

THE PROMISES OF GOD

BY Charles Grandison Finney

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"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises; that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." --2 Pet. i.4.

In speaking from these words I propose briefly to consider--

I. THE NATURE.

II. THE CONDITION, AND

III. THE USE OF THE PROMISES OF GOD.

I. THE NATURE OF THE PROMISES.

(1.) By a law of our nature we affirm the truthfulness of God. How remarkable is the fact, that the question is always by those who dispute a divine revelation, whether God has spoken at all, and never whether what he has spoken is true. The inquiry I say is whether God has spoken and what he has spoken; and when it is once settled that God has spoken and made promises to man, we affirm by a law of our nature, that what he has promised must be true. The promises, however, are not to be regarded as the foundation of our confidence in God, for this foundation lies further back in the revelation which he has made in the laws of our own mind. Our confidence in the promise of any being cannot be the result of the promise itself--we have confidence in the promise of any being in proportion as we have confidence in his character; therefore our natures affirm that God cannot lie, that he must be a God of truth--no man ever honestly doubted it, no man can honestly doubt it. One of the elements of the idea of God is that of his perfection--his entire truthfulness. The promises, therefore, I observe, are to be regarded as the revelation of God's will in respect to granting us certain things. God might be good and yet not give us many things which he has promised to give us; for example, God might be good and yet not pardon our sin--justice is as much an attribute of goodness as mercy is. We could not have known unless he had revealed the fact, whether perfect goodness would allow him to forgive us our sins, or to give us many things which he has promised us; and, therefore, his promises are designed to reveal to us that will, and to make known to us the fact, that his goodness will allow him to grant us certain favours, and that it is in accordance with goodness to give us those things that he has promised. Hence his promises are given on the condition of our faith and that we pray for forgiveness. These promises are then not a ground of faith, but are given on condition of our faith.

(2.) Many of the promises are of a general character, which when you desire and believingly pray for, you shall receive. Persons may appropriate these promises under certain circumstances to themselves. General promises are ordinarily rendered available to us, as needed by us--when we pray for them understanding what we mean--by the Holy Spirit of God leading us to lay hold and appropriate them to ourselves as promises meant for us.

(3.) Promises are made to classes of persons also--it is remarkable to what an extent this is true. There are special promises made to magistrates, ministers, fathers, mothers, widows, orphans--to all classes of persons. There are also promises made to persons in various states of mind, such as "Come unto me all ye that weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." With respect to these, I observe, that when we have ascertained to what class we belong, we may understand that God has promised these things to us by name--for instance, "Come unto me all ye that weary," if we can say that we belong to that class we may understand the promise, "I will give thee rest," as given to us as truly as if it had been first revealed to us, or made for us alone, just the same as if God had called us by name and told us to come to him. The same with respect to widows and orphans who may appropriate the promises belonging to them without any hesitation, just as if they had for the time been revealed to them by name--it is of great importance for all persons to understand this. I shall have occasion in another part of my discourse briefly to allude to this thought again.

(4.) The promises are made in and through and for Christ--they are all made for a governmental valuable consideration paid by Christ. Let me explain myself. God has in an important sense given the world to Christ, and he is represented as having all fulness in him. As Christ became the Redeemer of mankind, God has given him "all power in heaven and in earth," to govern it by the use of those means and appliances that are essential to secure the great end he has in view: Christ

having, as I said, paid for it a governmental valuable consideration. Let me not be misunderstood; he has done that by which he has made a perfect satisfaction to the government of God. God's law had been violated, its justice, its equity, and its propriety had been publicly denied and trampled upon by mankind--the majesty of this law must be vindicated, the government of God demanded this--it was unsafe and also unjust for man to be forgiven unless the majesty of the law was asserted. Those who had broken the law could not be forgiven consistently with the rest of the universe, for the law that had been broken was public property--every moral agent in the universe was interested in the vindication of this law; the strength and efficiency, the power and the glory, should by no means be impaired--for the safety of the universe depended upon its being preserved. Now Christ came forth and publicly vindicated the honour of this law, by paying over to the government of God an equivalent for the offences and sins which man had committed; he suffered the penalty in order that the guilty might be pardoned. Christ, I say, offered to the government of God an equivalent for the execution of the law upon the offender; and, in consequence of what he has done, God has promised to bless those who deserved cursing. Now observe, that all the promises of God are represented as being to Christ, and as being in him; yea, and in him, amen, to the glory of God the Father. Christ magnified the law and made it honourable, so that it consisted with the honour of this law and the justice of God that sinners--rebels against his government--should through Christ be pardoned their offences. Let it always be understood, friends, that these promises are, in the spirit of them, really made to Christ and to Christ's people, to those whom he regards as part of himself, those for whom he came into the world, and those for whom he died.

(5.) The promises are, therefore, to be considered something in the light of certificates of deposit: as if Christ had made the deposit for us, and allowed us to present our drafts--these promises--and to take away that which God has promised to give, and for which he has received from Christ, a valuable consideration. We may regard, then, these promises as drafts or cheques which we take and present, and in return receive of the great blessings which God has promised by him, and through him, and on his account.

(6.) Again: with respect to the promises, many of them were made in the time of Old Testament Saints, not for their immediate use, the drafts were not due, but to be believed and pleaded at a future period. Any one who will take the trouble to examine the Bible in this respect will find this to be the fact, that many of the promises were not in the present tense, but referred to the advent of the Messiah, and were to become due after his appearing. Turn, if you please, to the 31st chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, and read the 31st to the 34th verse. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they break, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." This promise was made to the church, and of course to each individual member of the church: which was not to be pleaded at the time it was given, but which became due at a future period. The apostle who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, quotes this promise from Jeremiah, and says that the day had come for its fulfillment. It was made to be believed in its relation to a future time, and the age of the gospel was the time at which it was to be believed. All these promises are to be regarded as due in this sense--their fulfillment may be expected in our own days.

I cannot take the time which would be required to quote a great many passages in illustration of my meaning, but must rely upon your general knowledge of that particular class of promises to which I have just referred.

(7.) Again: with respect to the promises, they have their letter and their spirit. Many of the promises under the Old Testament dispensation seem to refer chiefly to temporal blessings, but only in the letter; for these promises, as applied in the New Testament, have a deep spiritual meaning. The promises of the Old Testament very commonly speak of worldly prosperity as the reward of the righteous, when, as it appears from the way in which they are applied in the New Testament, a great deal more than mere worldly prosperity and advancement was really meant--spiritual blessings, great and abundant, were really in the spirit of these promises, crouched under language that seemed to promise temporal prosperity only.

(8.) Let me say again, that many of the promises of the Old Testament were made to the Jews--the children of Israel--as if Israelites alone had been meant: whereas the New Testament abundantly shows us, that these promises had a very much larger sense--that they also applied to the Gentiles--and to the church under the Protestant--the Christian--dispensation. For example, the promise I have just quoted from Jeremiah, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Now this promise was more extensive in its application than was at first

supposed--it referred to both Jews and Gentiles--to all the spiritual Israel of God, in all ages future from the age in which it was first spoken.

(9.) Again: I remark, that where promises are made to the church, persons should not overlook the fact that they are also applicable to particular individual members of the church. Some time since, conversing with a brother minister in respect to the promises, he said, that he did not know of any particular promises made to parents on behalf of their children. I quoted some of them, such as, "My Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever." Again: "I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring, and they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses." But, said the minister, these were made to the church and not to individuals. Well, but brother, I replied, of what worth are they to the church if they are not meant for individual members of the church? If they are meant for the church in general, they must be meant for every member in particular. Did God intend to trifle with men? He gave promises to his church to be sure, but not that any individual member of that church should avail himself of the same. This is a mistake, brethren. God's promises are made to all his children, and to every one of them in particular, we must not lose ourselves in the mass. The feeling is too much abroad among Christians, that God's promises are made to everybody in general, but to nobody in particular. Very much of this I have found as I have for many years been passing from place to place. Because the promises are made to masses and classes, they are thought not to be available to particular individuals. How would this be in any other case? Suppose, for example, a great famine was in this city, that the people had no provisions; and, suppose that the government should issue a proclamation to all persons who were hungry and needy, telling them that they might, by applying at a certain place, secure provisions to supply their wants; now suppose the proclamation was general in its character, do you think that any individual who was starving would hesitate to go to the store, because the invitation was to everybody, and not addressed to particular individuals? No, indeed. Every individual who was in want, would say, I may go, because I belong to the class intended. Now if people fail to understand these promises, they may lay and rot in the Bible, and never be of any use to them. How many parents have unconverted children and unruly children, because they neglect to avail themselves of the promises of God.

(10.) The promises made to the Patriarchs, Abraham, for instance, have a letter and a spirit; they were intended principally to apply to the children of Israel, but now they apply to all, whether Jews or Gentiles. I might make a great many other similar remarks, but must proceed to notice

II. THE CONDITIONS OF THE PROMISES.

(1.) From the very nature of the promises, there must be certain conditions annexed to them all.

(2.) When a condition is once expressed it is always implied: for example, take this case, when God has promised particular blessings to 'his church,' he concludes by saying, in one instance, Nevertheless, I will be inquired of by the house of Israel to do these things for them, and thus in all cases we have conditions annexed to his promises, and unless these conditions are complied with, we cannot obtain the promises, although many of them seem to be given unconditionally; but wherever a condition is not expressed it is implied. Take another case, when God sent the children of Israel captive into Babylon, he promised them that in seventy years they should find deliverance. Now Daniel understood this! The promise, when taken by itself, would seem to indicate that nothing was to be done by the people in the way of prayer and supplication to effect their deliverance, or as a condition of this prayer being fulfilled. But Daniel was led to examine the prophets and to read the promises, and he found that the seventy years were expired but the people were still in bondage, and he found that the reason of this was that the promise had not been fully comprehended--he learnt that the promise was made on condition of prayer and supplication being offered to God; consequently, he set himself to confess his own sins and the sins of the people, and to pray, fast, and humble himself before God. This will illustrate what I mean. Now when it has once been said that God will be inquired of to do these things for us--to fulfil his promises--it must be understood as an unalterable condition of his fulfilling the promises--that we will ask him to do so.

(3.) Again: We are informed that faith in his promises is a condition of their fulfilment, that no man need expect to receive anything of the Lord, unless he asks in faith--this is one of the principles of the government of God: we must ask for those things which we need, and we must ask for them in faith; for it is of little use that we pray without this. God has said that unless we pray in faith we shall not have the blessing. In all the promises of God this is implied as a condition on which we are to receive them--again and again we are told, without faith, it is in vain for us to expect the fulfilment of his promises.

(4.) Again: There are many conditions which are naturally necessary; for example, suppose that God should promise that you should not starve with hunger, of course it implies that you should

be willing to eat the food provided for you; and you would tempt God if you should neglect to eat, and yet think that his promise, that you should not die with hunger, would be fulfilled. So when he has promised spiritual blessings, the employment of means, towards the accomplishment of the end, is always implied as a condition of our receiving them. We must appropriate the means, and so put ourselves in a position to receive the promises, or we tempt God by expecting their fulfillment.

(5.) Again: There are certain conditions that are not only naturally, but governmentally necessary: for example, we are required to offer our petitions in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is, I say, a governmental necessity for God requiring us to recognize Christ as the medium through which we receive these things. It is very easy to see that the same reason which required an atonement to be made for sin, required that we should recognize that atonement: the same law that made it necessary that Christ should die for us, required that his death should be recognized by us, as the condition of our receiving the blessings promised through this medium. It was governmentally necessary that Christ should die for the safety of the government; that Christ should die to establish God's law as the condition of our receiving the blessing of pardon; now it is just as governmentally necessary that in our petitions to God we should recognize our governmental relation to him; that we should remember the sacredness of the divine character, and that we should approach him solely through Christ, making mention of his name. But I must not enlarge on this part of the subject. We now pass to consider and specify some things in regard to--

III. The use of the promises.

(1.) I observe, that in using the promises regard is always to be had to the attributes of the promiser. His ability is infinite, and his willingness is also infinite--these things are always to be taken into account. Now if human beings promise us any thing, in ever such strong language, we are at liberty to doubt whether we shall ever possess the things promised, having in view the capacity of the promiser. Thus you see we must interpret promises made to us in the light of the attributes of him who promises. It is very common for men in very strong language to promise that which we do not expect them to perform, and which indeed they cannot. Suppose a physician says that he will restore his patient to perfect health: it would be unfair to understand him to mean literally what he says. If the physician recover the patient from the disease under which he is labouring, and restore him to comfortable health, it is all that can be expected of him. But whatever promise God makes he is perfectly able to perform it. We are always, therefore, to have respect to the attributes of him who makes the promise.

(2.) Again: We are to have respect to his relations to us, and our relations to him. The promises of a father to a child may be construed much more liberally than if they were made to a stranger in whom he had no particular interest, and to whom he sustained no relation.

(3.) Again: We are to have respect to his interest in us: and God has revealed in many ways, his great interest in us. For example, look at the things he has done for his children, the fact that he has given Christ to die for them, is alone more than sufficient to prove his infinite interest in them; but in addition to this, on every hand, this same fact is revealed--and the great things which he has done for us clearly proves that he is able to fulfil all his promises. We are surrounded by innumerable evidences of the highest order of his great interest in us, his great love for us, his great readiness to do for us above all that we can ask or think. Consider what he has already done, when we were enemies to him he withheld not from us his only and well-beloved Son! Then surely he will not withhold anything else from us. If he freely gave from his bosom his own Son--the greatest treasure that he had--"shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" If God give so great a blessing shall he withhold the less? No, surely no! In indulging such a thought we do him wrong and we do ourselves wrong; we must not overlook these facts as the highest possible evidence that all the promises are made in good faith; and God's infinite readiness to give the things that he has promised. It might have appeared incredible if God had told us beforehand that he would give Christ to die for us. It would have appeared wonderful! We should have exclaimed, can it be possible? Infidels now think it impossible. What! God give his co-equal Son to die for us? We cannot believe it! Now Christians understand it and believe it; and certainly since he has done this, we should look at this fact--never leave it out of view, when we come to the promises. All unbelief should vanish when we remember that "when we were enemies Christ died for us," and shall we not recognize in this fact, that he is willing, freely, largely, bountifully, to give us all other things that we want. By this gift of his Son, God has confirmed to us the promises stronger than he could have done by an unsupported oath. (4.) Again: God not only confirmed his promise by an oath, that we might have strong consolation, but by all his conduct he has shown us his entire sincerity in making these promises, and his readiness to fulfil them.

(5.) We should not forget the design of the promises--that they are intended to meet every demand of our being.

(6.) We must not forget to construe the language of the promises as meaning as much as the language used in commands. For example, when it is said (Deut. XXX. 6.) "And the Lord thy God

will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live," we are to understand this promise as covering as much ground as a command. We are to construe the language in the promises just the same as the language used in the commands. We are not to suppose that language found in commands is to be stretched to the utmost; but when found in the promises to be regarded as not meaning so much. Now it is common in the church, both in writing and in printing, and in conversation, to construe language when used in command, in its widest sense. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength," is made to mean all it can possibly imply--mind I do not find fault with this, for I suppose it is to be so construed--but when the same language is to be found in the promises it is construed to mean much less than the language really implies. Take another instance. When the apostle says, "I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that called you who also will do it," we are to interpret this language as liberally as if it had been used in the language of command. We must not trifle with these promises, and so restrict their meaning as to imply that they pledge but little, and that little in a most vague and general manner. If we would receive the blessings of the promises, we must understand what it is they promise us.

(7.) Again: we should in using the promises, always remember to fulfil the conditions on which they are promised to be granted. If we plead the promises of God, and do not fulfil their conditions, we tempt God: for example, suppose you were to plead the promise that God would forgive sin on the condition of repentance, and you were impenitent and did not repent, why you tempt God. Suppose a cold-hearted professor of religion should plead that promise in respect to backsliders, when they return from their backsliding, and should expect to be forgiven while he continues to go on in worldly-mindedness, why he would be tempting God. Fulfil the conditions first and then plead the promises.

(8.) Again: although conditions may not be expressed in connection with every promise, yet conditions are implied.

(9.) Again: The promises were made to be used--they were made to be used by God's children, by all who will believe them and appropriate them. They were not made to lay concealed in a gilt-edged Bible, but to be read, understood, and used. The fact is, the Bible is like a book of cheques put into the hands of the needy, and we are to use them when we want any thing: thus God has given promises to every class and description of persons; and these promises were given not to be hoarded up, but to be used--we are to draw liberally and freely upon the divine bounty for all the blessings that we need. I became acquainted with one of the most remarkable men that ever I knew in the city of New York: he was forty-five years old, a farmer, and an unlettered man. After his conversion, he had remarkable faith and confidence in God. He sold his farm and took his wife--he had no children--and travelled through various parts of the country, preaching the gospel and labouring to promote revivals of religion. He was a man of very humble talents, yet wherever he went there was always a revival of religion in consequence of his labours. This man laboured in New Jersey in a most remarkably successful manner. After many years he called upon me in the City of New York: after spending a little while in conversation, he proposed to pray: we knelt down together, and he prayed like a little child, "Our Father, thou hast given us great and precious promises, but what are they good for, unless they are to be believed;" and so he went on just like a little child, and really it was so perfectly apparent that he believed all the promises, that I never forgot the impression which his great faith made upon my mind. I could at once comprehend the secret of all his great usefulness: he had such confidence in God's promises, he realized to such an extent that God had made all his promises in good faith, and on purpose to be used by his children, and he availed himself of them with all freedom and with all boldness. He came to God, as a child would come to its father, fully believing that God would fulfil all his promises--this was the secret of his usefulness.

If Christians will but understand and get the impression deeply imbedded in their own minds, that these promises are regarded by God as their inheritance, given them to be used by them under all the circumstances in which they find themselves placed, they would often much better understand the meaning of the apostle, when he says, "whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises."

(9.) In the next place, in using the promises we should never forget that they are given to us in Christ, because he paid for them a governmental valuable consideration, and we therefore have a gracious title to them. Don't let me be misunderstood. We had no demand upon God for any thing, because we had forfeited his favour by our sins: but it has pleased God to make certain gracious promises to us in regard to what Christ has done, and in him given us a gracious title to them; therefore, we can claim them, not in our own name but in the name of Christ. I love to take this view of the promises of God, that if I am his child, they are all pledged to me in Christ Jesus.

(10.) Again: the promises are available to us, if we will only comply with the simple condition of believing, and if we will plead them in the name and for the sake of Christ.

(11.) Every command of God, when properly understood, is to be regarded as implying a promise. If God has required us to do anything whatever, we may always understand the very requirement as implying the promise of sufficient grace to assist us in the performance of the thing required. All needful strength and grace is pledged to us in Christ Jesus.

(12.) Again: promises were designed to secure our sanctification: and the will of God is, that we should make full, free, and thorough use of them to secure this end. On this I cannot dwell.

A few remarks must close what I have to say.

(1.) It is very important to notice the manner in which Christ and his apostles quoted the promises of the Old Testament. Take your reference Bibles when you read the New Testament, and see how the promises of the Old Testament were quoted by inspired writers, they will enable you to judge much more properly of the real intention and meaning of the promises of God; you will thus be able to see the promises in their fulness, and spiritual application.

(2.) The promises of God are valued by persons in proportion as they know themselves; they ask in proportion to the sense of their wants.

(3.) Again: searching preaching lead men to apply to the promises--when the wound is probed, then the plaster is applied.

(4.) Again: very much preaching is thrown away upon persons who are never sensible of their sins. Suppose an individual should proclaim through the streets that he had found a remedy for the cholera; if the cholera was not here persons would not be very eager in applying for the remedy. They would say, they were very glad there was a remedy, because other people might want it, but they did not. The medicine might rot in the shops before the people would avail themselves of it, if they believed there was no danger. Exhibit the gospel, and tell the people of the promises--they will not let the gospel take hold of them, not apply the promises, because they do not feel their need. You will hear people say, yes it is a gracious gospel, I will avail myself of it some day. But sin has taken possession of them, and they never lay hold of this remedy--this great salvation.

(5.) If Christians would at once believe, and apply the promises, meet God on the ground that he has promised to meet them, they would find in their own experience how much value there is in prayer, and how powerfully they can prevail with God. They would find that there was a cheerfulness and willingness on God's part to meet them at every point. Many individuals plead the promises without fulfilling their conditions, and then they lose their faith in the promises, because they are not fulfilled in their experiences. The reason of this is because they have not fulfilled the required conditions. I have no doubt but it is a common thing for men to pray themselves out of all confidence in prayer, because they fail to fulfil the conditions on which God has promised them. How general is it that we find professors of religion have but very little confidence in prayer; and why is this? Because they have come to regard prayer as a duty, rather than as something that can prevail with God. Brethren, if you would enjoy communion with God, and prevail with him, you must look upon prayer as something more than a duty. You must take hold of prayer, as a sure instrument by which you can move God's hand, his arm, and his heart, and then you will do it. Amen.

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