

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 6th September. Andy Banks.
5. God's Promise
Ex 3:7-8; Num 13:26 – 14:9; Deut 4:20-22

Intro:

Today is hopefully our last pre-recorded digital service. Next week we plan to begin our new socially-distanced face-to-face services. Attendance will have to be on a rota basis, so if you want to be added to the rota, today is the last day to send your responses to Kerry to let her know. If you respond after today, she'll include you on the next rota, starting in October, but not on this one. Please also consider if you could help with welcoming and stewarding – we need 7 people each week to be able to safely run our services and without these volunteers, they can't go ahead.

Digital Church will still go ahead, but instead of pre-recording the services, assuming the technology works, we'll be live-streaming to this YouTube channel at the same time each Sunday. Please bear with us as we get used to this next stage in our provision for services.

Today is also the last in our summer mini-series, exploring how God sustained the Israelites through their tough interim normal in the wilderness, as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the abundant life God had promised them in Canaan. And we're asking what we can learn from how God sustained them that can help us maintain hope through our interim normal as we emerge from lockdown, but still experience restrictions.

We began the series with a look at God's unchanging character: I AM WHO I AM. Then, his continual presence and guidance, his provision along the journey, and the comfort of his timeless instructions.

Object lesson

Before I reveal today's theme, I wonder, do any of you have a real £10 note in your house?

[Produce 3 x £10 notes]

You see, I've got three £10 notes, here, or what I thought were £10 notes. But, even though they came straight out of a cash machine, it turns out that none of them are real! All I have here are three promises! It's written at the top of each of them: "I *promise* to pay the bearer *on demand* the sum of ten pounds." So, when I pay this note, I'm not actually paying someone £10. I'm just promising to do so. So, I'm wondering, what does a *real* £10 note look like?

Fiona (coming into camera and interrupting): I have a £10 note.

Me: Is it a real one?

Fiona: Yes!

Me (looking at note): No, it's not, it's another promise. "I *promise* to pay the bearer *on demand* the sum of ten pounds." You can have that back. I want a *real* £10 note!

Faith (coming into camera and interrupting): I have a £10 note.

Me: You do? I must be giving you too much pocket money! Are you sure yours is a real one?

Faith: Yes!

Me (looking at note): No it's not, it's the same promise! "I *promise* to pay the bearer *on demand* the sum of ten pounds." I'm beginning to think that there is no such thing as a real £10 note. That all we do is trade in promises. No-one ever makes good on their promises!

Erin (coming into camera and interrupting): You can always take it to a bank and demand £10 in coins if you want a real £10.

Me: So *that's* what the promise means! It's a promise from the *bank* to pay the real £10 in *coins* on demand!

But, let's face it, most of the time we're happy to just trade promise notes, aren't we? Because the promise note has come to mean the same as the real coinage, and it's a lot lighter to carry around. I wonder, though, if there might be a limit to how many of these promise notes you could take into the bank and demand the equivalent coinage in return? If, say, I took in ten of these, could I get 100 coins back? And what about if I was really rich and had 100 of these. Could I demand 1,000 coins back? Is there a limit? I actually don't know. Perhaps, someone could tell me sometime.

Talk1

Today we're looking at God's promises, and how one promise in particular sustained the Israelites (or *should* have sustained them) through their interim normal in the wilderness. You see, when God called Moses to go to Pharaoh and make him set Israel free, he gave Moses a promise for his people. Let's read what he said (Ex 3:7-8):

[Read Exodus 3:7-8]

7The LORD said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land *into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey* – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

A few questions to get us thinking about this promise – why not pause the video and consider or talk about them?

- 1) Did God promise the Israelites something good or something bad?
- 2) Do you think God kept his promise?
- 3) Does God ever *not* keep his promises? Can *we* get in the way of that happening?
- 4) Do you think God has good or bad plans for us?
- 5) What might be *our* equivalent of a good and spacious land, flowing with milk and honey? What sort of good things do you think God wants to give *us*?

Take a few moments to consider or talk about those questions, pausing the video if you wish.

[Pause]

We're going to enjoy something a little different now. Many of us have missed being able to sing together through this lockdown. So the multi-talented Liz Bryant, who's been leading our worship this morning, came up with the idea of a virtual lockdown choir. She recorded a number of parts and people from our Trinity family recorded themselves singing along. And then Liz put them all together into something that is far better than the sum of its parts, as a lasting memory of our lockdown experience, and we're going to enjoy it now.

The song itself is also poignant. Horatio Spafford's *It Is Well With My Soul*, is understood to have been written on the boat that took him from America to Britain to join his wife after his children had tragically been killed at sea. It is an astounding expression of trust in God in the hardest of circumstances. If you know the words, feel free to sing along. If not, just listen, and use the words and the music to worship God.

It Is Well With My Soul

Talk 2

Welcome back. Children, feel free to do the activities we sent out, while I continue to talk.

Two further readings to fill in what happened after God made his promise to Moses to bring the Israelites into a land of their own, which itself was a repetition of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, long before Moses.

[Read Num 13:1-2; 13:26 – 14:9]

1The Lord said to Moses, 2'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.' ...

26They [the spies] came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. 27They gave Moses this account: 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. 28But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. 29The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.'

30Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.'

31But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.' 32And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, 'The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.'

1That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 2All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, 'If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! 3Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?' 4And they said to each other, 'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'

5Then Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. 6Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes 7and said to the entire Israelite assembly, 'The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. 8If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. 9Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.'

But the people didn't listen, and refused to go in as God commanded them to do. And, as a result, they spent forty years longer in the wilderness than God had planned, until all the generation who refused to trust God had died out – except Caleb and Joshua, whom God kept alive to enter the land because they did trust him.

The last reading is part of Moses' instructions to the next generation as they, like their parents, stood on the shores of the River Jordan, about to enter the land God had promised them.

[Read Deut 4:20-22]

20But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are.

21The LORD was angry with me because of you, and he solemnly swore that I would not cross the Jordan and enter the *good* land the LORD your God is giving you as your inheritance [Moses is referring to an incident in Numbers 20, when he struck a rock with his staff, instead of speaking to it, to produce water for the grumbling community]. **22**I will die in this land; I will not cross the Jordan; but you are about to cross over and take possession of that *good* land.

[Pray]

God had astoundingly good plans for his people. The land of Canaan was both beautiful and bountiful – “flowing with milk and honey” is the description, which depicts a land of abundant harvests and prosperity – and God had promised it to his people, Israel. And God delivered on his plans. He rescued them with a mighty hand from slavery in Egypt, he parted the Red Sea for them to pass through on dry ground, he miraculously provided food for them every day, and gave them water along the way, and brought them to the edge of the land he promised them on oath. God always delivers on his promises. There may be a limit to how many banknote promises you can actually cash in, but there is *no* limit to the number of God's promises that we can cash in!

But we do have to actually cash them in. In the Israelites' case that meant engaging the inhabitants of the Promised Land in battle. God would ensure their victory, but they had to actively trust him to do that by engaging in battle. Yet, in Numbers 14, at the sight of a few giants, they forgot again all that God had proved to them of his power and his favour upon them, and they sought to return to their old life of slavery, rather than trust God to deliver on his promises!

This was one disobedience too many for God, who judged them with 40 more years in the wilderness! God still kept his promise to his people. But this particular generation would never see it come to pass. Whilst God's grand plans cannot be thwarted, it *is* possible for individuals or communities to delay his plans through disobedience. And, once God judges, we cannot act as though he has not judged. The Israelites tried that, after God's judgement, and found that he was no longer with them. We cannot expect God to bless our work if we are disobedient to his commands, for God hates sin.

Of course, there can be delays to God's plans that result from no fault of his people. In Ezra 4, for example, the rebuilding of God's temple was delayed by enemies. In Daniel 10, the heavenly messenger sent to answer Daniel's prayer was delayed by the mysterious “prince of the Persian kingdom.” And in Romans 1:13, Paul talks, without further explanation, of having been prevented from visiting the Roman church, despite his plans to do so. But far more commonly, God's plans are delayed by human disobedience. Yet, even so, God will always deliver on his promises.

So what has God promised us, his Church, his people? We could list thousands of promises, but I want to just list a few that are particularly pertinent to our situation. Firstly, Jesus promised, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18). If not even death and hell can overcome Jesus' building of

his church, then I assure you that Covid-19 cannot overcome it. Jesus will build his Church – and *this* church, providing we walk in obedience to him.

Jesus also said, “do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:31-34). Jesus isn’t talking here only about food and clothes; he’s establishing the principle that God our Father promises to care for our needs, if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. So, if we’re doing what *he* commands in his word by meeting together to encourage one another in faith, and providing *everyone* takes the responsibility to follow the government guidelines laid down for our safety, then I believe God will do his bit and keep us safe as we meet. And I believe he will provide for our material needs – personal and corporate. Specifically, we are told not to fret about what might happen in the future, but rather to trust that God will provide for us then, just as he will provide for us now!

Then Jesus also promised, “I have come that they may have *life*, and have it *to the full* [or *in abundance*]” (John 10:10). I don’t believe that promise has ended. And, although I believe that the face-to-face meetings we are planning will prove to be more encouraging to us than continuing with only pre-recorded services, I still can’t believe these restricted meetings are the abundant life God has for us. So, yes, I believe there is better to come – this interim normal is not the permanent new normal that some might have us believe. It might last a while, but my faith in God tells me it won’t last forever.

And lastly, even if I’ve misinterpreted all of that, yet there is hope. For Jesus has promised, “I am coming soon” (Revelation 22:12, 20). This old world-order of sin and sickness, of death and decay *will* come to an end. Because Jesus is returning to this Earth as the Risen Lord of all. And, when he does, the pain and dross of the Earth will be burned up. And the abundance of Heaven will be joined to the best of the Earth. And there will be a New Heaven and a New Earth. And we, who have trusted in him will be finally free of all encumbrances, and will truly enjoy abundant life in all its fullness in our new resurrection bodies. If no other hope sustains us through this interim normal, then this hope should! For God has promised it, and God keeps his promises. And the proof he will keep this promise is Jesus’ death and resurrection – promised beforehand, fulfilled in history, effective for all time.

The future is bright, not because we *wish* it to be, but because God has *willed* it to be. Fixing our eyes on the promise of God’s care and protection, and on his promise of *abundant* life here and now and into eternity, can sustain us through this still strange interim normal.

“Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trumpet shall sound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when our faith in the good plans you have for us in *this* world shall be sight too, when we can once again worship all together and witness to your wonderful gospel without restriction. Until that day, keep us faithful and full of faith through this interim normal, we pray. In Jesus’ precious name and for his glory. Amen?