

PROMISES AND CERTAINTIES

Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:1–11

The disciples of Jesus knew their Old Testament. Of course, for them, it wasn't the Old Testament; it was simply the Scriptures. The New Testament had not been written. They knew the Scriptures and they believed the Scriptures. God had made promises to his people Israel and he would keep them. He would not let them down. God would establish his kingdom by sending a Messiah, an anointed king, a deliverer, a champion.

It was there at the beginning of the prophetic books, in Isaiah's prophecy (9:5–7). 'Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.'

That promise permeated the message of the prophets. It was there at the beginning of the prophetic books and it was there right through to the last, to Malachi's prophecy (3:1; 4:1–3). "'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,'" says the LORD Almighty. ... "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.'

Wonderful promises – and then John the Baptist came and said, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' Then Jesus came and said, 'The time has come. The kingdom of heaven is near. It's good news. Turn from your sin, and trust in God.'

Great crowds followed Jesus. Great miracles were done by Jesus. Great words were spoken by Jesus. Great expectations were raised by Jesus. And then it happened. Not victory but defeat. Not a crown but a cross. Not glory but shame. And as he went to the cross the soldiers mocked him. They put a purple robe on him and a crown of thorns and said, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' while they beat him and spat on him.

As he hung on the cross the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross; then we'll see and believe.' The crowds who passed by and the criminals who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

If this was the fulfilment of God's promise he must be a strange sort of God. The only other explanation was that Jesus was not the fulfilment of God's promise.

That was the dilemma facing the disciples after the crucifixion. It's the background to the conversation of the two disciples going to Emmaus in Luke chapter 24. 'Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel' (verses 19–21).

The answer they got cut right through the problem. '[Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And

beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (verses 25–27).

The same thing happened when Jesus revealed himself to the rest of the disciples later in Jerusalem. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem' (verses 44–47).

The Catholic scholar Fitzmyer says this: 'It is impossible to find any of these elements precisely in the Old Testament, either that the Messiah shall suffer, or that he is to arise, or that it will happen on the third day.' now it's true that there is no one place where these things are predicted precisely in just these terms, but if they had been, the disciples would not have needed Jesus to open their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. So where in the Old Testament did Jesus take them? Intriguingly, Luke doesn't tell us. He's at the end of his Gospel. Books in those days were written on huge long rolls of papyrus and Luke had reached the end. He had filled the scroll. He only had a tiny bit left to finish the story.

But wait a minute. Luke's got another scroll, an empty one, and he's started writing again. He's continuing the story and in our Bibles it's called The Acts of the Apostles. Suddenly we find that we do have the key to unlocking the Old Testament and identifying those promises about Jesus.

In Acts chapter 8 Philip the evangelist meets an Ethiopian high government official going home from Jerusalem. We pick up the story from verse 30. 'Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.'" The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus' (verses 30–35).

That very passage of Scripture was Isaiah 53 and the sacrificial lamb it speaks of was Jesus. 'This is what is written:' Jesus said, 'The Christ will suffer.' But what about the promise of the resurrection?

On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached to the crowds in Jerusalem and quoted extensively from the Old Testament Scriptures. He took them to Psalm 16 verses 8 to 11, where David says, 'My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.' Peter goes on: 'Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay' (Acts 2:29–31).

And that reference to the third day? Paul says specifically in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. When the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked for miraculous signs on demand from Jesus this is how he replied. 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the

belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12:39, 40; quoting Jonah 1:17). Incidentally, 'three days and three nights' was an expression used by the Jews for a period covering three days whether or not it literally included the third night.

When we study the writings of the New Testament we discover that there are 350 direct quotations from the Old Testament and many more allusions or echoes of the wording of the Old Testament. I have a New Testament in which all the Old Testament quotations are in bold type. Unfortunately it's in Greek! However there are English Bibles that highlight where the Old Testament is being quoted. The New American Standard Bible puts them in capital letters. If you have a cross-reference Bible it will tell you where these quotations occur.

Jesus opened the minds of the disciples to understand the Old Testament promises. He showed them from the Old Testament that for the Messiah the way to glory was through suffering and that suffering was the pathway to glory. God *had* kept his promises. When we understand it properly, the Old Testament confirms beyond any doubt that Jesus is God's Son, our Saviour; we must turn from our sins and believe in him.

As we come to the end of these studies in the resurrection appearances of Jesus there are two more promises for us to consider. The fulfilment of all those Old Testament promises about Jesus was the assurance that these promises would be fulfilled as well.

The first is in Luke chapter 24 verse 49. 'I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' When Jesus spoke about power the disciples were still a bit confused, still thinking about political power, some kind of military coup that would oust the Romans and make them the new generals.

So we find them in Acts 1 asking, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (verse 6). Jesus answered, 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (verses 7-8).

The power Jesus promises is spiritual power, power to be holy, power to witness for him. That power is given to us by the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need that power and God has promised it. Does God keep his promises? Of course he does.

And the second promise? It's in Acts 1 verse 11. It came not from the lips of Jesus on this occasion, because he had just ascended into heaven. As the disciples stared up at the sky in utter amazement they suddenly became aware of two men dressed in white. This is what they said: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven' (verse 11).

The promise of Christ's return. We don't know when it will be. We've just got to be ready. Will God keep his promises? Of course he will. But will we be ready?