ten Commandments. There was a greater theme of God's promise and provision happening in that moment. Bible commentator Matthew Henry explains it this way:

A full discovery of the glory of God would overwhelm even Moses himself. Man is mean and unworthy of it; weak and could not bear it; guilty and could not but dread it. The merciful display which is made in Christ Jesus alone can be borne by us. The Lord granted that which would abundantly satisfy. God's goodness is his glory; and he will have us to know him by the glory of his majesty. Upon the rock there was a fit place for Moses to view the goodness and glory of God. The rock in Horeb was typical of Christ the Rock; the refuge, salvation, and strength. Happy are they who stand upon this Rock. The cleft is an emblem of Christ as smitten, crucified, wounded, and slain.¹

The cleft in Horeb for Moses is a symbol and pointer to Christ, who is the ultimate cleft, the Rock of Ages, cleft for us. As Henry explains, for Moses, the cleft was not just for his protection. It was also the sanctified place whereby God could let him see a glimpse of His glory, His majesty. And so it is with Christ, the One in whom God poured His glory and majesty so we could catch a glimpse of the Almighty and be kept safe by the abundance of His provision.

CHRIST IS THE CLEFT, THE KEEP

This is the shelter of all God's promises: God not only keeps His promises but He longs to keep us in them. As it was in those castles long ago, made of rock and stone, the very center tower was called the "keep" and provided shelter, a place of habitation, an operating station from

which defense, under siege, was centered. Usually a well was built at the center of the keep so those sustained there could not only endure but thrive.



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In God's kingdom, there is a keep, too, and it is Christ. How beautiful that God designed a way to provide such strength for us through the Person we crushed through our sin. How fitting that the rebellion of the Israelites, which brought about the destruction of God's tablets, is a reflection of the wounding we would cause to His Son. But light-years beyond these failures, our loving and promise-keeping Father would find a way to keep us, to say yes to us when we asked for forgiveness, protection, and a glimpse of His glory. That eternal Yes, that Shelter of the promise, is Christ.

In the face of some disappointments and discouragements, the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of this:

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Corinthians 1:20–22)

Just rest for a moment in the beauty that comes with the phrase "He set his seal of ownership on us." God claimed us through

Christ—He has made an eternity-long commitment to us that He cannot break. But He didn't just put a seal on us and set us aside like a near-empty jar stuffed way back in the cupboard. No, God has made *many* promises to His people, and they all come back to Christ. Here's how another Bible commentator explains it:

These promises are all “in” Christ; with and in whom could they be but in him, since he only existed when they were made, which was from everlasting? with and in whom should they be of right, but in him with whom the covenant, which contains these promises, were made, and who undertook the accomplishment of them? where could they be safe and secure but in him, in whose hands are the persons, grace, and glory of his people? not in Adam, nor in angels, nor in themselves, only in him . . . by whose blood, the covenant, and all the promises of it, are ratified and confirmed, and in whom, who is the truth of them, they are all fulfilled.²

But why would God do this? Why, when we break so many promises to Him? We build our own golden calves and break our word to God, our vows, our promises. We say we trust Him and believe in His promises when we need them or want something. But when things don't work out the way we think they should, or something bad happens, a storm comes, or we're left waiting for answers like an Israelite in the wilderness, we can be so unfaithful. Sometimes in our pain or in our panic we forget God, we forget His promises.

Why would God want to keep us and His promises to us when we mess up so badly?

The Bible reminds us of a truth we too often forget, a truth that shines as clear as daylight: *because God cannot help Himself*. The force of His righteousness and mercy, which were from everlasting and formed the covenant with us, are the unchanging foundation upon which His

promises are built. God does not change, nor do the glories of His person and the salvation He engineered for us. God's promises are as dependable as He is. Because they *are* Him.



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GOD'S PROMISES ARE NOT LIKE OURS

There is a story in the Old Testament of a prophet named Balaam whose donkey talks back to him (Numbers 22:22–35). Balaam may be a prophet, but he is a heathen one and not looking after the interests of God, not counting on God's promises or commending them. He's only after his own purposes and gain. Even Balaam's donkey sees he's in trouble, so when Balaam sets off on a road for his own agenda, the donkey stops, turns into a field, presses Balaam's foot against a wall in a narrow place, and even lies down, refusing to go forward.

Balaam, enraged, beats his donkey, who talks back: *Haven't you ridden me all your life and have I ever done this before? Why can't you take another look and see what's going on here?*

Such wise words: take another look and see what's really going on here.

What Balaam will learn, and eventually tell the people, is what's really going on: "God is not man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23:19). This is not so much a statement of faith from Balaam, as even to the end he puts stock more in the promises of men and their riches than the promises of God. But

Balaam cannot help but recognize what is true: God cannot lie. And this from a man who, we're told, has no love for God or any desire to change his own self-serving ways. I love the fact that we are given those words not from a devout follower of our Father but rather from an outsider who recognizes the truth of who God is and that He does what He says He will do without exception.

As I studied the word *promise* in the Old Testament, I came across a very interesting fact. The two Hebrew words we translate into English as "promise" are the words *dabar*, meaning "to say," and *omer*, meaning "to speak." In other words, when God says something, when God speaks, that is as good as it gets. He means what He says, and He says what He means. It would appear as if we, humankind, had to invent the word *promise* because what we say or speak cannot always be trusted, so we upped the ante with a new word. But when God speaks, He cannot lie.

That's the foundation stone of this book. When God makes us a promise, He can never break it. If a heathen prophet can live by this understanding, how much more so can we whom God has restored?



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THE STRUGGLE TO COUNT ON HIM

When I was visiting Scotland in the summer of 2009 to celebrate my mother's eightieth birthday, I saw again that there is an innate hope in our hearts that we can count on the promises we are given,

whether we are five years old or eighty. My mom is a very careful—or *canny*, as we call it in Scotland—housewife. She has lived on a modest, fixed income for many years and knows how to balance a budget, but she had been taken in by several mail marketing schemes simply because they promised generous returns on purchases made through their catalogs. So her kitchen was piled high with foot cream from Holland and macaroons from Belgium. I tried to reason with my mom that I had seen television news reports exposing these scams. Yet this kind of suspicion was outside my mom’s personal integrity to grasp. How could anyone make such bold claims without any intention of remaining true to their word?

“How could they print something like that in black and white if it’s not true?” she asked.

This is the primal struggle we have to deal with here on earth before we are able to move on to receive God’s promises. We have to separate promises that may never be kept from God’s promises, which will never be broken. We have a lifetime of experiencing deception, corruption, and embellishment on one side of the scales and a simple, profound promise on the other: God cannot lie. Our human experience does not sync up with a heavenly truth.



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from God’s promises, which will never be broken.*

I wonder if we have such a hard time believing this, resting in God’s promises, because we have been lied to so many times, because so many earthly promises are broken. Think for a moment of the cultural climate in which we have grown up. We live in a day when

those who want to sell us something easily access us through television, radio, the Internet, and even our cell phones. We are told: If you follow this diet, you will lose twenty pounds in two days. If you use this face cream, you will look twenty years younger in two weeks. If you use this shampoo, your hair will be full and flowing as it sparkles and shimmers in the breeze.

The sensible part of us knows that such promises are nonsense, but isn't there another part of us that longs to believe miracles can actually happen? And don't we think at some level, *Surely these kinds of promises wouldn't be made if they weren't true?*

Culture has driven us to think of promises as personal fulfillment, when God's promises are not about us, but about Him and being saved by Him. God's promises are an expression of His holiness.

I remember watching television one night with my son, Christian, when he was almost five years old. It was getting close to Christmas, and we were facing the usual barrage of must-have toys. A commercial interrupted *The Grinch* to sell a new fishing rod for kids that guaranteed catching a fish within five minutes "or your money back."

Christian asked if he could have one.

I told him that his daddy and I would be glad to get him a fishing rod, but fishing is a learned skill, and no one can promise that you'll catch a fish in five minutes.

I'll never forget how Christian looked at me with his big brown eyes and said, "But they just said you can on television. They wouldn't lie, Mommy."

My heart ached for him as I realized that he was just beginning to taste what it's like to live in a culture that thrives on telling lies with no apologies. What a difference there is, however, between the promises made in sales pitches, among ourselves, and even the promises we make to ourselves, and the promises of God.

As I sat on the couch, while the people of Whoville and Little

Cindy Lou Who all ate “roast beast,” I thought about my love for Christian. How much Barry and I want to keep him safe and healthy, see him happy and living with purpose and passion. How much we love to look in his eyes and see a part of ourselves there, but something more too, something unique and beautiful and surprising. How much we want to enjoy him forever—a new capacity in our hearts that God gave us through parenthood, a reflection of His love for us. Though we break God’s heart at times, He loves us and says, *You can shatter Me like My Word on the stone tablets. You can leave Me in pieces, and I will still love you. I will hold on to you. I will create a place, a cleft in the rock for you, to keep you and on which you can steady yourself and stand.*

God keeps us not only to give us a future, but also to reflect His glory. He keeps His promises to us because He cannot help Himself. He cannot lie, and He is full of love for His creation.



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FROM THE CLEFT BACK TO THE GARDEN

From the very beginning, God made a promise and had a plan. You can trace His promises back to the garden of Eden. When Eve disobeyed God, when she ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and shared it with her husband, Adam, we lost our place in Paradise. Sin became our birthright. But God in His grace and mercy promised deliverance before He banished Adam and Eve, and

us, from that perfect place of no pain, no worry, no storms. Genesis 3:14–15 captures the moment:

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

*“Cursed are you above all the livestock
and all the wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”*

The promise was that the seed of Adam and Eve would crush Satan’s head and destroy him for eternity. Satan would bruise Christ’s heel, meaning there would be pain and suffering ahead for the Messiah. That seed is Christ Jesus. God’s promise for you and me today is that there is a limit to the time that the enemy will be able to have free reign on this earth, and that even during that limited time and space, Christ Himself will walk with us.

Whenever I am faced with a difficult passage in my life or that of a friend, I remind myself again that we are travelers in this world, headed back to our true home with God. But we come upon detours in our journey. Each detour takes us from the garden to a cross on a hill, where Christ Himself paid the ultimate sacrifice so that we will be free. Even as Christ was placed in a grave carved into a cleft of rock, He went there as a fulfillment of God’s promise to you and to me that death would be swallowed up in victory, for no grave could hold Him.

I can never forget that night I was in the Cairngorms, how I made my way in the dark into the cleft of the rock and found a place of shelter. We are each invited from the worst storms of our lives to find our safe hiding place in God. God provided shelter for Moses not in a moment of shining triumph but when his heart was broken by the faithlessness of those around him. When the people failed, God's glory caused Moses' face to shine as He reiterated His promises one more time. Our faithlessness does nothing to diminish God's faithfulness. Whatever God says, we can stake our lives on, and Christ came to show us who our Father is. In Christ all the promises of God are fulfilled, for no matter how many promises God has made, they are "yes" in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20).



Whatever God says, we can stake our lives on.

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't it so mysteriously complicated and yet so simple? Isn't that just like God to always come down to the most elemental way of things? In His creation, there is darkness and there is light. There is the beginning and an end, the heavens and earth, water and rock, body and blood, your broken heart and His.

Normally we doubt whether a promise maker will be a promise keeper when everything is completed. But the witness of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus is that God's most difficult promise has been kept. The Father is truly the only Promise Maker who is in earnest a Promise Keeper. A promise from God is a promise kept.

There are His promises and His unbreakable commitment to keep them.

There is Christ. There is yes.