

Standing on the Promises, you know that old hymn? I love the melody, but I'm not really sure that the lyrics are exactly right.

How can I be sure what are God's promises to me in the Bible and what are not? I certainly don't want to stand on something as a promise of God that is not a promise of God. Just because I want something to be a promise of God to me doesn't mean it is one.

Another reason that the gospel song makes me uncomfortable is that God makes two kinds of promises in the Bible...unconditional and conditional. And one should never be mistaken for the other.

In the time of Moses, several hundred years before me, the Israelites' relationship with God meant only one thing: follow his laws. They knew they were supposed to love God, but following his laws seemed much more important. Why? They seemingly were punished when they broke his laws, but not punished when they refused to love him. They had the promise that they would inherit Canaan, but had not yet done so.

To the Israelites of my time, everything revolved around two things: God and the land. We had been in possession of Canaan for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, the land was more important than God to most of us.

My people's agreement with God is simple – we do everything he tells us to do, and he protects and provides for us. He provides us the land of Canaan. Among the things that void his obligation to protect and provide for is...worshiping other gods. Do that, and we're in complete violation of our agreement.

One of the main subjects of the Old Testament, is the refusal of the Israelites to consistently follow God's laws. Follow them for a while, quit following them, get

punished, repent. Rinse and repeat. Worship only God, quit worshipping only God, get punished, repent. Rinse and repeat.

... standing on the promises of God my savior.... Promises. There are conditional and unconditional promises.

An unconditional promise means that God will do something no matter what. Frankly, there are very few unconditional promises of God in the Bible.

The vast majority of God's promises in the Bible are conditional. God will do "x" if his people do "y." Sometimes the conditions are spelled out specifically, and sometimes they are implied. Sometimes there are consequences — punishments— involved with not following the conditions, and sometimes none are spelled out. In other words, the promise depends on our actions, and we are not the most dependable people.

Now, the land, and why it was so important to me and the Israelites of my time.

The founder of the Jewish nation is Abraham. We Israelites even call him Father Abraham. Because of Abraham's faithfulness, God promised land to the descendants of Abraham. He confirmed this promise to Isaac and Jacob.

The land promised to Abraham stretched from Euphrates River to the Nile River. When Joshua led the conquering of the area known as Canaan, he acquired a big portion of the land promised to Abraham. Canaan became known as the Promised Land. Moses indicated that God would give the Israelites the rest of the land if they remained faithful to God.¹

The Israelites had uncontested possession of the Promised Land twice in ancient times: after the conquest by Joshua and after the conquest by David, my father. Under Joshua, the Jews worshiped only God, and no other gods. Four centuries later, under David, the Jews worshiped only God, and no other gods. Both of those times, the surest way to continued prosperity and full habitation of the Promised Land was to continue worshipping only God.

¹ Deut. 19:8-9

I will talk about what happened after Joshua died, but let me work backwards starting with what happened after David, my father, died.

Upon David's death, I took over complete control of Israel. King Solomon. I built the Temple of God in Jerusalem, I was completely faithful to God. Then, then...I decided to quit trusting God completely. I decided to willfully break his laws and ordinances.

Out of my lust and out of my desire for political alliances, I married seven hundred princesses of foreign countries and took three hundred concubines. Over time my heart turned to foreign gods.² I began worshiping the foreign gods of my wives and concubines, and led the Israelites to do so. This was the beginning of the end for the country. Never again would the Israelites have as good an opportunity to completely follow God and inhabit their land peacefully.

Back to the death of Joshua, found in the book of *Judges*. Under Joshua, the Israelites had conquered virtually all of Canaan. There were only a few cities and small areas remaining unconquered. Rather than staying unified and completely conquering the country as God ordered, the tribes broke up and decided to clean up their own allotted lands. Divide and conquer, I suppose.

Although the tribes had full intention of completely destroying the Canaanites, it was hard to do. So, they decided to let a few of them live, some even under custom treaties. This was not part of the promise, this rogue move infuriated God. He told the Israelites that the survivors would be thorns in their sides and their gods will be a snare.³ The people wept when they heard these words...but they still did not wipe out their enemies.

As long as Joshua lived, and as long as his followers lived, the people were faithful to God. Upon their deaths, the following generation did not know God or his miraculous works for Israel. The people did evil in the sight of the Lord by worshiping foreign gods.

Let me be perfectly clear about the situation; My people wanted to live in the Promised Land and enjoy God's blessings, while living in complete disobedience

² 1 Kings 11:1-8

³ Joshua 2:3

to God. They expected God to fulfill his promise, while they failed to fulfill their side of the bargain.

They didn't just *kind* of disobey God by abandoning him. They deliberately spat in his face...they worshiped the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

As you can well imagine, the all-powerful God of the Universe could not and would not stand for that level of disrespect and hatred. He gave them over to the peoples who tempted them with their foreign gods. The Israelites could not withstand their enemies. The foreigners with their attractive foreign gods plundered the Israelites. The Israelites came to harm as God had warned them.

Modern Christians see the cyclical rebellion of the Israelites primarily played out as a spiritual war for our hearts. We saw it primarily played out in the land. We owned it, we didn't own it. Borders continually shifting, paying tribute to foreign kings or being paid tribute.

The Land. We have always wanted the land promised to Abraham, but we have never been willing to be faithful to God. We want to stand on an unconditional promise that was not made.