

“HANGING ON TO GOD’S PROMISES”
Isaiah 42:1-9, Hebrews 9:23-28, Luke 2:21-38
December 18 & 19, 2021

“Missionaries Dick and Margaret Hillis found themselves caught in China during the Japanese invasion [at the beginning of World War 2]. The couple lived with their two children in the inland town of Shenkiu. The village was tense with fear, for every day brought terrifying reports of the Japanese advance. At the worst possible time, Dick developed appendicitis, and he knew his life depended on making the long journey by rickshaw to the hospital. On January 15, 1941, with deep foreboding, Margaret watched him leave.

“Soon the Chinese colonel came with news. The enemy was near and townspeople must evacuate. Margaret shivered, knowing that one-year-old Johnny and two-month-old Margaret Anne would never survive as refugees. So she stayed put. Early the next morning she tore the page from the wall calendar and read the new day’s Scripture verse. It was Psalm 56:3 - *What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee.*

“The town emptied during the day, and the next morning Margaret arose, feeling abandoned. The new verse on the calendar was Psalm 9:10 - *Thou, Lord, has not forsaken them that seek Thee.*

“The next morning she arose to distant sounds of gunfire and worried about food for her children. The calendar verse was Genesis 50:21 - *I will nourish you and your little ones.* An old woman suddenly popped in with a pail of steaming goat’s milk, and another straggler arrived with a basket of eggs.

“Throughout the day, sounds of warfare grew louder, and during the night Margaret prayed for deliverance. The next morning she tore the page from the calendar to read Psalm 56:9 - *When I cry unto Thee, then shall my enemies turn back.* The battle was looming closer, and Margaret didn’t go to bed that night. Invasion seemed imminent. But the next morning, all was quiet. Suddenly, villagers began returning to their homes, and the colonel knocked on her door. For some reason, he told her, the Japanese had withdrawn their troops. No one could understand it, but the danger had passed. They

were safe. Margaret glanced at her wall calendar and felt she had been reading the handwriting of God.”¹ (Jan Winebrenner, *Steel in His Soul, The Dick Hillis Story*, [Chicago: Moody Press, 1985], Ch. 10.) She had trusted in His promises, and God had delivered her and her family.

When God makes a promise to His people, He never breaks that promise. It’s a pattern throughout the Bible. It may take some time for God to provide the fulfillment to the promise, but God is faithful in that He cannot lie, and we can depend upon His promises.

Let me give you some Bible facts about promises. It has been stated “that there are 30,000 Bible promises. No indication is given as to how this colossal number was reached. Altogether, there are 31,173 verses making up the Bible; 23,214 verses comprising the Old Testament, and 7,959 verses in the New Testament. Doubtless this total of verses gives rise to the 30,000 - every verse being a promise.

The magazine *Time*, of December 4, 1956, carried an item to the effect that schoolteacher, Dr. Everet R. Storms, of Kitchener, Canada, reckoned the 30,000 figure to be off the mark. During his 27th reading of the Bible, this devout student tried to tally up the promises found in the Bible, a task which took him a year and a half. Storms came up with 7,487 promises by God to mankind (that’s about 85% of all the Bible’s promises); 2 promises made by God the Father to God the Son, Jesus; 991 instances of one person making a promise to another person; ... 290 promises from people to God; 21 promises were made by the angels, [most of them found in Luke’s Gospel]; One promise was made by a man to an angel; and two promises are made by an evil spirit to the Lord. Satan made 9 promises, as when he promised to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if He would fall down and worship him. **Storms then gives us the grand total of 8,810 promises”² found in the Bible.**

God has made a lot of promises to humanity, many of which are still being fulfilled today. And He is not slow in fulfilling His promises, but God’s timing is much different than ours is. And we have to remember that God sees things differently than we do, Him seeing the world from above, and us seeing it from underneath.

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000] pg. 646-647)

² (Herbert Lockyer, *All The Promises of the Bible*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 1962] pg. 10)

So today we look at God's fulfillment of His promises to a few people just a few weeks after Jesus was born. I invite you to hear it. This is Luke 2:21-38. (READ Luke 2:21-38)

Joseph and Mary were very diligent to do all that the Law of Moses required. Jesus was circumcised and named on the eighth day after He was born. Now, "it is important to understand the sequence and background of these events. According to Jewish law, a woman became ceremonially unclean on the birth of a child. On the eighth day the male child was circumcised, after which the mother was unclean an additional thirty-three days (sixty-six if the child was female - Leviticus 12:1-5). At the conclusion of this period, the mother offered a sacrifice, either a lamb or, if she was poor, two doves or two young pigeons (Lev. 12:6-8). In addition, the first son was to be presented to the Lord and then, so to speak, bought back with an offering (Numbers 18:15). Luke [explains] how Jesus was reared in conformity with the [laws of the Old Testament]. His parents obeyed the Lord in naming Him. The offering of birds instead of a lamb shows that He was born into a poor family."³

After the thirty-three days, Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem to dedicate Jesus at the Temple. **And at that time they are addressed by an older man, Simeon.** The Holy Spirit had promised Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Messiah. Having made that promise to Simeon, we can assume that he had been waiting a long time for that promise to be fulfilled, and we can assume that Simeon is by then, an old man.

Did you catch the description of Simeon? "*He was a good, God-fearing man and was waiting for Israel to be saved*" (Luke 2:25). The New International Version calls him "*righteous and devout*." **This was a man who was eagerly seeking the ways of the Lord.** He's not described as a priest, or a teacher, or a Pharisee, but one who was eagerly waiting for God to fulfill His promise of providing His servant who would bring about the redemption of Israel.

Our Old Testament lesson of Isaiah 42:1-9 describes that promised servant to be the one who

³ (*The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebelein, [Grand Rapids:MI, Regency Reference Library, 1984] Vol.8, pg.848)

would “bring justice to every nation. He will not shout or raise His voice or make loud speeches in the streets. He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp. He will bring lasting justice to all. He will not lose hope or courage; He will establish justice on the earth. Distant lands eagerly wait for His teaching” (Is 42:2-4).

God had promised His Messiah, the Christ, who would set Israel free and touch the lives of all people. It was understood that this servant, the Messiah, would be the king of the nation, and would be able to establish Israel once more in the same condition that saw King David’s kingdom. He would free the people from the oppression of the occupying forces of any controlling nation. He would bring peace once more to the whole land of Israel.

Being that the nation of Israel was then under the oppression of the Roman government, the longing for the Messiah would have been high. And since Simeon had been assured by the Holy Spirit that he would see the promised Messiah before he died, the hope was then that the child, Jesus, would become the king of Israel who would cast off the Roman occupation and bring peace to the whole nation of Israel. But it was very unusual for a king to come from a poor family. Most often the new king would be the child of the reigning king or a person already in royalty.

But there was an even greater understanding of setting people free, but it seemed to be beyond the common understand of even the leaders of the Temple, that of releasing them from their bondage to sin and death. Even greater than the occupation of Israel by Rome, **the freedom that the Messiah would bring would be that of releasing people from the oppression of Satan**, who cajoles or drives us away from God’s laws and into sin. No matter what the governmental condition of any particular nation, the Messiah was the only One who would be able to break the bonds of slavery to Satan’s control, thereby freeing the person’s soul from eternal death and bringing them back into life, spiritually. Though this was certainly referred to by the prophets, the most common understanding was that the Messiah would be more on the order of Moses, or David, or even Solomon.

So Simeon was told that he would see God’s Messiah before he died. Imagine if he had been

told that when he was a young man. He would be eagerly looking for the fulfillment of God's promise for a Messiah every day. He would constantly be on the lookout for the One who would fit the profile of the Lord's Servant. Diligently Simeon would have learned all of the different characteristics of the Messiah from the Scriptures that were available. He would have talked to the teachers of the Law, or the Scribes, to get as much knowledge of what this Messiah would look like so that he could recognize him when he appeared. Day after day Simeon would have done his work and sought for the Messiah.

It could have been very easy for Simeon to have given up his search, however, if after a few years there was no sign of anyone fitting the description of the Messiah. He could have become so discouraged in the promise not being fulfilled that he just gave up on what he was told, fearing that the promise was just a lie. It is a tendency for us as humans to give up if we don't get an answer right away. But being a devout and righteous man, Simeon hung tightly to the promise given to him and kept looking for the Messiah. So on that marvelous day when the Holy Spirit led him once more into the Temple, Simeon might not have been really excited about the possibility of actually seeing the Messiah. It had not yet happened, so what would there possibly be for him that day?

But then Joseph and Mary and Jesus arrived at the Temple to do all that was required of them for Mary's purification. And as soon as Simeon sees Jesus, the Holy Spirit opens up his eyes and he sees the Promised One. He took Jesus *"in his arms and gave thanks to God: 'Now, Lord, You have kept Your promise, and You may let Your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen Your Salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples; A light to reveal Your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to Your people Israel'"* (Luke 2:29-32).

Here was a Jew, a devout Jew mind you, giving thanks to the Lord for His Salvation, even to the Gentiles. A Light so bright that it would attract even those not of the Jewish heritage to the ways of the Living God. And a glory to the nation of Israel, God's favored people, that they might shine out to the world as the origin of the One who would set the people free. After all the years of emptiness, with no fulfillment of the promise, finally the Lord revealed His Messiah, and it was a month-old baby.

Now imagine Joseph and Mary watching all of this. And hearing the words that Simeon says to them about this child they were entrusted with. After nine months of eagerly awaiting Jesus' birth, after the struggles of finding a place for the child to be born, and then having the visitation of the shepherds after He was born, **Joseph and Mary were absolutely amazed at this new reminder from God** of who it is that they were given to care for.

Simeon had no idea what they had been told before they came to the Temple. But his words of thanks to God and insight to who Jesus would be, confirmed once more all that had been told to them from the angels and the shepherds. Simeon's pronouncement that Jesus was the Lord's Messiah was one more affirmation of what the Lord was doing, and that the child was indeed the Promised Messiah.

We're not told what Simeon does after talking with Mary and Joseph. I wonder if he began to share with all the people in the Temple that day what the Lord had revealed to him. This was exciting news, that God's Messiah was now here. I would think that had Simeon told everyone in the Temple this great news, some would have begun to prepare for the revolution that certainly the Messiah would instigate on their behalf. However, seeing that the proposed Messiah was just a one-month-old baby, others might have just smiled and nodded at old Simeon as if to quietly placate his excitement just to get him to stop his ranting.

But he's not the only one to make such grand statements about this Child-Messiah. There is another faithful follower of God at the Temple that day who has also been waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah. "*Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher*" (Luke 2:36) also becomes aware of the Messiah's presence. She, just like Simeon, is an old person, devout and righteous. Her situation, much different than Simeon's, established her in the Temple for a much longer time.

Upon the death of her husband, Anna lives in the Temple, possibly living in one of the rooms surrounding the Temple. We are not told about her husband, or her family, outside of her being from the tribe of Asher, one of the sons of Israel. Being a young widow, there is no description or detail given what her duties might have been, but it is certain that she was taken care of by the Temple as one who

had nothing else to provide her a living. It was the obligation of the Law of Moses to take care of widows and orphans, so Anna may have been a familiar figure at the Temple.

She is considered a prophetess, so God may have used her at other times to inform the people of the work of the Lord. She is also present in the Temple that day, and she collaborates Simeon's proclamation of Jesus being the Messiah. For anyone to be credited as have a truthful testimony, there needed to be another person to give similar testimony in order to substantiate that testimony as being true. **Anna is used by God to confirm Simeon's statements about the Messiah.**

Her words are not recorded by Luke, however, but she also shares the news of God's work at bringing freedom to everyone in Jerusalem. Another old person in the Temple proclaiming that the Messiah had come into the world to bring freedom to the country of Israel. Yet there seems to be a passive acceptance that Jesus is the Messiah, if the people heard it at all.

Though the expectancy would have been high, and the desire for deliverance would have been greatly welcomed, **there does not seem to be any real reaction by the people or the leaders of the Temple to accept Jesus as the Promised One.** Maybe He just didn't fit their concept of what the Messiah looked like. Or maybe, because the One they were pointing to was just an infant, they figured that it would take time for Him to grow up before He could do anything of significance. They would not be willing to commit their allegiance to this child yet - let Him grow up and see what He does, and then maybe, just maybe then, they would rejoice that God had provided the fulfillment of His promise to redeem Israel. So much could happen in between then and the future reveal.

But for Simeon and Anna, it was the crowning point in their lives, to not only be told of God's promise, but to experience the presence of that Promised One there in the Temple. The long expected Messiah had come and they could now rest, assured that God would complete His plan of Salvation for the people.

For us today, we are on the other end of the time spectrum with regard to God's promised Messiah. While we may claim Jesus as our Savior and even allow Him to become the Lord of our life,

we are also awaiting the deliverance of the Lord our God. We have been given the promise that Jesus will save us as we put our trust in Him as the Christ. Yet what does that really mean? Is it that when we put our trust in Jesus that we will not have any more trials or troubles in this world? Does it mean that we will not have to worry ourselves about provisions of our family, or the protection from our own persecutions? Does it mean that we will have life easy with no worries or problems? No.

On this side of the work of Jesus at Calvary to bring about our Salvation, trusting in Jesus means that we have a life beyond this world, and that no matter how tough or difficult this world might become, we have a new home waiting for us beyond this world. We have been promised a room in the Father's House, where there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain and no more death, for the old things will have passed away (Rev. 21:4). We've been told that we will be raised from the dead and given new life when Christ Jesus returns (I Cor. 15:20-28). We've been promised that when we are in Christ Jesus, we will be more than conquerors and that nothing in this world will be able to separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:31-39). There is much to long for as we remember His promises.

But when will they take place? Jesus promised to return one day to take us to be with Him, but we don't know the day or the hour that it will happen (Mark 13:32). We have signs and seasons given for us to watch out for, but it has been so long since they were given to us. How can we trust that they are true promises and that God will fulfill them? It is so easy for us to give up on those promises, or to lose heart and forget them.

Much like Simeon and Anna, we are encouraged to hang onto the promises of God for us. Though some may try to dissuade us and discourage us from staying true to our hope in God's promises, we are to remain confident that when God makes a promise to us, He fully intends and has all the means to accomplish that promise. Though it may not happen in our lifetime (Hebrews 11:39-40), God has planned something better for us, if we only remain steadfast in our faith.

So do not give up your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Learn and remember from the examples of fulfilled promises throughout the Bible, and stay true to your faith. God is faithful and true

and in Him we will find our hope and peace. Do not become discouraged at the wait. Remember that our time and God's time are different, and that God knows just the right time to accomplish His plan of Salvation for the world, in order to give everyone the chance to know about Him and put our trust in Him. Hang on to God's promises, and never let them go. Let's pray...

Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Though we may not see the end for us, You know all that will come. Give us the courage to trust in Your promises given to us so that when the things in this world become so overwhelming, we can trust that You have us in Your hands. Give us such confidence in Your Word, that we never vary in our trust in You. Thank you for Simeon and Anna and the examples of many others who stood strong in their hope in You. May we follow their commitment, their devotion to Your promises, and be found righteous and devout, too. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.