

*Luke 1:68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

THERE IS ONLY ONE PERFECT PROMISE KEEPER

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Welcome to the new year! Did the new year spur you on to resolve to make 2016 better than 2015? Any new year resolutions? The one good thing about resolutions is that they are called resolutions. At least we aren't pretending. A resolution means, "I am going to try," with "try" being the key word. We realize that these are things we would like to do, things we should do, and some are even things we really *need* to do. We also realize that while the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak—which is why we don't call them New Year's promises. It's bad to make promises you aren't going to keep.

I. The Promise Breakers

I don't know about other languages, but in English we have a lot of different words for promises. We have promises, contracts, resolutions, agreements, pledges, oaths, vows, guarantees, warranties, treaties, and sometimes even handshakes count as promises. The fact that we have so many different words for promises tells us something.

Promises, contracts and all the rest came into being because basically people can't be trusted to do what they say they were going to do. If we don't have someone holding a knife to us, we get tired of doing what we said we were going to do. Things happen, circumstances change, we get sick, we get tired, we get lazy. And suddenly we start looking for ways to get out of what we said we were going to do.

It's as true for nations as it is for individuals. Back almost 500 years before the birth of Christ, the cities of Greece were having trouble fighting off their enemy, the Persian Empire. Now you have to understand that these Greek cities were an argumentative, independent minded bunch. They probably couldn't have agreed on the color of the sky. And they were about as trustworthy as a gunny-sack full of rattlesnakes. But in the face of a common enemy nearly all of them finally banded together. The Greek leaders met and reached an agreement, an alliance. The enemy of one would be the enemy of all. The friend of one would be the friend of all. It was the dawning of a new day in Greek history. They were united as they had never been in the many centuries of their existence. To show their sincere intent, they took some large iron bars, threw the bars of iron into the Aegean Sea and swore that "until the day these iron bars float" we will be faithful allies.¹ It lasted eight years—which is pretty good by human standards. You really didn't expect much more did you? ...Given that the human race has a pretty close to 1:1 ratio of promises made to promises broken.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wars_of_the_Delian_League

But you know what broken promises do, don't you? If you are the victim, you never recover. Oh, after a while you can move on from the things your parents promised to do for you as a child, but did not. But you never forget. After someone you trusted defrauds you, years later you still remember, and you don't trust them—and you trust everyone a little less. And when the subject gets brought up even decades later, most people still feel the resentment. It is hard to recover from those sorts of things.

It's not just the victims who suffer. Promise breakers don't escape unscathed. Except for a few very self-centered people, when we break promises we think less of ourselves. We wish we would have done things differently, chosen better priorities, thought things through. After those moments when you didn't do what you had promised with your children or for your friend, you wish you could go back and re-write history. Through the weeks and years little memory triggers happen when you least expect them, and the regret and remorse flood back. It becomes a vivid flashback where you go back to the past and imagine what you should have done to remove the shame, to restore the relationship, to put a smile on someone's face instead of disappointment in their heart. Promise breakers have scars too; mostly healed wounds, but never 100% healed.

And worse than all that, our broken promises, our failures to do what we said or should, deserves God's eternal punishment.

II. The Promise Keeper

The faithlessness, the weakness of our human condition, our sins, put us in places like these; where we feel terrible and know we deserve worse. Thank God there is a Promise Keeper more faithful than we are. Our reading marvels at just this fact.

Our reading was words from the mouth of an old priest named Zechariah. In his old age, he and his wife had a son. Now, Zechariah had been told that his son would grow up to announce the arrival of the Savior, Jesus. When their son was born, Luke chapter one tells us, "*Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit*" and sang the words of our reading.

His poetry, his hymn, is about the only faithful promise keeper the world has ever known: God. And when you put yourself into the place of aged Zechariah (or his wife Elizabeth), back in 4BC and look at your own child, a God-sent messenger of a new dawn, and you think of all the centuries that God's people groaned in slavery in Egypt, and in Babylon, and all the centuries that so many of them chased after false gods, and many others hoped in the God of Israel but did not live to see the day of the Messiah, then you can understand why Zechariah sings for joy to God. Like Christmas gifts, like a family vacation, the long-expected promises of God are finally coming true.

Zechariah repeats the names of well-known men from Israel's history, Abraham and David. God had promised the Savior to them. They longed to see the Savior (John 8:56), but never did. Zechariah remembers the prophets' like Isaiah and Micah, Jeremiah and Daniel, and God's promises through them. And then Zechariah rejoices that he, Zechariah, would see what those great people had only hoped for.

He speaks of the dawning of a new age. "*He has come and has redeemed his people...salvation from our enemies...to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.*" Sentence after sentence is a reminder of God's ancient promises. Word after word rejoices in God's consistent faithfulness, faithfulness in supplying the freely given forgiveness we need. And Zechariah laughs with joy! God is so faithful. We can *always* count on him!

This is why is so good for you, dear Christians, to know your Bibles, even the Old Testament. If you have been a Lutheran for a while, you probably know that we follow a set schedule of Bible readings for our Sunday worship services. We repeat these readings every three years. This schedule of readings is called a lectionary. For hundreds of years, the Christian church did not include Old Testament readings. They just had Epistle and Gospel readings. I don't know why. I'm just telling you the facts. I can't imagine worshipping like that! Zechariah's joy was specifically because of the Old Testament. The Old

Testament was a testimony of what he and we need so badly: God's faithfulness.

Think of it this way. All you need is a birth certificate with your father's or mother's name on it and you are their child. But is it not much greater and grander to know them by a life-time of experience. To know the stories of their youth, how they grew up, how they struggled through life and persevered in spite of difficulties. Isn't that part of really appreciating someone—knowing their history?

And we can look at our salvation in a similar way. Sure, knowing, believing and trusting that Jesus is your Savior from sin is all that you need to know to be saved. It is that simple. But is that really all you want to know about him?

Knowing your Bible—not just the bare facts, but the stories around that salvation—assure you of God's faithfulness and love. In the Old Testament we look back to prophecies of the Savior's life, and yes, even of his death, and we become aware of how faithful God is. Children realize the sacrifices their parents made only when they are much older. Likewise, through years of continual reading and hearing of God's Word we begin to stand back in amazement and say, "I didn't realize how much he loved me!" His faithfulness to saving us from our sins is amazing!

As the Holy Spirit spoke through Zechariah you hear a thumbnail sketch of God's promises. And you start to realize that with the coming of the Savior, it is all coming together. By looking at the Old and New Testaments together, we become aware that sending the Savior was not a last minute stop-gap measure, but a carefully thought out and orchestrated plan from the beginning of the world.

God makes promises to us, to all, and our God is a Promise Keeper.

III. Our Faith Rests in the Promise Keeper

Because God is so faithful, we have hope. In the midst of doubts about what God is doing in the world and what God is doing in our lives, remember God's promises. He has said, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God.*" (Isaiah 43:2). He is there through all our troubles! He has said, "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). Jesus truly is the end of the guilt of our sins! He has promised, "*The dwelling of God [will be] with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes*" (Revelation 21:3-4). Heaven will be a wonderful place!

As certainly as God kept every single promise about a Savior. We can look at every single promise of our God to us and know that it is true. Whether the promise is about our life now, or eternal life in heaven.

So what of it all? Forgiveness, redemption, eternal life, God's faithfulness—what is it all about? The humanistic ideal is that when God is on my side I then have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Well, we may have the right to pursue those things. We can be thankful we have those rights in our country—believe me that I know that many people in many countries do not have those freedoms. But the pursuit of happiness, while a blessing, is hardly a complete definition of what it means to be a Christian. Listen to what Zechariah says is the purpose of God's faithful, underserved love: "***To enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days***" (74-75). "God saved me so that I could serve him"? Our human nature rises up in rebellion.

But that is exactly what a Christian does. We realize that God's faithfulness, his kept promises, have bought us from our sins and given us eternal life, and as such we are glad to serve, first God, then our fellow people starting with those closest to us. And in serving God, we find what it really means to have life to the fullest.

Dear Lord, you are a faithful promise keeper. Keep us full of faith so that we never doubt, but ever trust your promises. Amen.