

<Read text: Romans 1:1-7>

Promises and trust can be a tricky issue for us. With one notable and obvious exception, the only people we have to hear promises from and to put our trust in are other human beings. And as human beings, they all share one common trait: they are all sinful. This means that people break promises all the time. It means that people make promises without thinking them through, without thinking about whether they'll really be able to keep them, whether they really have that kind of control over the outcome. And because of this, it means that our trust in others can be gradually (or suddenly) eroded away over the course of our lives. When people make us promises we can get skeptical, demand details of how it will be carried out or simply withhold our trust until we actually see it completed. There may be a few people in our lives exempt from this kind of scrutiny, but let's be honest, it's pretty rare all told.

The problem is that we are tempted to take this skepticism and distrust and apply it to our God just the same as the people in our lives. Now we know that's just not logical, it's patently unfair. But it happens all the same. God makes us promises but because we're afraid of whether or not he'll really keep them, we hold back on one thing or another. We doubt our God. This is not right. Not only is this doubt a sin against God, it keeps us from living at full peace and contentment in this life. So how do we work to build trust with someone who doesn't have our trust? Usually trust is earned after a long time of a person being faithful to their promises. So let's take some time to do that today. Let's look at the promises that God has kept so we can be certain in our own trust of him.

And why not use the big one? The one we're about to start the celebration of this week, the one that Paul is talking about here in his opening to the letter to the Romans. Let's talk about the promise of the Savior. Paul says here that he was promised beforehand in the Holy Scriptures and it does go all the way back to the very beginning of our Bibles. The story of the history of our world is not two chapters old before the only two people around managed to wreck it all. And yet, God promised he would fix it. He promised that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent and put the enmity back where it belonged, between man and Satan, not between God and man anymore. This one singular promise was the hope of all people. It was the only thing that would satisfy God after the sin of the people. They kept their trust in this singular promise, and in view of their faith, their sins would be forgiven through the coming savior.

And throughout the centuries that passed, God kept repeating this promise to his people. And not just repeating it, but expanding on it and giving a more detailed picture of what the savior would be like. We have an example of that in our Isaiah reading today, where we are told that the coming savior would be born of a virgin. Throughout the history of the Old Testament God continued to expand his promise of what the Messiah would be like, what he would specifically do or accomplish.

Now, I'd really like to just take a minute and take this in. Just how complicated and specific the promise of the Messiah was. Maybe I've told you this before, maybe not, but I always find it fascinating. A mathematician once figured the approximate odds of making eight specific predictions about a person's life and having all eight of them come true. The odds would be the same as covering the state of Texas two feet deep in quarters and having someone randomly select the one marked quarter out of the entire pile. That's for eight predictions. Depending on how you count them, there are as many as two hundred specific predictions about the Christ in the Old Testament, made in over a dozen different authors and books. This is not something that someone's life is just going to randomly fit. This isn't even something you could've read about and tried to shoehorn yourself into. The only way it was all going to happen exactly as promised is if God was the one who made the promise and God was the one who carried it out.

And just as our Old Testament reading today gives us an example of one of those specific promises, our Gospel today showed the fulfillment of that same one. Since we don't have time right now to look up every single one of these prophecies and look to how Christ carried them out, I'll just tell you: he did. He was born a human being, just like one of us, born of the line of David, just like it was promised. He was God made man, just as was promised and Paul observes in our reading here. He was exactly what was expected of him.

And he did exactly what was expected of him. He was promised to be our substitute and he was. He lived a human life under the law of God. He lived that life perfectly for us. He did his Father's will at all times, he kept the commands of God in everything he did. As a human being, he earned eternal life; he met the requirements. And then, as he promised, he sacrificed it for us. On the cross he made the trade. His merit, his good life was taken from him and credited to us. Our sins, our failures were taken from us and counted against him. And on the cross he suffered for

them. Punishment needed to be handed out for what you have done, and the Messiah took that punishment on himself, just as promised. He died for us.

And just like he promised, he did not stay in the grave. The power of the Son of God could not be contained, and the grave could not hold him. He rose on the third day to prove that his promises were sure. To prove that his sacrifice was accepted by God the Father. To show us that he had indeed fulfilled all that he promised. The promise made in the Garden of Eden was now fact. The serpent's head was crushed by the offspring of the woman, and God and man were now at peace again. The opposition was back where it should be, between the children of God and the devil.

And the best part of it all is that this was all done for you. Just as Paul said to the Romans here I can just as truthfully say to you, "**you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.**" (v6). Through your baptism you have had the name of God place on you. He washed you clean and claimed you as one of his own. You belong to Christ. And through your faith in Christ, everything he has done benefits you. Your sins are forgiven. Your eternity is secured. God promised it would happen and God carried it out just like he promised. He has saved you.

And that's just the big one. Read through the whole Old Testament sometime and just see if you can count how many promises God made to his people, to the world or to an individual and how he never once failed to deliver on his promise. Let's not ever treat the words of God with skepticism like we do the people here. God is not a man that he should lie. He has kept every promise so far and so when he speaks to promises we haven't seen fulfilled yet or promises that we're not sure *how* he is going to keep; don't let there be an ounce of doubt to go with them. He has kept his promises in the past and he will always keep them in the future. When God speaks, his word is certain.

Later this week, when we look into the manger let's remember that. There lies the fulfilled promise of God. He is faithful. Let that strengthen our faith and trust in him for all the promises he has made us here and now. He will do everything he has promised for you. And let's maybe touch on a few of those that we sometimes struggle with to remind ourselves that they are sure and certain so we can put away our fears and doubts.

Our God has promised to always provide for you. To give you whatever it is you need in your daily life. He has not promised to give it to you plenty ahead of time or to always make it plain where it will come from. Most of the time he expects us to work with the skills and strength he has given us to accomplish this. But when our skill and strength fail us, he will not fail to provide. When circumstances take away from us he will still give us enough. He will provide. It may not always be what we want, but it will be what we need and it will be enough. We don't need to be terrified or even afraid of running out or of coming up short in whatever circumstance. We don't need to hoard for any eventuality. He will provide in every situation.

And as he gives us what we need, that applies to more than just our physical needs. It applies to our spiritual needs as well. He will lead us along the paths that we need in this life to remain close to him. Whatever that path may be. Whatever it is that's necessary to get us to the good end. That may mean the path is uncomfortable, but he promises that it is what is best for us and we know the end result is worth it. We can trust that promise in the middle of anything this life throws at us. God is in control.

And through it all, our God has promised to always be with you. He will never abandon you or forsake you. No matter the depth of our sin, no matter if we should give up the faith, he will stand by us until the end. If we should forsake him he will remain with us, doing everything he can to call us back. If we sin he will always be there when we come to him in humility and contrition to remind us that we are forgiven and he still loves us. And when we face the worst life has to offer he will remind us that he is there with us, to comfort us and dry our tears, to remind us that we are not alone and that this pain we have will not last forever.

He will take you home to be with him at the end of this all. Above everything hold to this promise. You are forgiven in Christ and you are going home to heaven when this is all done. Don't say something silly like, "Oh I sure hope so," to that. This is not a "it would be nice" situation! It is fact! It is sure! State it like the truth it is! You are going to heaven through your faith in Christ Jesus your Lord. He died for your sins and he will take you home when the time is right. Trust that completely.

Paul's final words here are entirely appropriate. Grace and peace to you. God has shown you grace, undeserved kindness in what he has done for you. He has promised you a savior and he has delivered. He has promised you eternal life and he will not fail in that promise. And trusting in his promises brings us peace. God has promised you salvation. Trust him. Amen.