

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast Date:** 23 September 2012

**No.** T0747

**Speaker:** Dr. Gordon Hughes

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## Lessons from History: Laying hold of God's promises

Concerned friends of Joe Smith called the police when they hadn't seen him for some days. When the police broke into his dingy terraced house, they found him dead in his bed. The official cause of death was later given as malnutrition. Yet under Joe's bed, the police found a tin box containing over £1,000 in £10 notes.

Have you ever looked closely at the small print on a £10 note? On that note, you will find under the heading of the 'Bank of England' the statement, "I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of TEN Pounds. For the Governor and Company of the BANK of ENGLAND". Then follows the signature of Andrew Bailey, the chief cashier. Similar wording occurs on all our British bank notes. Every time we use a bank note to pay for our purchases, we are, in effect, laying hold of that promise.

Joe Smith's death was a tragedy; he need not have died of malnutrition. He died simply because he failed to lay hold of all the promises contained in that tin box! While the story of Joe Smith is an imaginary one and need not concern us, it is an even greater tragedy that some Christians fail to lay hold of God's promises in His Word, the Bible and, as a consequence, their lives are the poorer.

Our talk today, 'Laying Hold of God's Promises' is the last in a series of talks entitled 'Lessons from History'. These talks have been based on the experiences of the Israelites as they left their slavery in Egypt on their way to the land of Canaan. It has been said, "What we learn from history is that we don't." Sadly, there is more than a grain of truth in that statement. The failure of governments to learn from history has resulted in the sadness and pain of wars. But the failure of individuals to learn lessons from the history recorded in God's word can have even more tragic consequences.

Today, then, as we look at Joshua and the way in which he was able to lay hold of God's promises and to find encouragement in them, may we learn the lesson that Joshua's God is our God! We'll read then from Joshua 1:1-9: "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: 'Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them - the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.'"

What tremendous promises! What encouragement to Joshua, this fledgling leader of the Israelites as he steps into this new role as leader of his people! It might be helpful to recall an earlier experience of Joshua. Shortly after the Israelites started upon their wilderness journey, Moses was commanded by God to send out twelve spies to spy out the land of Canaan. Joshua and Caleb were amongst them (see Numbers 13). During their forty days of spying, they all saw that it was a good land - a bunch of grapes was so large it had to be carried on a pole by two men (Numbers 13:23)! Nevertheless, on their return the other ten counselled Moses against entering the land because of the giants who were there. Then we read, "And Joshua ... and Caleb ... tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, 'The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them.' And all the congregation said to stone them with stones" (Numbers 14:6-10).

We can imagine something of the distress of Joshua and Caleb. Because of the lack of faith of the people, God told Moses that they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years, one year for each day the spies were in the land. All the adults over 20 years old, except Joshua and Caleb, would die in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb would set foot in the land.

Now that time had come, and Joshua stood on the wilderness side of the River Jordan and saw the fortified city of Jericho in the distance. Did he remember the fears of those who had been terrified by the giants in the land? He might have been forgiven a feeling of fear at this time. But God comes to him in his fear with this marvellous encouragement to "be strong and of good courage" (Joshua 1:6) and with the tremendous promises, "You will have good success" (Joshua 1:8) and "The LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

The rest of the book of Joshua records how, in the strength of that encouragement and with confidence in God's promises, Joshua and the people went forward and entered the land. It is just worth noting the extent of the land promised to Joshua: "From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates ... and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun" (Joshua 1:4). This is not the narrow strip of land bordering the Mediterranean Sea that the nation of Israel now occupies, but a vast territory including present day Jordan, Syria and part of Iraq. God's promises are more than half measures! For a while, Solomon's empire included all that vast territory.

If only we could learn to lay hold of God's promises as Joshua so obviously did! I want to spend the remainder of today's talk looking at just three of the many promises in the Bible. They are special to me and I hope they will be to you, too. Before we do so, however, I want us to look at the nature of God's promises. You and I make promises, usually with the best of intentions to keep them. But occasionally, through no fault of our own, perhaps because of changed circumstances, we find ourselves powerless to keep them. Are God's promises like ours? Not a bit of it! The writer to the Hebrews, recalling the promises God made to Abraham, tells us, "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast..." (Hebrews 6:17-19).

Note those words, "It is impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18). By contrast, Satan is called "the father [i.e., the originator] of lies" (John 8:44). The first lie ever told in this world was Satan's lie in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:4). But God is not like that! His word is truth (see John 17:17). In the promises of God, absolute truth is backed up by absolute power - a combination that can never fail! Even banks may be unable to honour their promises as, sadly, we have seen in recent years with sometimes devastating losses to their customers. But God's promises can never fail!

**Promise 1: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)**

Let us now look at three of God's promises. The first is perhaps the best known verse in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). We should just notice, first of all, that this promise is characterised by its greatness:

<b>God</b>	The greatest Lover
<b>so loved</b>	The greatest degree
<b>the world</b>	The greatest company
<b>that He gave</b>	The greatest act
<b>His Only begotten Son</b>	The greatest gift
<b>that whoever</b>	The greatest opportunity
<b>believes</b>	The greatest simplicity
<b>in Him</b>	The greatest attraction
<b>should not perish</b>	The greatest promise
<b>but</b>	The greatest difference
<b>have</b>	The greatest certainty
<b>everlasting life</b>	The greatest possession.

Deliverance from the judgment of God that should come upon me for my sins and God's free gift of eternal life are promised in this verse. The only condition is 'that whoever believes'. Throughout John's Gospel, this word 'believe' means much more than mere mental assent. It implies a total commitment towards. It is one of the key words in John's Gospel, occurring nearly 100 times. Appropriately, John writes towards the end of this Gospel, "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

There is a 'feel good' factor about being a Christian. But the possession of eternal life does not in any way depend upon whether I feel that I have it. God says it; I believe it; and the transaction is done! Reader, may I ask you if you have laid hold of this very special promise? While eternal life is God's free gift to us, let us never forget what it cost God. He had to give up His Son, the Lord Jesus, to die for our sins on the cross of Calvary. No wonder, then, that the Apostle Paul exclaims, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

**Promise 2: For [God] Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6)**

Our second promise is found in Hebrews 13:5-6: "For [God] Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" It is interesting that, while this promise is clearly based on God's words to Joshua that we considered at the beginning (Joshua 1:5), they are also implied in the promise the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples just before He returned to heaven, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Apostle Paul had certainly laid hold of this promise. Just before his martyrdom, he wrote to his young son in the faith, Timothy, "At my first defence no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:16-17). In that most trying of circumstances, Paul knew the abiding presence of the Lord Jesus with him. Let us then, like Paul, really lay hold of this precious promise and know that the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

It is so easy to give in to fear - fear of losing one's job, fear about ill-health, fear of having enough to live on, fear of death. Long ago, the shepherd lad, David, faced his fears as he wrote, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). I wonder if those words occurred to David, as with his sling and stone, he faced the heavily armed Goliath? (1 Samuel 17) May each of us truly know the abiding presence of God with us as Paul and David undoubtedly knew.

**Promise 3: Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:1-3)**

Our final promise was made by the Lord Jesus as He met with His disciples in that upper room just before His crucifixion: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-3). Note that promise, "I will come again". They are the words of a God who cannot lie, as we reminded ourselves earlier (see Hebrews 6:18).

In 1914, the Antarctic explorer, Ernest Shackleton set out with his team for the Antarctic in the ship, Endurance. While there, the ship was crushed in the ice and had to be abandoned. They were marooned on Elephant Island with no hope of rescue from the outside world. Shackleton, with five of his men, set out in an open boat on the high seas to find help on the island of South Georgia. At times, the boat had to be manhandled overland. That journey ranks among the epic voyages of Antarctic exploration. Before he left, Shackleton made that same promise to the rest of his men, "I will come again". Day after day, the men lined up in expectation of their leader's return. Eventually, Shackleton was able to return with help and the whole party was rescued.

We have the promise of One so much greater than Ernest Shackleton: "I will come again and receive you to Myself" (John 14:3). Have we laid hold of that promise and are we looking for the personal return of the Lord Jesus? That will influence all of our lives - the way we think, the way we behave, the places we go to, the words we say. Some Christian homes have a text on the wall, 'Perhaps today'. While some of the promises of God, particularly relating to the nation of Israel, await the fulfilment of prophecy, no prophecy at all needs to be fulfilled for the Lord Jesus to keep His promise.

Paul tells us about the fulfilment of that promise: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Perhaps today!

We close with some words from a hymn by Samuel T Francis:

*I am waiting for the coming  
Of the Lord who died for me;  
Oh, His words have thrilled my spirit,  
"I will come again for thee".  
I can almost hear His footfall  
On the threshold of the door,  
And my heart, my heart is longing  
To be with Him evermore.*

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