

Chapter Two

Faith and the Promises

Purpose: This teaching focuses on the nature of biblical faith. It aims to show what faith is in the Scriptures and that it always includes faith in the promises of God. Faith has a past dimension, a present dimension and a future dimension. The promises of God are always expressions of His covenant relationship with his chosen people. We need therefore to know the promises of God belonging to the covenant.

Presentation: It is important to use the stories of the great biblical figures of faith. Key here are Abraham, David and Mary. But others can also be mentioned: Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul. Promises to these major figures are all grounded in the covenant promises of God to Abraham. Promises concerning their personal lives and roles always fit into the developing picture of God's big plan grounded in covenant-relationship and expressed first in the promises to Abraham, the father of faith.

Abraham, the Father of Faith

The history of salvation begins in Genesis 12. God tells Abram, soon to be renamed Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12: 1). Here we find the key elements in biblical faith:

1. Abraham hears God's Word and he accepts it.
2. Abraham believes in this Word and he obeys.
3. Abraham believes the promises that are at the heart of God's Word.
4. God makes an everlasting covenant with Abraham.
5. Covenant with God is sealed in an outward rite involving the shedding of blood.

These five elements are a constant in biblical faith. For Abraham, faith has a present dimension (God speaks in the present, Abraham believes and obeys now) and there is a future dimension (Abraham believes in God's promises concerning the future). Faith now in the promises for the future is necessary for the fulfilment of the promises. The new relationship God has established with Abraham is a covenant relationship. It involves a promise of God to Abraham and his descendants that He will be God to them, that is, their God. The covenant relationship is sealed or formalized in an outward ceremony involving sacrifice.

This pattern remains true throughout the biblical history. Often Catholics have been given the idea that faith is primarily a matter of believing a list of doctrines, while Protestants have emphasized faith as total trust in God. While both these positions contain important truth, they often forget the foundational element of faith-trust in the covenant promises of God.

The promises of God to Abraham are initially threefold: first, the promise concerning the land that God will give to him and to his descendants (Gen. 12: 2, 13: 15; 15: 18; 17: 8); second, the promise that Abraham will have descendants (Gen. 13: 16; 15: 5; 17: 2); third that all the peoples of the earth will benefit from Abraham's faith (Gen. 12: 3; see also Gen. 17: 4 - 6).

Following Abraham's obedience to God's Word in faith, God makes a covenant with him: see Gen. 17. "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." (Gen. 17: 7). The peoples of the ancient world of the Middle East were all familiar with covenants. Covenants were a way peoples related to each other, a way of preserving some order and peace, a way of conquering nations to keep conquered peoples in submission. What was totally new and unheard of before was that God would make covenant. It was God making covenant with Abraham and with his descendants that provided the foundation for monotheistic faith, i.e. faith in one God and Creator of all.

God's covenant relationship with Abraham is made definite in the ceremony of circumcision: "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." (Gen. 17: 11). Again Abraham immediately obeys the Word of the Lord, and circumcises all the males of his household as well as being circumcised himself (see Gen. 17: 23 - 27). The covenant promises of God to Abraham are to be fulfilled through his natural son Isaac, born "out of due time" to his wife Sarah in her old age. God repeats the promises concerning Abraham in relation to Sarah's son Isaac (Gen. 17: 16 - 21). The promise concerning Isaac as Abraham's heir is based on Abraham's faith: "I will fulfil the oath which I swore to Abraham your father ... because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." (Gen. 26: 3, 5). One generation later, God repeats the promises to Isaac's son, Jacob, introducing himself as "the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Gen. 28: 13 - 14; see also Gen. 35: 11 - 12).

The Jewish tradition has always seen as a key event in the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant what is called the "binding" of Isaac, in Hebrew the *akedah*. Here on Mount Moriah, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son in obedience to the word of the Lord. When he passes this test, and Isaac is spared, Abraham offers a ram, caught there in a thicket (Gen. 22: 13).

The apostle Paul calls Abraham "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4: 11). Here in Paul's exposition, Abraham's faith is demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice his only God-given son and heir Isaac. This passage, along with Gal. 3, is of particular importance because it is a teaching on faith. Abraham believed in the midst of the most frightening test: the God in whom He has placed His total trust, leaving his people and native land, is asking him in his old age, when his wife is even further beyond the age of child-bearing than when Isaac was conceived, to sacrifice his son, through whom the promises of God would be realized. So Paul writes: "in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'reckoned to him as righteousness.'" (Rom. 4: 17 - 22).¹ The significance of this example for Christian faith will be seen when we come to the promises of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus Christ. The letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the role of sacrificial blood in the

¹ Paul here cites Genesis 15: "And he [Abraham] believed the Lord; and he [the Lord] reckoned it to him as righteousness." (15: 6).

making of covenant: “even the first covenant was not ratified without blood” (Heb. 9: 18), later adding: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 8: 22).

On Mount Sinai God makes covenant with the whole people of Israel through Moses. But here there are no unconditional promises unlike the covenant with Abraham. The promises to Abraham had no conditions attached to them. The promises at Sinai concern the consequences of obedience to the Law and the consequences of disobedience (see Lev. 26: 3 - 45; Deut: 28). The Sinai covenant is ratified in blood following the reading of the “book of the Law” to the whole people: Moses says, “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Ex. 24: 8). In Gal. 3, Paul will explain how saving faith is through believing in the promises not through obedience to the Law: “the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham as a promise.” (Gal. 3: 17 - 18). It is the Sinai covenant that is ratified by the Israelites through Joshua at the end of his life (Jos. 24: 25).

The covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants are significantly expanded through David. Through the prophet Nathan God promises David a kingdom through his royal descendants. First, God makes a promise similar to that given to Abraham: “I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.” (2 Sam. 7: 9). Also like Abraham, God promises sons to David: I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.” (2 Sam. 7: 12). But while disobedience will be punished, this kingdom will not end: “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” (2 Sam. 7: 16). The covenant character of this kingdom and its everlasting character are celebrated in Ps. 89: “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations.” (Ps. 89: 3 - 4). God’s total faithfulness to his promises is underlined: even when David’s descendants rebel against God, he will punish them, “but I will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips.” (Ps. 89: 33 - 34). The promise to David concerning his kingly line and kingdom will be further developed in many messianic promises given to the prophets of Israel.

The New Covenant in Jesus Christ

The basic character of faith is not changed in the New Testament - contrary to what Christians have thought. Otherwise St Paul would not have called Abraham still the father of faith. Faith is still faith in the promises of God. New Testament faith is still covenant faith. But with the coming of God’s only-begotten Son, there is both fulfilment and promise. Jesus is both realization and harbinger of God’s future. Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ, who has come and who is to come. The content of God’s covenant gift is deepened and expanded, and is embodied in the incarnate Son of God. And with this expansion, the promises are also expanded.

At the beginning of the Old Testament story, there is a man of faith, Abraham. At the beginning of the New Testament story, there is a woman of faith, Mary. The New Testament story begins with the Annunciation, the visit of the angel Gabriel to the virgin of Nazareth. The angel gives Mary a promise from God: “behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” (Luke 1: 31). This promise is not something unrelated to the Old Testament promises to which God remains faithful. “He will be great, and will be called son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him

the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” (Luke 1: 32 - 33).

Unlike her cousin Zechariah, who doubts the message of the angel, Mary simply asks a question about how this can happen, being told it will happen through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 35). Immediately she believes. “And Mary said, Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1: 38). In Mary’s faith, there is also “a believing in hope against hope”, a faith fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised (Rom. 4: 21). The blessings of Mary’s faith are recognized by her cousin Elizabeth: “And blessed is she who has believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (Luke 1: 45). As Mary believes in the promises given to her, she extols the faithfulness of God to his covenant promises from of old: “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity for ever.” (Luke 1: 54 - 55). The new promises are founded and built on the old.

The new promises brought by Jesus are threefold in their fullest expression. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The promise of the Kingdom.
2. The promise of the Holy Spirit.
3. The promise of the resurrection and eternal life.

Before looking at these promises further, we should note that they are all realized in Jesus himself in his first coming. They are all given already to Christians through and from Jesus in initial form. But the full realization of all the promises for the Church, for humanity and all creation will be given at the second coming of the Lord in glory. The first two are found in Jesus’ teaching in the first three gospels, the last two in his teaching in the gospel of John. The intention here is not to give a full teaching on the relationship between the Kingdom now and the Kingdom to come, but to outline the central elements in the promises that belong to New Testament faith.

1. *The promise of the Kingdom.* The preaching of Jesus began with the message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4: 17). After the removal of the weeds at the end of the age, Jesus promises: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matt. 13: 43). Jesus says to the Twelve: “I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22: 29 - 30). In Matthew 25, we read: “When the Son of man comes in all his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ... Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25: 31, 34).
2. *The promise of the Holy Spirit.* Jesus tells the disciples: “Ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” (Luke 11: 9, 13). “But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to

you.” (John 14: 26). “He [the Spirit] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16: 14).

Jesus speaks specifically about the promise of the Spirit after his resurrection. Here, the gift of the Spirit is described as “the promise of my [the] Father” (Luke 24: 49; Acts 1: 4). The promise of the Father is that they will be “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24: 49) and that “before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1: 5).

3. *The promise of the resurrection and of eternal life.* The fullness of this promise is linked to the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory as indicated in 1 above, where the passage from Matthew 25 about the judgment ends with the words of Jesus: “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25: 46). In John’s gospel we have the promises in the bread of life discourse in John 6, where Jesus says, “For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6: 40). “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6: 54).

These promises are developed in various ways in other books of the New Testament. But the purpose here is simply to point to the basic promises as an essential element that is accepted in the act of Christian faith. There are of course many other promises of Jesus, many of a personal kind, that are found in the gospels; for example, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11: 29). But those highlighted in this teaching form part of the essential hope that is held out to us in the gospel. More will be said about our hope as Christians and the hope of the Church in other chapters.

Questions for Discussion

1. What place have the promises of God in the Scriptures played in my faith and the way that I live it out?
2. Describe in your own words the promises of God that are promised to God’s sons and daughters in the new covenant.
3. What place did the concept of covenant have in the teaching you have received in your Church? What can you see was missing from what you had been taught?