

News Raises Questions of 'What Has God Promised Us?'

The Wired Word for the Week of August 4, 2019

In the News

Late last month, Joshua Harris, once a megachurch pastor and the author of the 1997 best seller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which promoted a "purity culture" that emphasized a lifestyle prior to marriage that included not participating in romantic social dating and not engaging in practices such as intercourse or even kissing until marriage, announced that his marriage is over and that he has lost his faith.

Critics, such as former *Christianity Today* editor Katelyn Beaty, have likened Harris' approach in his book to the so-called "prosperity gospel." (The prosperity gospel claims that God rewards increases in faith with increases in health and/or wealth.) These critics often conflate refraining from premarital sex with the additional strictures against dating and kissing that Harris advocated. Beaty posted in a recent opinion piece on the *Religion News Service* website that what Harris had touted in his book was a form of "sexual prosperity theology." Beaty said the claim in his book is that "God will reward premarital chastity with a good Christian spouse, great sex and perpetual marital fulfillment."

"The giveaway of any prosperity teaching," said Beaty, "is an 'if/then' formula: If you do this, then you will get this. If you put a \$100 bill in the offering plate, then you will get tenfold back. If you stay chaste now, then you will later be blessed by marriage and children."

In any case, Harris last year disavowed the ideas in his book, acknowledging that it set many Christians up for disappointment and pain. (See *The Babylon Bee's* satirical take on that here.)

"I no longer agree with its central idea that dating should be avoided," Harris said in a statement. "I now think dating can be a healthy part of a person developing relationally and learning the qualities that matter most in a partner. To those who read my book and were misdirected or unhelpfully influenced by it, I am sincerely sorry."

And now, the ending of his marriage perhaps illustrates the fallacy of his book's central premise.

We at *The Wired Word* take no pleasure in reporting someone's relationship difficulties and loss of faith. This news simply reminds us that claiming that God promises things which are not supported by scripture can misdirect those seeking to live a godly life.

As Beaty noted, "Evangelical leaders have roundly condemned the prosperity gospel for manipulating the poor and making promises not found in the Bible."

And she quoted Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler: "Nowhere do the Scriptures tell mankind that if we just do our part, God will do his."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Joshua Harris and the Sexual Prosperity Gospel. *Religion News Service*
Author of Christian Relationship Guide Says He Has Lost His Faith. *The Guardian*
I Kissed Goodbye. *Slate*
Josh Harris Kisses Christianity Goodbye. *PJ Media*

Applying the News Story

Just to clarify, our topic for this lesson is *not* courtship practices before marriage. Rather it is the matter of what God has actually promised us. As our "In the News" story indicates, God has promised neither prosperity nor sexual fulfillment as a reward for faith.

Any conversation about the promises of God requires us to think about three things:

1) *The question "For whom was the Bible written?"* Christians may view that as having an obvious answer. "It was written for us," we say. "Why else would we study it week after week in Christian education classes and hear sermons from it week after week in worship?"

As obvious as this answer may seem, it is an oversimplification. Human beings, about 40 of them, forged the messages of the Bible in the furnace of encounter with God over a period of at least 1,000 years. Most of the authors did not know the others. They wrote in cultures very different from our own, against a changing background of Middle Eastern empires, many of which are now long since extinct. They all wrote for audiences alive back then, and it's probable that these writers didn't realize they were composing scripture. (Later recognition of the enduring faith-value or authority of their writings eventually granted them scriptural status.)

Thus, it follows that whatever we see as promises in the Bible were not initially or explicitly addressed to us by the authors.

Yet the apostle Paul wrote that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV). And Peter is clear that "The prophets did not think these things up on their own, but they were guided by the Spirit of God" (2 Peter 1:21, CEV). Christians have come up with different theories on how God inspired the writers -- but we can be confident that he is somehow behind the words of scripture, and, therefore, we need to take them seriously, along with whatever God may additionally say to us today.

What's more, Christians through the ages have rightly declared that the Bible is their book. And they have handed it on, generation after generation. Although God was speaking to and dealing with particular peoples at particular places and times, the underlying message is universal and timeless.

Reading the Bible requires discernment: While some statements were made in a specific and limited context, which ones have more universal applicability? Are the promised rewards temporal -- in this world -- or eternal, in the world to come? Christians often differ on some of these specifics. Perhaps we all should remember the following:

- We are each human -- not infallible -- and may be mistaken in our interpretation.
- We can pray to ask God for his guidance.
- We can trust God to forgive our mistakes.

In any event, until we place ourselves under the teaching of the scriptures and enter the community of faith, the Bible is not ours or "for us." Only once we acknowledge its authority, does it give us a basis to see the promises of scripture as speaking to us.

It also gives us a basis for challenging claims that God promises such and such when there is no support for such and such in scripture.

2) *Acknowledgement that some Bible promises were for a specific time.* For example, the promise that God would bring the Israelites out of exile in Babylon and return them to their homeland. That was fulfilled in the time of Nehemiah. We might infer that God would do something similar again, but that is not a promise to us.

3) *The timeline for promise fulfillment.* Some of God's promises in scripture speak of fulfillment as being in the future, when the kingdom of God comes. Thus, God's promises are strongly linked to a) trust that God is able and willing to keep the promise and b) to patience and hope on our part.

The Big Questions

1. Name one particular promise of scripture you rely on for your own life. Who was the original audience for that promise? What makes it a promise to you?
2. When have you seen a divine promise fulfilled in your life? What divine promise fulfillment are you expecting eventually?
3. Who, if anyone, do you trust to tell you what the promises of God are? Why?
4. What is the effect on you of having to wait an indefinite amount of time for some divine promises to come to pass?
5. If not all the *promises* of God are applicable to all people in all times and places, do all the *commands* of God apply to all people in all times and places? And if they do not, how do we determine which are universal, and which are location- and time-specific?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 6:38

[G]ive, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (For context read 6:27-38)

This verse is perhaps the most clear and general statement in the scriptures that seems to promise that God will reward people for their acts of charity. And it is sometimes used to support the prosperity gospel notion.

That interpretation, however, not merely fails to look at -- but avoids -- the context for this verse. The entire thought reads, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." God is discussing forgiveness and mercy, not physical possessions.

God is very consistent, telling us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

We can never forgive others nor stop from judging others as much as God has already forgiven us and foregoes judging us. We are often tempted to make this a *quid pro quo*: a bargain with God. But in the larger context, it is we who are responding to what God has already done for us.

Questions: What are some examples of a person forgiving someone out of recognition of God's forgiveness? When has God's love and forgiveness of you led you to forgive someone else -- or at least showed you that you *needed* to forgive someone else?

Isaiah 40:28-31

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (No context needed.)*

Although this passage has a context -- it was addressed to the people of Judah in captivity in Babylon to assure them that God still had compassion for them and that they should "wait for the Lord" even in their hard circumstances -- we have indicated "No context needed." That's because it's clear to most Bible readers that these words are universal and timeless. They can speak as a promise of God to us in our hard circumstances.

Questions: What does it mean to you to "wait on the Lord"? What are some specific ways you do that? How does the original context of this promise help you in applying it to your context?

2 Chronicles 7:13-14

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (For context, read 7:12-22.)

These words are part of God's response to King Solomon after the king dedicated the newly constructed temple to the Lord. Some people today take verse 14 as a promise of God to us, but to do so pulls it out of context.

Questions: What justification is there for isolating verse 14 as a universal and timeless promise? What justification is there for assuming the promise applied only to the situation in which it was spoken? What message, if any, do you hear in this verse for yourself?

Malachi 3:8-10

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me -- the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (For context, read 3:8-12.)

Verse 10 from this passage is often pulled out as a promise from God applying to all the faithful who tithe, but in context, it is part of a dialog (or even an argument) between God and the Israelites, represented by the prophet, regarding scarcity and abundance. In context, the tithe referred to amounts the Israelites had been bound by covenant with God to give, but were failing to do so.

Questions: At first reading, this passage might seem to be an exception to Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler's comment that "Nowhere do the Scriptures tell mankind that if we just do our part, God will do his." Is it an exception or not? Why? Does the original context for verse 10 help or hinder your understanding of the verse as a promise applicable to today? Why?

2 Corinthians 1:19-20

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. (For context, read 1:12-20.)

Paul had intended to visit Corinth both coming and going from Macedonia and then go directly to Jerusalem, but had subsequently changed his plans, which led some to accuse him of vacillation. But in the context verses of this passage, Paul explains that he changed his plans out of consideration for the Corinthians. Paul goes on to say that he and his companions have always acted with the integrity of Christ, in whom all always find a "Yes."

And then Paul adds that in Christ, "every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.'"

Question: What are some promises of God for which Jesus is the fulfillment? What evidence of this can you present from your own life? What Yes from Jesus do hear in Luke 23:43: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise"?