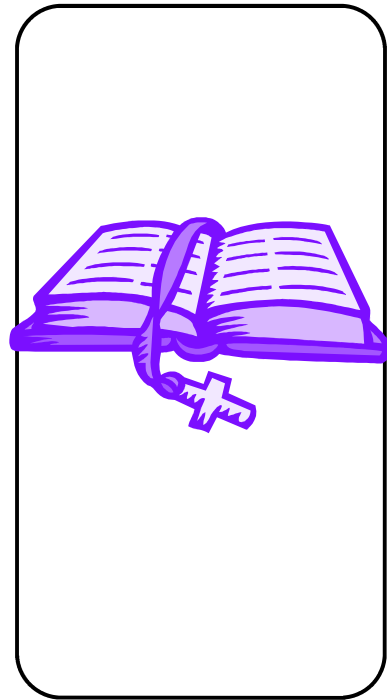


Monthly Monthly Meditations



CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Promises

By definition, a “promise” is an expressed declaration, an assurance, an indication of what may be expected. When we were children, we accepted a promise without doubt or skepticism. But as we matured, we became a little more jaded about the “promise business” as we came to realize that, for whatever reasons, assurances were very often broken. Adults, we came to realize, often make promises that they/we either cannot keep or never intended to keep.

But not so with God.

But, we quickly protest, God has made promises that we find difficult to believe or accept. Probably closer to the truth is the fact that God has made promises that we find difficult to understand. They belong to that category that Philip Yancey has aptly called **The Encyclopedia of Theological Ignorance**. It is with belief in the promise that “My Word shall not return unto me void,” that this monthly meditation comes to you with hopes for spiritual renewal and rebirth.

The Promises of God from Psalm 121

I will lift up my eyes to the hills ---
From whence comes my help?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

He will not allow (my) foot to be moved;
He who keeps (me) will not slumber .
Behold, He who keeps (me)
Shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is (my) keeper;
The Lord is (my) shade at (my) right hand.
The sun shall not strike (me) by day,
Nor the moon by night.

The Lord shall preserve (me) from all evil;
He shall preserve (my) soul.
The Lord shall preserve (my) going out and
(my) coming in
From this time forth, and even forevermore.

Jeani Goodwin

Standing on the Promises of God

As we have seen, Scripture and experience speak to the fact that we can rely on God to keep His promises. One other avenue speaks loudly as well—hymns.

Russell Kelso Carter, born in 1849, was an athlete, educator, rancher, preacher, and physician. But for our purposes, the most outstanding thing about him is the fact that he wrote the well-known hymn, *Standing on the Promises of God*. Carter was born into a Christian family and early in life accepted Christ as Savior. But as he grew into his later teen-age years, he drifted away from God. Then, when he was 30 years old, he almost succumbed to a serious heart malady for which medicine seemed to be able to do little.

Desperate and afraid, he knelt in his mother’s bedroom and promised God that if He would spare his life, he would consecrate himself wholly to God. As he later remarked, “I knew it would be ...blasphemy to ask God for a strength which I didn’t propose to use wholly for Him.” God granted Russell Carter his wish and Carter went on to write these words:

*Standing on the promises of Christ, my King,
Thro’ eternal ages let His praises ring.
Glory in the highest I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.*

*Standing on the promises that cannot fail.
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail.
By the living Word of God, I shall prevail.
Standing on the promises of God.*

*Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord.
Bound to Him eternally by love’s strong cord.
Overcoming daily with the Spirit’s sword.
Standing on the promises of God.*

*Standing on the promises I cannot fall.
List’ning every moment to the Spirit’s call.
Resting in my Savior as my all in all.
Standing on the promises of God.*

*Standing, standing, standing
on the promises of God my Savior.
Standing, standing,
I’m standing on the promises of God.*

And so may we, Heavenly Parent, stand firmly on your promise to abide with us, to keep us, protect us, sustain us, whatever befall.

Jeani Goodwin

Nothing, Absolutely Nothing

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Perhaps this is the greatest promise and affirmation in the Bible. In the midst of a world filled with disappointment, hardship and loss, it’s a great reminder to us that God’s love is constant – and God’s presence is always with us.

Recently, a good friend lost his cousin to a brain tumor. It was sudden and shocking for the family. Diagnosis to death was only 10 days. As soon as the diagnosis was known, our friend got on-line and urged all his friends to commit to intercessory prayer on behalf of his cousin. Thanks to e-mail, he knew that hundreds, if not thousands of people would be praying for their family within hours of his posting. Many of us immediately began storming heaven for healing for this not-yet-40-year-old man. When he died, I was very concerned that my friend would view his call to prayer as failed, or not answered. In fact, when I called him, his first words were: “Hey, have you ever thought about the fact that, in death, God completely healed my cousin? God answered our prayers!” Praise the Lord! How wonderful that our friend was able to see and claim that promise!

Another friend, dealing with the loss of her 35-year-old brother after a 3-year battle with the same disease, is struggling to understand why this tragedy happened. She commented that she’s jealous of God: He gets to spend time with her brother and she doesn’t. Though she’s hurting and grieving, she is, thankfully, surrounded by an accountability group who will love her through her grief – no matter how much time it takes. They will love her through her anger. They will also help her look for the ways that God is at work, even in the midst of this circumstance. Time and hindsight will help her see how God’s presence was with her especially during this incredibly difficult time.

So often, circumstances can dictate our view of God. We can allow details – seemingly big and sometimes even insurmountable – to cloud our view of the Almighty. It takes time, perspective and life experience to help us keep occurrences from standing in the way of our relationship with the Lord. Maintaining a vibrant faith requires that we have a firm and clear understanding of God’s character. The best way to do that is through reading Scripture – and the time to do it is every day – BEFORE the bad stuff comes our way. We will all face hardship – how will you prepare yourself? What will you choose to remember when they come?

Omnipresent God, we thank you that your promises are sure. Because of your character of faithfulness, we know that we can take your promises to heart. Today we give thanks that NOTHING in all of creation – not hardship, or job loss, nor divorce or even death of a loved one – can take your love from us. Thank you for your presence in my life. AMEN.

Deb Trimpe

The Promises of God: Psalm 121: 1-2

“I will lift up my eyes to the hills --- From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord Who made heaven and earth.”

These verses speak to the promises that God has made to us as **Creator** to creature. This particular psalm has sometimes been called “A Psalm of Ascent,” depicting the pilgrimage that the Israelites would make several times a year to Jerusalem, “The City of God,” this holy city on a hill. We can even share with them the awe that they must have felt as they approached this magnificent sight, this holy place of worship. And yet, with all its magnificence, they realized an important truth: God is not Jerusalem; God is not the mountain. As **Creator**, God is infinitely more than a place of worship or a huge, stone edifice.

Some commentators have suggested that the correct wording would be “I will lift up my eyes *beyond* the hills,” for in these days of polytheistic worship, the gods were often thought to occupy the hills, the high places. And others have rightly pointed out that certainly the God Who made the hills is greater than the creation itself.

For those of us living in the age of modernity and in a relatively “hill-less” area, the symbolism can be extended even further. I would suggest that we all have “hills” to which our eyes go when we seek security and certainty. It may be our financial status; strong family and community ties; the dreams of youth or the wisdom of old age; physical strength or intellectual prowess; a spouse; our children; our government.

But we are reminded by the Psalmists in other places that we cannot trust in chariots and horses because there are always stronger chariots and horses; in governments because leaders are subject to the same frailties as the led; in wealth, youth, status or human strength because none of these will accompany us to the grave. Isaiah reminds us that “Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait on 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.”

The eight verses of Psalm 121 take us on a journey, for indeed, that’s what life is. In this Psalm, we are encouraged to trust God, **our Creator**, to be not only the destination of our journey but our abiding **Companion** every step along the way.

O, God, we need help on our journey. When we falter, replant our feet on firm ground; when we experience joy, remind us that all good gifts come from thee; when we doubt, remind us of the gentleness with which you spoke to Thomas; and when we despair, remind us that we have the very Creator of this universe on the journey with us.”

Jeani Goodwin

The Promises of God: Psalm 121: 3-6

“He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps (you) will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”

These verses speak to us of the promises that God has made to us as **Protector**.

Traveling has a measure of insecurity about it, especially when the path is rocky and treacherous as certainly the Palestinian hills were. But regardless of the treacherous path, as the NIV translation says, “He will not let your foot slip.” Now, in all honesty, because we live on a “fallen planet,” as Philip Yancey phrases it, admittedly there are times when we will stumble. In fact, as Yancey says in Reaching for the Invisible God, “I have to face the honest fact that Christians live in poverty, get sick, lose their hair and teeth... and die at exactly the same rate (as the rest of humankind): 100 percent.” We know that those observations are true. But we also know that there’s a difference between being on a journey alone and being on it with a trusted companion. We may stumble, but we will not slip and fall.

Our feet will not slip because of the promises embedded in the remaining verses. “This guard of yours, He does not doze!” (The New Jerusalem Bible). I Kings records the story of the contest between Baal and Yahweh as acted out through their prophets. When the prophets of Baal call upon their god to act, nothing happens. Elijah suggests that their god might be sleeping, i.e., unconcerned, unaware, uncaring about their supplications. David Jeremiah in his book A Bend in the Road tells the story of Bishop Quayle, a prominent leader in the Methodist church. His many duties had him pacing the floor late into the night when his inner being heard the Lord say, “Quayle, there’s no need for both of us to stay up all night. I’m going to be up anyway. Why don’t you go home and go to bed.”

“Yahweh guards you, shades you. With Yahweh at your right hand the sun cannot strike you down by day, nor the moon at night.” God provides protection **where** we need it most (our right hand, i.e., the hand with which most of us accomplish our work), and **when** we need it the most (day and night).

Is there anything more vital than the safety provided by shade when the hot, penetrating rays of the sun beat down upon one, threatening a heatstroke? The Psalmist reminds us that our God will protect us from such daytime assaults. And at night, there is the potential assault of the moon. To understand the significance of this suggestion, we have to reach back to the superstitions of the time when these words were penned. Lunar superstitions attributed to the moon some rather hostile and mysterious powers.

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Calling the Plays

“The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon Him in truth.” Psalm 145: 18

One of the many promises of God is that we when reach out to Him, He will draw near. Prayer is the love language between God and us. It is the direct connection for the two-way communication between us. He promises that when we reach out in prayer, our prayers will be heard. Scripture shows us that our model for prayer is Jesus. We see many times when Jesus went off by himself to pray... after preaching, healing, and even in times of worry. He often suggested this same practice to His disciples. So we are encouraged to do the same. The more often we pray, the more we get to know God, his truth, and his plan for our lives.

There was a time not too long ago when I did not practice the discipline of prayer. Boy, was I missing out!!! Now I pray so many times a day that I probably can’t count them. You know how a football team “huddles” after every play? Well, I “huddle” with God all day long. We discuss my day “play by play”. It tends to be very conversational at times and we certainly don’t always agree whether the next play should be a “run” or a “pass”. However, planning together usually assures me that we will at least make another “first down”! What truly matters is that I give the Lord the right to be part of my daily thoughts and actions. Prayer is the time and place when I tell the Lord of my love, my heart felt gratitude for His presence in my daily walk. It is a time when He shows me how to be a better servant and disciple.

Yes, each of us is invited to “call upon Him”. When we do, we **are** promised He will draw near. Believe this promise and spend a day with the Lord doing the “play calling”. You will be richly blessed.

Prayer: Dear God, Help us to remember your promise: Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you. We entrust all the plays of our lives to you this day, knowing that you do all things well.

Deb Williams

Help For Our Temptations

“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Hebrews 2:18

The book of Hebrews begins with a defense of how Jesus is greater than the angels and greater than Moses. Today we might not think this an important theological issue. We take it for granted that Jesus is much greater than either. But in the first century the question of the exact nature of Christ was a burning one. What exactly did it mean when Jesus was called the “Son” of God?

Theologians debated this issue for several centuries. The debate was fueled, in part, because of the heresies that arose. Some said Jesus was mostly God and only slightly human. Others said he was mostly human and only slightly God. Some denied that he was fully either one. In the end the church settled on language that seemed to best articulate what the Bible describes. Jesus was both fully God and fully human. He was not a split personality but one person. Both divinity and humanity met in the miracle of the incarnation to create one person who was both God and man.

The issue is very important. If Jesus were not fully God, then his sacrifice on the cross for our sakes would have been insufficient to pay for our sins. Yet if Jesus were not fully human, it would be hard to make the case that he fully understood us and showed us how life is to be lived. Hebrews says that one benefit of Christ’s humanity is having been tempted like we are and knowing how to help us in our struggles.

Was Jesus really tempted? Did he really feel the attraction of temptation? Did it really tug on his heart? The novel, “The Last Temptation of Christ”, is an imaginary account of how Jesus might have been truly tempted like we are. His last temptation while hanging on the cross was to come down, get married, have children, and live a normal life.

Hebrews says that Jesus was truly tempted. He suffered in his temptations, like we often struggle with ours. Yet he did not sin. Therefore he is able to help us in our moments of weakness.

Here is an important promise from the scriptures. Jesus will be with us and help us in our temptations. This does not say temptation goes away. It does not say that it becomes irrelevant. It merely says that Christ is near us to help us. The next time we are tempted, we should remember this promise. We are not alone. We have someone who understands. It is a promise intended to strengthen us in our times of testing.

Bob Bohler

The word “lunar” meaning “moon” is the word from which we get the words “lunacy,” and “lunatic,” suggesting that in earlier days, behavior that was on the “warped, crazy” side was somehow connected to the moon. Even today as you might recall, we sometimes attribute some questionable behaviors to the “full moon.” The word “epilepsy,” described by the father in the New Testament as behavior where the son falls into the fire and often into the water, was in ancient times translated as “moonstruck.” And so this idea that nighttime brings its own dangers is not new to humankind.

Certainly, the nighttime does hold for young and old alike fears and loneliness and the need for special care. Every night little Susie would cry when it was time to go to bed alone in her own bedroom. She was scared. Her mother and father would reassure her that there was nothing to fear. God was with her. “Yes,” she replied. “But I need somebody with skin.”

The truth is that all of us feel like Susie. Life can be messy. The journey can be dangerous. The unknown can be frightening. But the most reassuring message to us is that we have a God Who isn’t asleep, Who provides a protective presence both day and night.

When you go to bed tonight, give your troubles to God. He’ll be up all night anyway.

Jeani Goodwin

“The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.”

These verses present God as our **Sustainer**.

The imagery of Psalm 121 is that of a pilgrim accompanied on his/her journey by God. God promises to preserve us, to preserve our soul. “Preserve” means literally to “put a hedge around,” “to enclose,” “to protect.” And so, these verses must mean that no harm will ever befall us on our journey. The realist would quickly dissent, reminding us that just recently five Amish girls were shot to death in their school-room; that missionaries are slain; that Christians die in automobile accidents, and Christian couples end their marriages. The cynic and skeptic would go even further, as did a character in a novel: “God knows that sparrows fall, but they keep falling. Ain’t creation just one dead bird after another?”

The character, of course, was referring to the passage where Jesus says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” Some commentators have suggested that the original N.T. Greek text read, “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father,” giving an entirely different meaning to the passage. In other words, death and accidents and sorrow will come as the result of natural laws, but nothing happens to God’s creation apart from His comfort and strength and support. “At issue is the presence of God, not His will.” (Reaching for the Invisible God, p. 58)

Author Eugene Peterson has said it very well: “Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, drink the same water, read the same newspapers, pay the same prices for groceries, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same stresses, and are buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God; and therefore, no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will keep our life.”

What’s more, He will keep our life not only today but for eternity, for “He will preserve our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.”

O God, Accompany us on our journey, we pray. Help us hold fast to the belief that no matter what the future holds, no matter what may lie around the next corner, no matter how steep the grade or slippery the descent, that you are with us. Nothing can separate us from your presence or from your love.

Jeani Goodwin

“Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. ‘They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.’” Malachi 3:16-18

Is it worthwhile to serve God? While we would quickly answer, “Yes”, we sometimes get discouraged. Often we cannot see the outcome of the good things we try to do. We cannot tell whether any good comes from our efforts to make the world better. For every place the world seems to get better, it seems to get worse in another. When we are discouraged, it is easier to merely coast through life and not strive to do all the good we can.

This promise from Malachi reminds us that God sees all we do. God remembers our efforts and knows the outcome, even when we do not. Malachi talks about God’s book of remembrance. Does God really have a book? Does God actually write? Are our good deeds recorded? Those questions are hard to answer because Malachi is clearly using symbolic language. Whether God actually writes our deeds down, the point is clear. God remembers our actions and will not forget them.

Malachi’s words are about those who “fear the Lord.” That is, they live their lives aware of God’s presence and power. One of the results is that they talk with one another about God. This assumes that they meet together. This assumes they meet for the purpose of sharing their journeys of faith with one another. This sounds a lot like what we do in the church. In fact God has given us, in the church, the perfect vehicle for becoming the people about whom Malachi is speaking. God has given us the perfect tool for living close with God and doing what pleases him.

This final book in the Old Testament gives us a wonderful promise. The promise is that it is never futile to serve God. It is never wasting our time. It is never a useless endeavor. God’s promise is to spare those who do, from the day of wrath and judgment that is coming. Whatever that day entails, those who fear God will be spared it. That is a wonderful promise and good incentive to love God with our heart and mind and soul and strength.

“Lord you have promised to remember our works. Let my heart be attuned to you and your people in all I do this day. Amen.”

Bob Bohler

No Longer Any Condemnation

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1

As a young man, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther found himself tormented by the awareness of his sins. His was an age, the early 1500's, in which the terrors of hell and the torments awaiting there were painted in vivid colors. In the mindset of many, hell was a looming reality that could scarcely be avoided outside a vow of monastic piety, poverty, and chastity. But even when Martin Luther became a monk, he discovered that his guilty conscience and his terror about hell hardly subsided. The story is told how Luther would confess his sins to his superior for hours upon end. He would parse them into fine detail and worry over the tiniest misstep. Finally one frustrated older monk told Martin not to return to the confessional until he had committed some really major sins. None of the “cures” of the day for a guilty conscience seemed to help. Luther walked up the steps of St. Peter's cathedral on his knees, praying as he went. But at the top he noticed that he did not feel changed in the least.

The light finally shone on Luther one day when he was lecturing on Psalm 22. He came to the part where the writer cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He remembered that Jesus had also cried out these words from the cross. Since Luther understood that Christ was God's Son, it dawned on Luther that God was doing something new and wonderful on the cross. He saw God not as angry or vengeful. Instead God was suffering for our sins. God was experiencing the penalty of sin for our sakes. God was redeeming us by his love. Luther realized that the significance of the cross was that Christ died for our sins so we could be truly forgiven. Our guilt had been removed. Our consciences were cleansed by Christ's blood. We were delivered from hell and invited to enter eternal life with Christ our Lord.

Luther's realization is still valid today. We are not forgiven because we remember all our sins and confess them. We can not remember them all. We have committed some we are not aware of. We are not forgiven because we are perfect. Romans 8:1, reminds us that there is no condemnation awaiting us because of what Christ has done for us. This means we should not be consumed by worry. We should live life in joy and in God's grace. We should not walk on eggshells. We should live life freely and for the glory of God. Are you living like someone set free? Or do the chains of a guilty conscience still hold you back?

“Lord, let us live as people set free to love you and others. Amen.”

Bob Bohler

A “Non-Promise” Promise

As I sat and wrote this, I was overcome with the painfully sad emotion of just having visited with friends whose twenty-nine year old daughter was killed in an automobile accident not even a day before.

What do you say to people whose grief has overcome them? Whose tears seem to be endless? Where is – or **was** – God when that young woman was hit head-on by another automobile hastily trying to avoid a deer in the highway? Her whole life was ahead of her. So many dreams her mother and daddy had for her. All of it – GONE!

What “answers” could I give to them? What Scriptures could I quote? What “God promises” could I offer them? I could come up with nothing. All I could do was to hug them. Listen to them grieve. Feel with them the wretchedness of their sobs. Tell them the deep sorrow I felt for and with them.

Upon leaving them I could not help but remember that I'm supposed to be writing several devotionals about God's promises. I had already written one devotional based on Genesis 28:15 – “I will be with you and will keep you, wherever you go.” I believe that is true for me, and that it is true for my grieving friends, but it didn't seem like much comfort to offer them when their daughter had been dead less than a day.

In my mind I wrestled with the question, “what promises **does** God offer us at a time like that?” What promise would really speak to my dear friends in their pain? As I desperately searched, the only thing that would come to my mind from the Scripture was more like a “**non-promise**” **promise**. A command with a promise implied as a result of obedience to the command.

“Bear ye one another's burdens,” wrote the apostle Paul to the Galatians. The “**implied promise**” is that if we seek to bear the burden of anyone, that person will feel that his or her burden is being shared. The person will feel “cared for.” Helping to bear the burden is our task. One of the best ways I know to help bear the burden is to **be there. To love.** To let them know that they are cared for.

And while that comfort ultimately comes from the Lord, from God's Spirit within our hearts and minds, I believe that **we can be instruments** through which that comfort is transmitted

Jesus said “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Help that be true by “being there” for friends in need.

Charlie Cook

I am with thee and will keep thee!

In my first year of college, while browsing in the school bookstore, I noticed a small glass plaque on which were printed the words,

“I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.” (Genesis 28:15)

If I had read the Old Testament story in which those words were spoken, I didn't remember it then. But I was moved by the promise. I bought the plaque. I have it 'til this day.

The plaque's **fancy border** has become disfigured, but the **words of the promise** have remained crystal clear – on the plaque as well as within my mind, heart, and experience. That is not to say that all of life has been wonderful or trouble-free these fifty-four years since that bookstore discovery. Not at all!

There have been times when I have felt weak, unsure, afraid, and inadequate – but I have never felt abandoned by God. My life has included pressures and challenges – some of which even made me break out with physical perspiration. But I didn't feel like it was all up to me – by myself.

I have done things and said things for which I was (and am) sorry and ashamed. But I have never felt condemned by the Lord. Only forgiven.

Family life, and the raising of two children, has been interesting. It has been filled with lots of love and satisfaction, and has given me wonderful memories. It also included stress, most of which I brought on by my giving my work more priority than I gave to my family. Clearly I had my priorities mixed up and wrong! Even in my wrongness, I never felt deserted by the Lord.

Anxiety, depression, disappointment (in myself as well as in others), are feelings which I know far too well. But during all those times and feelings, I was reminded of, and believed the reality of, God's promise, ***“I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.”***

So I have been reassured, again and again, that even for me, that great promise is true. In my own personal experience it has been continually validated.

I contend that the promise is for you as well. In both its Old Testament version, as well as in the words of Jesus himself, who said,

“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:20)

Charlie Cook

strong telling us that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” and that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” James is echoing Micah's reaffirmation of the need for inward and outward piety. I think that serving the poor, widow and orphan has something to do with the abundant life that God is inviting us to enter. I invite you to join with me to meditate on God's word and his heart for the poor, widow and orphan and to ask God to provide us with real, tangible avenues to roll up our sleeves and be a good neighbor.

Ben McLeish

“There will always be poor people in the land.”

Deuteronomy 15:11

Even in the best societies, under the most enlightened laws, the uncertainties of life result in some people becoming poor. Through our church's involvement in Interfaith Hospitality Network, I have seen how many people, through just a single major event, can go from comfortable to homeless. King Solomon referred to this losing of wealth as “a grievous evil under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 5:14. Deuteronomy 5:11 finishes with how we should respond to this grievous evil, “Therefore I command you to be open handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” We are called to practice the discipline of Service.

Bernard of Clairvux wrote, “Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe.” Jesus didn't use a scepter, he used a towel. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus tells them that “they should go and do as he has done.” John 13:14,15. We are called to serve.

You may have experienced desire to do anything but serve when asked to serve. You are busy and have a lot of things to do. When you finally agree to serve, doesn't it always make you feel good afterwards? It is almost like we are created to serve.

There will always be needy and poor. But one promise of the Bible is that the needy and afflicted will not be forgotten by God. “But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish.” Psalm 9:18. We should not forget them either.

Humbly remembering that “only by the grace of God” 1 Corinthians 15:9, we are in a position to serve those in need, perhaps we may want to begin the day by praying,

Lord Jesus, as it would please you, bring me someone today whom I can serve.

Robbie Bryan

My friend Ben McLeish has been living among the poor of New Orleans for several years now, running the Desire Street Ministries for the Poor. The Atlanta Falcons just gave Desire Street Ministries several hundred thousand dollars during the Saints game. We reflected and wrote about God's promises to the poor.

Robbie Bryan

What does the Lord require of you?

How many times have you longed to know the will of God? If you are anything like me His will tends to be very mysterious. It would be a lot clearer if He just wrote it on the wall. While I would never claim to have a full grasp on His good, perfect and pleasing will, scripture does provide us clues. Micah 6:8 says, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In this passage Micah reaffirms the two categories of piety; outward (act justly, love mercy) and inward (walk humbly with your God). It seems, though, that much of our efforts lie in cultivating inward piety while outward piety is what we do with our extra time, talent, and energy. The average Christian bookstore is full of books on how to have a better quiet time and techniques on personal growth but contains very few, if any, publications on justice and mercy. If Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself, why aren't there more books, sermons, small group curriculum, or seminary classes on loving our neighbor?

If you search the scriptures you will find verse upon verse about how we are to treat our neighbors, especially the poor, widows, and fatherless. Psalm 68:5 says that "God is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows." Often times when the topic of the poor is mentioned in Christian circles, Matthew 26:11 is referenced where Jesus says, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Jesus is pulling this straight from Deuteronomy 15:11 where it says, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." While this is true, Deuteronomy 15:4 says, "However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, He will richly bless you." The key here is *among you* referring to the covenant people, the people of Yahweh. Among us God mandates that there should be no poor. Are we being imitators of God and loving the poor, widow, and fatherless? Are we doing it in a way that empowers them and recognizes their God given dignity or just belittles them, enables them and eases our guilty conscience?

In our neighborhoods and cities what are we doing to ensure that there are "no poor among you?" We have been saved by grace through faith but created to do good works that bring God praise. James comes at us

The Promise of Peace

Peace. That's something for which we hunger, and sometimes even clamor. Something so elusive that one often wonders if it is possible to experience. The absence of it may leave us with unrest, or fear, or anxiety, or hopelessness, or emptiness, or with any number of other feelings which seem to befit our particular uneasy, unpleasant, or tragic situation.

Yet **peace** is something which God promises in the Holy Scripture. All but one of the books in the New Testament speak of peace. Some quite often. Luke thirteen times. Romans eleven times. Eight times in Paul's brief letter to the Ephesians. In fact, Paul begins all his letters with a prayer: "Grace to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Peter prays for the best for the recipients of his letters, beginning both with the words "May grace and **peace** be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."

More powerful than that is the promise of Jesus to us, his followers: "**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you**; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Many times when my heart is restless, and peace is elusive, I remember a covenant promise found in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

"Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I call that a "covenant" promise because both God and I have a part to play in that promise. My opportunity is to "talk to the Lord" about the heaviness weighing on me. And to remember that my conversation with the Lord must include some giving of thanks for the good in my life. "Pray - with thanksgiving!" It's God's business to keep the divine end of the bargain. Only the Lord can put the peace in my heart and soul.

In my "human" experience of faith and prayer, sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't seem to work. But I still keep returning to and clinging to the covenant promise. I offer it to you as a promise worthy of believing.

Go. Read it for yourself. Give it a try. Claim God's covenant promise in Philippians 4:6,7.

Charlie Cook

I Love You Forever

“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Zephaniah 3:17

Have you ever wondered how much God loves you? Have you ever pondered how precious you are to the Almighty? If you're like me, you may shy away from spending a lot of time pondering this reality – it seems unlikely, even arrogant sometimes, that the God of the Universe could really, passionately and unconditionally love ME. Don't get me wrong, I believe the words, but I don't spend a lot of time enjoying the fact that I bring a smile to God's face. Not only does this limit my understanding of God's character, it can also keep me from experiencing one of the greatest gifts the Lord is offering me!

Let's put this passage in context: Zephaniah, one of the minor prophets, prophesied to the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Josiah. Though Josiah was the king known for the greatest reform in the Southern Kingdom, the country was in a big mess when he took the throne. Zephaniah 1 gives us a picture of the religious practices of these people of God: they were known for idolatry and “complacent wickedness”. In chapter 2, Zephaniah calls these people of God to repentance. It's clear that their attention is divided, at best, when it comes to the deity they will worship. Wouldn't you expect that the conclusion of the Lord's message through Zephaniah would be a harsh indictment of their chosen lifestyle and faith practices?

In fact, chapter 3 shows a picture of the restoration that God will bring. Included in that promise of restoration are the words of our passage for today. Even for these rebellious, disobedient children, God reminds them that His promise is for them. Putting it in the 1st person, God says “I will take great delight in you. I will quiet you with my love. I will rejoice over you with singing.” WOW!!! What an affirmation – what did they do to deserve this?? Nothing.

God's promise is for us, too. We don't earn God's love. Even better, His devotion to us is because of HIS character, not because of ours. Not only does God love us, but the Lord takes great delight in us – you and me. He does quiet you with His love. He DOES rejoice over you with singing.

Prayer practice: Today, sit down and reflect on God's love for YOU. You might want to imagine God with a big smile on His face when He thinks about you. If this is uncomfortable for you, or foreign, offer your feelings to the Lord in prayer. Ask him to show you His love – then, be looking for the showers to come!

Deb Trimpe

Morning Walk

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” Psalm 30:5

For an entire year, Philip Yancey confessed, he could not pray. And so he bought a book of Psalms. Each day his prayer would be something from that book. He chose well because in the Psalms, one will find an honest expression of every human emotion possible. Many come from the depths of despair; some are even angry; but many, like the one above, speak to the enduring presence of God Who will sustain us through the night-time trials, even replacing sorrow with joy.

It is perhaps this very thought that Barbara Cagle Ray had in mind when she wrote “Morning Walk.”

*Amidst the dew of early dawn,
I took a morning walk.
And along with me, I took a Friend,
for I felt a need to talk.
I unburdened both my heart and soul,
and spoke many things:
Of plans gone wrong, of failure's pain,
And how to live with shattered dreams.
My Friend just listened quietly,
and uttered not a word.
For it was His time to listen
and my time to be heard.
His sympathetic ear brought peace,
As we walked this earthly sod.
And I learned to trust life again,
On my morning walk with God.*

Thanks be to God for His unspeakable presence day in and day out. As He was with the Psalmist so He will be with us. But as someone has wisely said, if you want Him with you throughout the day, you have to meet Him in the morning.

**Dear God,
You have not promised us that the walk will always be easy, but you have promised to be with us wherever it may lead. Help us to begin each day with that sustaining truth.**

Lansing Patterson

Promises, Promises

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis. 12: 2-3

We hear statements like "Promises are made to be broken" or "Promises, Promises". We all know what that means. It means you cannot always depend on promises made by man, even those who profess to be Christians. This is certainly NEVER the case with God. God always keeps His promises (the Scriptures are full of them). Did He not keep the promise made to Abram (aka Abraham) in Genesis? Have we not all been blessed by Abraham and his faith and confidence in leaving his homeland to delve into the uncertain? How many of us would leave our comfortable surroundings (yes, even in the primitive days of Abram, he was in comfortable surroundings to him)? How many of us would leave Athens to do missionary work in some remote area where we would not have the comforts of home. God still calls but are we really listening? We are given marching orders in the Great Commission. How many of us take that seriously?

We make excuses such as we don't want to offend someone by mentioning Jesus or we don't want to seem like a religious fanatic. Was the Apostle Paul a religious fanatic? You bet. Carrying out the Great Commission is one of my weakest traits as a Christian. We should not apologize about our Faith and Christianity. We should be concerned about others if we really love them. Those we love will not spend eternity with God unless they profess to love and obey Christ. Of course, the final decision as to whether someone will follow Christ is always up to him or her. That is the nature of the Christian Faith. We should thank God and Jesus Christ every day for the promises that God made (and kept and keeps!) and for our opportunity to exercise our faith. This is not possible in some cultures and in many areas of the world.

Thanks to you, God, for always keeping your promises. May I be more like you in this regard. May I always be bold in my Faith without being overbearing to those who may not have the zeal that I have. Still, make me realize that I have a personal obligation to tell folks about Christ if I really love them and am truly concerned about them.

States McCarter

Do Not Worry about the Rest

"Consider the ravens. They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet, God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who are you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?" Luke 12:24-26

When I look back on my Christian life, some of the things that stand out seem today like miracles. For example, the Second Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, burned down, destroying everything except the Bible on the pulpit. It was barely singed. I didn't realize it at the time, but in retrospect I now understand the message: God's Word will prevail. As my understanding deepened, so did my vision of this tragedy.

When I was 10 years old, I attended the funeral of a little girl my own age. What an enormous impact that event had on my life! Until then, I had felt hurt and abandoned. My parents had divorced, and my previous grandparents had died. But attending this funeral in a church other than my own introduced me to the wonderful ecumenical friendships and opportunities that lay ahead for me. As I look back now, I rejoice in the many fond memories of choir and Bible school with other Christians. As my understanding deepened, so did my vision of the beauty of Christian community.

When I was in the sixth grade, my schoolteacher showed the class some slides of Egypt. Oh, how I prayed I would someday be able to go there. I never imagined that my father would someday get a job in Saudi Arabia and that my stepmother and I would actually get to ride a camel in Egypt and I would get to attend a year of high school in Cairo. When I returned to live with my mother in Louisville, I received a scholarship to attend a Christian girls' school. I remember these times with great fondness, especially the time we met at a stream. Each one of us carried a little wooden boat with a candle in it. We lit the candle and floated the boat into the stream. As my understanding deepened, so did my vision of our responsibility to be light in a darkened world.

Dear God, Thank you for leading us to places we could never go on our own. And thank you for the lessons learned that we could never learn on our own. Help us to rest in you. Most of all, help us to stop worrying about the things that we have no control over, giving all things into your loving hands instead.

Melody Cartledge

An Awful Promise: God's Silence

At the time of Amos, life was good for the people of Israel, at least for the well to do. Finally the country was at peace and faced no threat of invasion. The trade routes, crucial to prosperity, were open and flowing with goods. Business had never been better. Luxuries abounded – stone houses, exotic furniture, delicious food and wine – for the privileged. In fine clothes they regularly went to shrines for worship. From all appearances they were blessed, antecedents perhaps of today's prosperity gospel adherents.

Into their midst came Amos, a rustic, who earned his livelihood as a farmer and shepherd. Called by God and bringing the word of God, he got their attention by describing God's harsh judgments on Israel's neighbors – Damascus, Gaza, Edom, and others.

When Amos had seduced them with his plain talk that skewered others, and surely puffed up the Israelites, he gave his rapt audience the punch line: God would judge Israel too. The people could count on that. And they and their beautiful homes and their sacred altars would be destroyed.

Why? Why would God do that? Because the wealthy Israelites obtained their wealth on the backs of the poor, using dishonest, overbearing business tactics, bribing the courts, and oppressing the poor, all the while making religious display that covered over hearts empty of any real relationship with God and unburdened by notions of justice or charitable obligations. How would God respond to such a people?

"The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." Amos 8:11. In other words, if the people did not repent, change their ways, and act with justice to the needy, the nation would experience the silence of God.

Amos' prediction proved right. After King Jereboam II, the government deteriorated and within 30 years Israel was permanently dismantled by the Assyrians. Now I wonder if the United States is like ancient Israel. Do we elect political candidates whom we know will keep us prosperous with tax and other laws that favor those who have at the expense of those who have not? When we have policy choices to make, do we ask only how it will affect us and never ask how it will affect the needy? Are we a just society? Do we really want one?

I am haunted by my image of a silent God: a spirit so distressed by man's greed and inhumanity that he must turn away, close his eyes, and silently weep.

Dear God, today help me to make choices that bind me closer to you. Move me, push me, prod me to love my neighbors, especially the needy. I beg you, Lord, to let my life be used up in doing good so I will not deserve your silence.

Jo Carol Nessel-Sale

The Promise for Persistence

"... and will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?" Luke 18:7

The context for this verse is one of the parables of Jesus, The Parable of the Persistent Widow. In the story, a widow kept beseeching the judge for justice to be done. Since the woman has no political or economic power, the judge is not particularly inclined to help her, but by verse 5, the judge finally relents, "... so she won't wear me out with her coming," the judge says. In verse 7, Jesus reveals the import of the parable: "...and will not God bring justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?"

This summer I began noticing a vision loss in my left eye which I thought meant I needed glasses. I learned, however, that I had a significant rise of pressure in that eye which three eye specialists called a "very significant, irreversible damage to the optic nerve." In fact, texts indicated about 80% loss of vision in that eye. The third specialist I saw was a glaucoma specialist at Emory, which added credence to the diagnosis.

Meanwhile, my prayer class at Central had begun praying for full recovery of vision in that eye, which seemed to me to require nothing short of a miracle. Others in Georgia, Kentucky and Florida began interceding on my behalf as well. As they persisted in prayer, I persisted in talking to another retinal specialist at Emory. The day I went in, I saw three retinal specialists who all concluded that the problem was caused by the deterioration of the sclera buckle in the eye. (This buckle was a device placed around the eye eleven years earlier to correct a detached retina.)

A week after seeing the retinal specialists, I had surgery to repair a hole in the eye plus remove the lower portion of the buckle which had eroded into the eye. But the best is yet to come: the day after surgery, the surgeon told me that he fully expected for full vision to be restored within one to two months. I still have a ways to go, but each day I see improvement. To me, this is a concrete example of how persistent prayers can bring about miraculous results.

Dear God, We ask for the faith to trust in you even when the way seems obscured and the vision dim. Thank you for your promise to be beside us. Amen.

Carl Cartledge

Whatever Works

“Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” Jeremiah 18:1-12

Throughout my years as a middle school science teacher, I have found that my educator friends and I agree on a two word teaching method that stands the test of all schooldom: *whatever works*. I am delighted to see evidence throughout scripture of God, when He assumes the role of teacher, bases his lesson plans on this very same method and in many subject areas:

Language Arts class: I was recently reminded that in Exodus 31, God wrote His lesson on a chalkboard. (Then, of course, there was that unfortunate incident when his star pupil threw down the chalkboard and God had to write it again.)

Oceanography: Jesus would frequently hold lessons at the beach and teach from a boat. (And the “walking on water” thing could easily go under the category of *physics*.)

Geography: In Genesis, God sent Abraham on a field trip. Abraham had no idea what his destination was, but when God said “Head out” he went, and ended up being one of God’s best pupils. He taught his son, Isaac to be likewise.

Art Class: In Jeremiah 18, God sent Jeremiah to a potter’s house though Jeremiah had no clue what he would learn. He watched an artist carefully mold a pot made from clay. The artist took an unformed lump of clay and shaped it into a vessel-- into a design of his own choosing. And (here is the lesson!) a vessel that needed re-shaping was done so lovingly into something beautiful and useful by the Potter.

And as I frequently remind the Youth in my Sunday School class: God speaks to us through Scripture, through prayer, and—this is important--through each other. Not only should we be listening for his message to us through Christian friends, but we need to realize that He will use us to teach others as well. Share your stories of how God works in your life with others. Share how God has molded you and reformed you into a better vessel. Your personal story is worth sharing. God will use it for teaching.

Lord, please use me as your vessel. I entrust myself into Your hands. Let my life reflect Your teachings, and when it is Your timing, help me to share my story with others of how You have done so. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

Peggy Bailey

Hannah – Procuring a Promise

“There are things that are never satisfied, [that] never say, “it is enough”: the grave and the barren womb” (Proverbs 30:15-16)

She had little reason to be hopeful. In our day and age when so much can be done about infertility, or any other medical problem, it is hard to identify with the note of finality that must have rung in the soul of a woman without children in an Old Testament world.

Today we often see children as simply another option that we can choose in defining the kind of life we want to make for ourselves. In Hannah’s time sons and daughters were what life was about. A stigma attached to those without them.

Hannah’s disenfranchisement was only compounded when her partner and companion in social isolation sought his own solution in the flesh through a second marriage that proved all too adequate in providing the children his first wife could not. The satisfaction and status that Elkanah achieved through Penninah’s fertility only guaranteed further estrangement for Hannah.

The person to whom she should have been able to turn for solace no longer shared in her longing, being freed from the disgrace they once shared. It is no small wonder that his attempted consolations were without effect. In addition Hannah suffered Penninah’s mocking abuse. Year after year she tolerated the condescension of a double portion at the feast of Jerusalem, a gesture which only further emphasized her position and plight to a watching world.

She went into the temple to pray, hardly for the first time, but on this occasion with a difference. Into Hannah’s soul had crept the notion that life grew out of death. Gain must come through giving up. The promises of God are secured through sacrifice. “Give your servant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life.” The one child she asked for would serve to glorify her God, even if it meant losing him again.

Even an irresponsible priest’s unfounded charge of drunkenness could not diminish the intimate moment of her epiphany. Convinced of her sobriety, he assured her of the fulfillment of her desire. She joyfully left the temple anticipating the one son that she had requested, knowing full well that she must give him up.

“And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the LORD.” (1 Samuel 2:21)

Tom Virkler

The Virgin Mary – An Inconvenient Promise

“Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.” (Matthew 1:19)

It would seem that the young maiden had little need for promises. She is presented as a woman of moderation and education regarding her heritage. She is from the most historically prominent tribe of Israel. She is betrothed to a respectable carpenter who shares her Judean heritage. In fact, both trace their roots to David. Her fiancé’s lineage is no less than that of the kings of Israel through Solomon. Some would even argue that Joseph had a legitimate claim to the throne, if only there was a throne to be claimed.

Into Mary’s ordered existence come two other-worldly visitations with a very worldly announcement; she would give birth to a son. Mary would be the human agent in an event so unique that it would serve as a mighty premonition, even without further explanation. She would conceive through an overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

But what an explanation that *did* follow: her son would be nothing less than the divine Son of God, who would humanly fill the empty throne of the house of David and literally reign over His covenant people forever.

What a powerful testimony there is in Mary’s immediate reaction. She could have agonized over the uncomfortable personal situation the announcement created for her. But instead, trusting God completely, she accepted the exalted role given to her in God’s unfolding plan of salvation. Later reflection would allow her to completely grasp the import of events as she confided to her cousin Elizabeth that this was nothing less than the fulfillment of God’s promise that “He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his seed forever.”

Like a ripple of water proceeding relentlessly out in all directions, the work of the baby that Mary would bear would have its effect. The culmination of the life that had been entrusted to her would have its way in a manner she could never imagine as she saw her son hang on a cross. In this mighty act that would “pierce her heart”, her son and her LORD would also cleave the earth, the temple’s veil, the hearts of men and death itself.

His saving work would reach backward to all those who shared in Mary’s hopeful expectation as the work of the crucifixion “led captivity captive” and then would focus forward toward all those who would follow in new life because of the great work of redemption in which she had such an elevated role.

“He has regarded the lowly estate of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.” (Luke 1:48)

Tom Virkler

Simeon – A Long-suffering Promise

“There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.” (Luke 2:25)

There is a story about a letter that it took the Post Office 23 years to deliver. It had slipped behind a built-in cabinet and was discovered only when some remodeling was done two decades or so later. It was dutifully delivered, probably postage due.

The “delay” in the Messiah’s coming must have caused many within the covenant to question God’s delivery time. Millennia had passed since God had announced in the Garden that we would be rescued from our fallen state through the person of a savior. Adam and Eve anticipated a swift fulfillment of the promise in their third son, but six generations later Enoch would still preach of God’s coming to make all things right. Abraham was promised that the Deliverer would be through his Seed. And for 1500 years every aspect of the Tabernacle served as a reminder to the nation Israel of the redemption that was to come.

Then came Simeon. We know little about him, except that he was not bothered by long delivery times and that his faith allowed him to keep a very special divine appointment. He was told that he would not die until he saw his redeemer. All that had been foretold would come to a focus in his lifetime.

What did he expect to see? The prophecies concerning the Messiah ranged from a mighty warrior returning to claim His lost world to portraits of a sympathetic and compassionate Savior who had the power to heal and forgive and empower and grant eternal life. What kind of being was capable of fulfilling all such roles?

Perhaps Simeon expected little as he went to worship that particular day. Surely he expected even less as he approached a young couple who were too poor to offer more than the minimal sacrifice for the presentation of their newborn son.

What an opportunity for doubt when it was revealed to Simeon that the baby they held was the long sought hope for Israel. But without hesitation Simeon, being in the Spirit, took the child in his arms proclaiming him the light that would bring revelation to the Gentiles and glory to the people of Israel.

We often want God’s promises only when fulfilled in a manner we deem appropriate and on terms we find satisfactory. Let Simeon’s spirit of flexibility regarding God’s methods be a lesson to us if we are to be a witness to the fulfillment of His promises.

“And after the earthquake was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” (1 Kings 19:12)

Tom Virkler