

## God's Promises

Romans 9:4i

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

The scripture that we will be dealing with in our study today is Romans 9:4: "They are the Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." We will be looking at the last word, "the promises".

"Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together according to the law of God in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, and forsaking all others, keeping only unto her as long as you both shall live?"

"I will".

"Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together according to the law of God in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, and forsaking all others, keeping only unto him as long as you both shall live?"

"I will."

"I call upon these persons here present to witness that I take thee to be my lawful wedded wife to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part. And thereto I plight thee my troth." Which means I give you my promise.

### THE POINT AND THE POWER OF A PROMISE

On the basis of those simple words coming from the lips of an ordinary human being, you and I commit ourselves without any reservation to another human being. The most intimate relationship possible to us humans here on earth begins. If ever one of the partners steps back in the slightest way from those promises "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse, to love and to cherish," even a little -- though the physical intimacy may continue, the emotional, the spiritual intimacy is spoiled. However imperceptibly or unconsciously one person steps back from those vows, the spiritual and emotional intimacy is spoiled. It can only be restored after a lengthy period wherein the guilty partner can re-establish trust with the other. Those of you who are married now and those of you who will marry better get that one straight. It is true. However little you step back from those vows you spoil something.

Wordsworth has a line that says, "There have passed away a glory from the earth..." Every one of us who is married knows that. We know that the norm for God's plan in marriage is that we should be in love all the days of our lives. I don't think that there is one husband or wife here who does not realize that you have only to step back from those vows the slightest bit, and there has passed away a glory from the earth which is only restored after a lengthy period of confidence building. That is the point and the power of a promise for us human beings. We are not just fascinated by the sequence of promised events following a promise that is not what makes a promise so important to us -- but a kept promise declares the nature of the person who has promised. That is the point and the power of a promise.

A promise that is kept declares to the other person that he has a nature that is consistent. We little transient human pieces of earth need solid stable people here on earth before we will open ourselves to anybody. We are so insecure that we need immovable fixed points that we can hang onto. Those are the only points to which we will open ourselves without reservation. The only way we can ever establish those fixed points is if those fixed points seem to us to be consistent and reliable and stable. We are not fools. We will not open ourselves without reservation and without any holding back to anybody whose nature we doubt or question. I don't care how naive you particularly happen to be. We are so built that we will not open ourselves without reservation to anyone whose nature and consistency we cannot trust -- and that to us is the importance of promises.

#### CAN I TRUST THIS PERSON TOMORROW?

That is why divorce is such a major tragedy. Do you see when you promise again "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part," you already said that to somebody else? That is the difficulty you are placed with after a divorce. I am not saying that it can't be gotten over, but it is difficult because the natural question is, "How do I know that you really mean it this time?" If you said it before and you didn't keep it, how do I know that you will keep it this time? And then you are driven back, "Well, really and truly for better, for worse, really and truly for richer and poorer." It is a difficult one to settle. That to us is the importance of a promise. We sense that if a person keeps a promise that they have made they will be the same tomorrow as they are today. But if they don't keep a promise that they have made, then there comes a great hesitation and shakiness in our attitude towards them. The only way we can tell about a person's nature is by examining the track record of their promises.

That is why the sensitivity groups are so silly; all that circus routine that we used to go through in order to be open with each other. We are not fools. We know the issue is not whether they are prepared to be open with us but the question is what are they going to do tomorrow with the confidences that I have shared with them? Our problem is not to open ourselves and take our clothes off or be really sensitive or really honest today. Our problem is, "Can I trust this person tomorrow? Have they a track record of consistency and reliability so that what they are today is what they will be tomorrow?" The reason we don't love each other is because it is so hard to find people to whom you can open yourself completely without reservation and know that they are reliable and won't take advantage of you. That is why we have so many partial relationships. That is why we have partial openness and partial surrender because we have only partially kept promises all through our lives.

#### STILLED IN DEATH

One of the tremendous problems all of us have even with the person whose reliability we are sure of is that there will come a time when their consistent reliable lips will be stilled in death. That hits all of us. Even if you have had a dad that has just been like a rock or if you have had a partner who has just been as steady and consistent as a clock, someday they will die. There will come a day when those lips are stilled. There will come a day when those lips will not be able to keep those promises because everybody dies. That is the central neurosis of our time. We feel that we are made for something far beyond time and space, but we can't find anyone whom we know who will still be the same beyond this world of time and space.

So we are shaky about who to trust and rely upon. The Eastern religions don't help. The Hindus

present their images of God, and the god often is somebody who is arbitrary and inconsistent and unreliable. At times the Hindu gods fight. At times they make peace. At times they are cruel, and at times they are kind. They are less reliable than many human beings. Islam presents a prophet, Mohammed, who in his own life evidences all the unreliability and inconsistency of an ordinary human being. When you look around the world it does seem to be filled with unreliability, inconsistency, and broken promises.

Lance, who is our budget director and is responsible for the whole financial planning of the nation, we just discovered, can't even keep his check book balanced. It makes you wonder if there is anybody that you can depend upon anywhere. Isn't that what makes us often so insecure in our own relationships? Because we see not only in our own lives but in others a long steady trail of broken promises. To us that says something about the nature of the person who has promised. Repeatedly, we feel that there is no one who you can trust, and there is nothing reliable in this world.

Let me tell you something that will happen tomorrow without any doubt. Are you ready? The sun will rise. I will tell you another thing: there will be a spring in 1978. I will give you one more prophecy. There will be a harvest in 1979. You see the point. We are surrounded by inconsistency and unreliability in our world yet there is a set of natural events that are absolutely certain. I wonder how many of us would be in psyche wards if there weren't those certain fixed events? I wonder how many of us could live sane balanced lives if there weren't these certain set events that happen day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year? These events testify to the being of some mind in the universe that is reliable, some mind that keeps on keeping on whatever happens. There is some mind that keeps on exercising authority over these events of spring and harvest, summer, winter, day and night no matter what anybody else does.

That is the kind of person our dear Creator revealed himself to be to these Israelites. He revealed himself to be a person who is absolutely reliable, who is the same today as he was yesterday and who will be the same tomorrow as he is today. In fact, he actually promised those things. It is in Genesis 8:22: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." Our Creator promised that to Noah. That promise has been kept, some people say, for 4,000 years while some scientists say for millions of years. Now that is a good track record. It is a promise that has been kept without fail for thousands of years.

We call that promise by a different name in our financial world. They ask, how is your credit? It really means what is your record of promises that you have made to repay loans and your repayments of those loans. It is interesting that your credit is always better if you have made some of those promises. If you have paid cash for everything your credit is no good at all. What they want to examine is your track record. Our whole financial world system is based on trust. It is based on the reliability of a person to make a promise and keep it.

Our Creator has kept that promise for thousands or perhaps millions of years. Now, that is what God is like -- and not just in those big things -- but in the little things also. I think a lot of us sit here and say, "Ah well, yeah, that is just some big arrangement he has made about the whole universe. He looks after those things but what about a person like me?" He has kept the same faithfulness and reliability about his promises with individual details of people's lives.

Look at this one in Genesis 17:15: "And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai but Sarah shall be her name. For I will bless her and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall be a mother of nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to

a man who is a hundred years old? Sarai who is 90 years old bear a child?" Then God apparently made an impossible promise in chapter 21:1: "The Lord visited Sarah as he said and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of the son who was born to him, Isaac."

Another promise is in Luke 10:19: "Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall hurt you." Then Luke writes in Acts 28:1-6: "After we had escaped, we then learned that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, when a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' He, however shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They waited, expecting him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead; but when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god." God kept his promise that you would be able to tread on serpents and they wouldn't hurt you.

## THE BIBLE IS A BOOK OF PROMISES

The Bible is a book of promises. The Bible is a history book, and believe me, you can check it yourself. It is so chock-full of promises that just by going through the promises and finding that they were not fulfilled you could disprove the reliability of the book. There are promises on every page and you can check up on them because it is a history book whether the promises were fulfilled or not. It is full of promises that God kept, and you know that I know that attitude that you would take in your scepticism: "Yes, how do you know that the promises were kept? Who knows, maybe Paul had a friend write that up who was with him when that happened." There are promises in the Bible that the whole world can see. There are promises that concern such national and international events that all you have to do to see if they were kept is to check up on the contemporary histories of the other nations that were involved. In other words, the promises were not done in a corner. They are so obvious that you can check the Egyptian and Assyrian histories and find out that they were fulfilled.

Here is one of them in Genesis 15:18: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...'" Now that land you can check on because those rivers still exist. That was 2000 B.C. Then in 1000 B.C., I Kings 4:20 (it is a thousand years after the promise was made): "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life."

God made promises that you can check on. That is why the Bible itself says that God is a God who does not change. Look at this verse in James 1:17: "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." That is what the One is like who made you. There is no change in God. This morning you are facing a God who has proved to be absolutely reliable. Do you see that you have no excuse today for saying, "Well, I'm not sure of him. I'm not sure whether I can give myself without reservation to him. I don't know what he's like, and I don't know if I can trust him." The Bible has so many promises that he has fulfilled that you dare not question his reliability unless you have cast

yourself into absolute skepticism about everything.

## TRUST HIM AND HE WILL ACT

Today you are facing a dear Creator who is absolutely reliable, whose consistency you cannot doubt. Let me share with you a promise he makes to you. "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act." That is a promise that he makes to you in Psalm 37:5. If you are sitting there with a financial mess on your hands, that is what God is saying to you this morning. If you are sitting there with a domestic mess on your hands, that is what God is saying. Commit your financial or domestic way to me, trust me and I will act. If you are sitting there burdened with some relationship at work that you cannot make right, God is saying, "Commit your way to me. Trust me and I will act." Now do you see that if you don't do it, you are simply rejecting God? Committing your way does not just mean, "Okay, Lord, you help me out of this problem." Committing your way means, "Lord, here are my finances. I commit my whole financial way into your hands. Lord, you think that I should sell the car? I'll sell the car. Lord, do you think that I should give more money to you? I'll give more money to you. Lord, do you think that I should give up this job? I'll give up this job." It means committing the control of it. A lot of us have the feeling that it means shipping all of our problems over to him but then continuing to run our own lives the way we want. No. He is saying, "I make you a promise. If you commit your ways to me -- your financial ways, career ways, your professional ways, your domestic ways, your vacation ways, your personality ways, your marriage plans -- if you commit all your ways to me, and trust me with them, and stop worrying about them, and being anxious about them, then I will act."

Trusting means leaving them there and to stop worrying about them. You can't worry and trust. Worry means that you are only trusting yourself. But God is saying, "Commit your way to me. Trust me and I will act. If you have any doubt, all right, check up on me. You can check my record over thousands and millions of years. See if I will keep my promises. All you have to do to inherit the promises as the Jews did is to have faith and patience. You may have to be patient with me, but if you are patient with me and if you walk in faith, then I will fulfil that promise. You need not have any doubt about it. You commit your way to me, trust me and I will act. I will take care of the acting."

I will tell you what I'm afraid of. I am afraid that some of you are getting accustomed to an academic study of God. I want you to see clearly that I have presented evidence to you that God will not let you down. That in order to let you down, he would have to destroy the whole image and revelation of himself that he has built up over thousands of years with millions of people. God will not do that. God will not let you down. I have to charge you with a deliberate sin if you will not commit your way to the Lord because you have no excuse for arguing that he isn't reliable. If you are going to hang onto that financial mess and keep worrying about it, or if you are going to hang onto things in your life -- trying to work it out by yourself -- I have to charge you with downright rejection of God. You are declaring to him, "I do not care whether you are the God of the universe. I am going to run my life even if I make a mess of it; I am going to run it." I have to charge you with that if you do not act today and commit your way to the Lord. Don't you see the logic of it? There is no hole in the logic of it.

Will you take action today? If there is anything in your life that is a shadow or cloud -- or if there is anything that you are not sure whether it is right or not -- you can get rid of that now. Commit it to the Lord, trust him, and he will act. I know that you have all sorts of reasons why you are doing it, but trust him to sort the thing out and he will satisfy you. Commit it to him. If you have some anxiety or problem, commit the whole thing and the control of that area of your life and

abide by whatever he says. Those of you who walk out of here today without committing your way to the Lord, do you see that you are simply crucifying Christ again if you don't because you see what your God is like, and you are simply rejecting him and putting him to death again. Face it now and make your decision. Let us pray.

Dear God, I want to commit my way to you. Lord, I pray now for my brothers and sisters who have heard this for the first time and may be shocked by it all. Lord, I pray that you will enable them to forget what they feel like and face the fact that you have never been found to lie. You have never broken a promise. You are making a clear, simple promise to us today: "Commit your way to the Lord; trust him and he will act." Lord, I pray now that you will enable them to see that we either reject you or accept you as God of our ways. Lord, I pray for each one who is bowed before you that they might commit their ways to you and stop worrying this very moment -- that they may stop fretting and wanting their way in these situations -- that they might be willing to have it succeed or fail or go any way -- that they may commit their way to you and trust you. Lord, we see from your record that you will unquestionably act and not fail us. Lord, we would thank you for that. Father, we commit these ways that you have shown us, that we have been trying to operate ourselves, into your hands and your control. Thank You for taking them. Thank You for taking mine. Thank you, Lord, that we intend to trust you now and walk with an unwrinkled brow and clear eyes, free from worry and fret and anxiety, free from wanting our own way so that we can enjoy your world. Amen.