

## **THE INCREDIBLE POWER OF A PROMISE KEPT**

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

**Exodus 3:14** - "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.' "

**Exodus 3:12** - "He said, "But I will be with you...."

**2 Peter 3:13** - "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

I want to sing the praises of certain people in the Body of Christ all around the world today. Though their names will never be known this side of heaven, they demonstrate the one quality that is ***most like Father God***.

There are still some people who possess this rare and priceless quality that literally holds the Kingdom of God in this world together. ***There is no quality more needed than this one. And it's disappearing rapidly in the church today.***

Somewhere today a lonely, frustrated woman is saying, "For two cents I'd pack in this marriage. This clod of a husband has never given me one ounce of the love and support I need. I'd give my right arm to have a man who would love me like Jesus loves His church."

She feels nothing warm or even hopeful in her situation. And then she quietly remembers a promise - ***wedding vows*** - she made, perhaps long ago, and decides to stick with her marriage and try one more time to make the thing work against all the odds. God bless her for that.

Somewhere today there's a broken hearted father who thinks to himself, "I want my impossible son to get out of this house and never come back. He's disgraced our family and broken our hearts. He just makes life a burden for me and a heartache for his mother."

And then he remembers a day long ago when two big people and one tiny little person stood at the front of a church at a ***dedication ceremony*** and those parents made a promise to God. And he drives home from work determined to try to love some changes into that wayward daughter one more time. And I want to say with all my heart, God bless that man.

Somewhere today there's a teenager who is tempted and pulled into all sorts of compromising situations at school or college. The voice of the wrong crowd is calling loudly and there are no Christian friends around to give clear vision and support.

And suddenly there comes to that young person's mind a day when he or she stood in front of a church and died to the old life in ***water baptism***. And somehow, perhaps feebly, he renounces the will of the crowd and strikes out one more time to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost. And I want to say with all my heart, God bless that person.

To everyone who hears these words in the middle of a storm - to everyone who is in such a hard spot that the only thing you can control is the keeping of your word - to everyone who has a ship that you refuse to let sink - to everyone who has a person you simply will not abandon - to everyone who has a cause you will not give up on - more than anything else I could say to your broken and tired heart this morning, what I want to say is in this ***you are being like God!***

Let me pull this together with two points - one about ***God*** and the other about ***marriage***, though the latter relates to any moment of promise before God whether you're married or single:

1) **EVERYTHING GOD HAS ESTABLISHED OF HIS KINGDOM IN THIS WORLD RESTS UPON THE FOUNDATION OF HIS WORD - HIS PROMISE**

**Genesis 12:1-4** - "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that ***I will show you***. [2] And ***I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing***. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and ***in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed***.' [4] So Abram went, ***as the Lord had told him***, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran."

This is how everything starts. God makes a promise to an unknown Chaldean and this man burns all his bridges banking that God has told him the truth and will keep His word. God **sets it up** so Abram has nothing **else** to go on. From square one everything stands or falls with the keeping of a **promise**, and nothing more.

One of the next key players is **Moses**. And again, the story continues on the footing of God and His faithfulness to His promise:

**Exodus 3:9-12** - "And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. [10] Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." [11] But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" [12] He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

Both Moses and the people he leads will disqualify themselves for the Lord's blessing a thousand times. They will enter a promised land and virtually self--destruct. They will disobey, become immoral, worship idols, reject the ways of the Lord until they virtually spit in His face. Yet the whole Old Testament is the story of a God who keeps His promise when everyone else abandons ship. He does what He said He would do, **for no other reason than He said He would do it**.

And **we**, no less than those **Old Testament saints**, are people to whom promises have been given. Many of which we've seen come to fulfillment. Some of which are still in the future. In fact, our whole eternal **destiny** hinges on one huge promise yet to come:

**2 Peter 3:13** - "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

When Peter says we are waiting "**according to his promise**" he means this is what our waiting is based on. Just a **promise**. This is the peg on which your whole future hangs. How do we know that evil won't triumph and crush all hope of full redemption? How do we know we won't just end up on some cosmic garbage heap?

The evidence from former civilizations isn't encouraging. The reports of the environmentalists aren't good. Certainly the nightly news isn't loaded with hope. What makes the Christian stick his neck out and bet against the odds?

Well, someone came up to a transformed fisherman and asked that same question: "Peter, where does your hope for this future kingdom come from? What's your evidence? How can you be so sure?" "**According to His promise, we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth...**"

Friend, if God changed his mind - if He didn't keep His promise - we're in a lot of trouble. But we rely on a God who reaches into a future full of uncertainty and makes one thing certain. He creates an **island of certainty** in the middle of the unknown and says, "**You can count on this...**" And **that's** what I want to talk about today - **the incredible power of a promise kept**. Particularly, I want to talk about the power of a promise in the relationship of **marriage**.

## 2) **THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP MOST RESEMBLES THE UNION OF CHRIST AND HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH, IN VOWS SACREDLY MADE AND FAITHFULLY KEPT - ESPECIALLY WHEN THE OTHER PARTNER DOESN'T**

Dozens of times each year people join hands in this sanctuary and say words like these to each other: "**I Don, do take you Reni to be my lawful wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish as long as we both shall live; and thereto I pledge you my faithfulness.**"

I don't do most of the ceremonies anymore. But even when I'm just sitting and watching there are times I want to scream the ceremony to an emergency stop and shout, "Do you understand what you've just done? This is **huge**. Are you listening to what you're promising? Do you seriously **mean** this? Do you mean **all** of this? And do you mean it for **that long?**"

I say that because I've noticed a tsunami-like shift in the thinking of the church about marriage commitment. People don't think of their marriage in terms of **vows** anymore. We're conditioned by the world not to. The internet is packed with **dating services**, programmed to find a partner with the same interests, the same personality traits, someone who will be a person **most to my liking - someone who will satisfy me in every way**.

I suppose that shouldn't surprise us coming from the world's system. **"Look for a mate who will inconvenience you the least."** It's all designed to minimize the denial of self. I won't have to lay down my life for my partner the way Jesus did for me - the way He did for His church.

Then there are **pre-nuptial agreements**. Watch the idols in the entertainment industry. This is where people **vow** faithfulness till death and plan their **exit** from the relationship at the same time. I'm not at all sure that the difference between a **vow** and a **deal** is understood - even in the church. When a **deal** is cut, each party is committed to his or her part **as long as he or she gets what is owed from the other partner**. As long as you satisfy me, I will try to satisfy you. As long as you treat me well, I will treat you well. As long as you are faithful to me, I will remain faithful to you.

The difference between a **deal** and a **promise** is this: you can get out of a **deal**. It's not hard to walk out of a **transaction**. But there's no getting out of a **vow**. That's what **makes** a vow a vow. It's something **unbreakable**. A **deal** is off when one partner doesn't keep it. A **vow** is kept even when I don't get what I have a right to expect.

**Lewis B. Smedes** - **"What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, he reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: he will be there even when being there costs him more than he wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty."**

I never promised to love my wife as long as she loved me. I never promised to be there for her as long as she was beautiful. I never said I would be with her as long as she was faithful to me.

Listen, in the **same fashion in which God spoke to Moses**, I **vowed** to my wife, **"I will be with you**. Then I said, "No matter what, you can count on this - until my heart stops beating and the lid is closed. You may have to worry about many other things. Circumstances will arise neither one of us can control. But you never have to worry about **this**. This I **can** do. This I **can** vow. As surely as Jesus said He would never leave or forsake me, I will never leave or forsake you."

Whatever **arrangement** you have, you can't make a **marriage** without this. You can live with a person, you can feel romantic about a person, and even feel love toward a person without marriage vows. But you can't be **married** without the making and keeping of vows. **Love** isn't want makes a marriage last. **Vows** are what make a marriage last. **Love** grows in **vows** the way **muscles** grow in a **gym**. Vows protect love from sentiment and romantic whimsy.

Think about it. I don't know which of us will get hit by a bus first. I don't know whether there's a fatal disease lying in the wings. I don't know which of us will find life the more difficult. All I know is **I promised "I will be with you...until I'm dead."** And that's what I have to live up to.

I understand that one person can only do so much. One person can't make another person stay with them if they don't want to. But for **my part** I know what **my** vow has committed **me** to. No wonder the vows say that these decisions should be made **"thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God."** **God listens at the marriage ceremony**.

Let me try to pronounce a special, divine blessing on people who make promises to stick with lost causes - people who make promises to stick with a love that feels cold - people who make promises to stay committed when they seem committed to a pain in the neck. Why bother? Why take the risk? Why endure the pain? Because then, in a very special way, you become like God.

Let me tell you a true story. It actually happened to me. We used to attend a large men's retreat at Banff, Alberta, right in the Banff Springs Hotel. One of the speakers one year was a very successful American Christian business man. His wife began to manifest symptoms of a very debilitating degenerative physical and mental illness. She soon experienced physical crippling and total dementia.

This husband discovered early on that one thing that always calmed and quieted her was when they would visit the Pacific ocean. She loved to just sit, wrapped in a blanket and watch the waves, particularly when it was stormy weather. It wasn't too long before she lost all touch with reality. She didn't know who he was.

Eventually, this man sold off many of his business interests. He knew his wife didn't have long to live on this earth and wanted to spend all the time he could just being at her side.

Flash back to the men's retreat at Banff. The man is telling a group of us this story as we sat around the table in the beautiful resort at dinner. He teared up as he talked.

Eventually - back to his story - his wife died. But he said he always cherished those last years with her, sitting in their sea-side home. He would bring her coffee, stroke her hair as she watched the waves thunder in. She would smile. But not at him. She didn't even know who he was.

A young man sitting at our table asked the question I'm sure many were thinking inwardly. "Why did you do all that for someone who couldn't even identify you anymore? It must have been so difficult for you."

Sometimes, in the providence of God you hear things you didn't plan on hearing and you are permanently changed. I will never forget that man's answer. "I never promised to love *her* as long as she loved *me*. I promised to love her till death."

There it is. Behold **vows** putting muscle into what could have been a diminishing **love**. Behold the incredible power of a promise kept - a race run well. Behold one small place, in a world of chaos and muck, that didn't collapse - that was held fast and sure. Just as our future as Christians, every one of us, is held sure by nothing more than the promise that Jesus will come again and restore life and righteousness. If He ever changed His mind (and who could stop Him if He wanted to change it?) we'd all be doomed.

Let me wrap this up the best I know how. This is for everyone - married or single - young or old - rich or poor. So what is **gained** by keeping your promise moment? An easier life? No, not in a million years. What's gained? You become Godly. You participate in the character of God. Christ is more deeply formed in you. You shape your own future against all odds. You experience the total **freedom** of not being shaped by anything other than the cement of your own God-shaped faithfulness. You step into an uncertain future and, with God's help and blessing, create a future of your own that would never have happened without the power of your own kept promise. And you have the joy of building something, at least from **your** end of things, that most resembles the city of God.

**2 Peter 3:13 - "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."**