

Promise

Let's talk about **promises**.

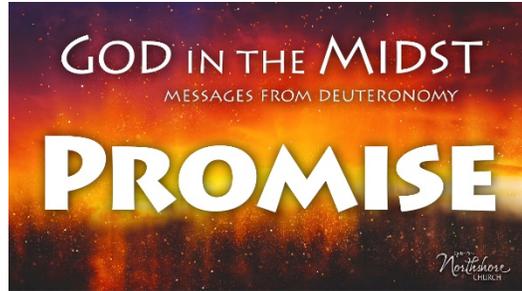
Promises are a pretty good thing. Right?

Our lives are built on promises. Societies are built on promises.

We make promises to each other. Companies promise things to customers. Nations make promises to each other and citizens.

Entire industries are all about promises. Banking, for example, is built on promises. Banks promise to keep money safe and available. We borrow from banks and promise to pay it back on certain terms.

It turns out that money, itself, is really just a promise. A dollar isn't worth anything more than the promise that stands behind it, in this case it is the assets of the United States that stand behind the promise. It says so, right across the top, "federal reserve note." It is a *note*, a promise of value... but the value is nothing more than the promise, and the trust we place in that promise.



By the way... if you think that the problem with our dollar is that it is no longer tied to the *gold standard*, remember that gold's value is mostly derived from the *promise* of the international **market**... a promise that is usually more volatile and often less reliable than the promise of the Federal Reserve. Why do we care about gold? We rarely *need* gold. If you *need* gas you might rather have our money backed by oil. Or if you *need* food you might rather have our money backed by potatoes. As far as money goes, the promise of our government is as valuable anything else.

So... what is the problem with promises? **Risk**. Sometimes promises are broken. On rare occasions we might receive a promise that never had any value; sometimes people lie, and enter into a promise under false pretenses, knowing full well that they will never live up to the promise. But most of the time, we enter into promises with good intentions. We intend to, at least, **try** to meet the obligations of our promises.

I suppose *try* could be another word for promise. When we make a promise, we proclaim that we are going to try. And when we receive a promise, we determine the value, or reliability, of that trying.

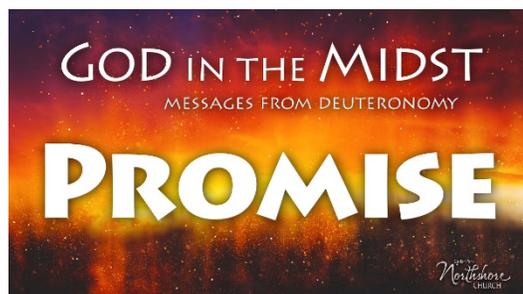


When we enter into a formal agreement with a bank, let's say for a mortgage, we proclaim that we are going to try to meet the terms of the note. We agree to pay a certain amount, at certain intervals, for a certain time. The bank *sizes up* the value of our trying before accepting the promise. They check our credit, investigating our track record of *making good* on our promises. They also mitigate their risk by making claims on our property until it is paid off (it isn't entirely *ours* until it is *paid off*), and the bank often requires a down payment... another great way to know if we are serious about our trying.

But even with credit checks, down payments, and claims on our property and such... it is still just a **promise**; sometimes, try as we might, promises are broken. Things change. Calamity strikes. People get sick, lose jobs, even die, and the value of the promise *goes out the window*.

The same goes for all promises. Whether formal or informal, between people or corporations or governments, there is risk involved with promises. Nevertheless, we assume the risk when it is worth it. There is just no way around it. If we are going to live together, work together, do business together and such... there will always be promises, and the risk associated with promises.

Today, Scripture calls us to consider God's promise. We have this series underway from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. Last time we dealt with the first part of chapter 4; today we'll look at the rest of the chapter. We will see here a number of promises made on behalf of God through the words of Moses. While the word *promise* does not appear in our passage, the presence of God's promise is unmistakable.

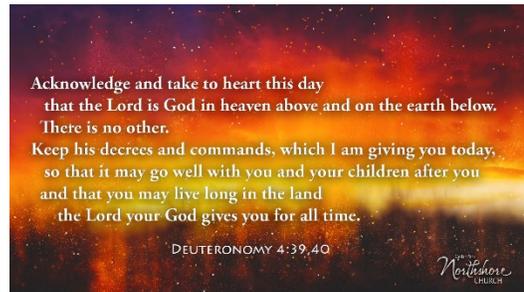


Promise is a central theme of Deuteronomy; the word shows up 23 times, and it is exclusively used in the context of God's promises to His people.

This section on God's promise culminates near the end of the chapter, starting with verse 39.

Let's stand and read it aloud together.

³⁹ Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. ⁴⁰ Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time. ¹



Keep his decrees... so that it may go well with you. This promise not only summarizes the verses that come before, this promise introduces what comes after. Chapter 5 begins by restating the Ten Commandments (but that is for next week).

We'll look to some of the detail in the verses that come before, but first allow me to ask a vitally important, more general question:

Is a promise from God like any other promise?

If we believe verse 39, then how could God's promise be like any other promise? If we believe that God is God, then His promise isn't merely more powerful than any other promise, it is fundamentally **different**.

First off, with God there is no **try**.

Sound familiar... maybe you remember the words of that great prophet Yoda?

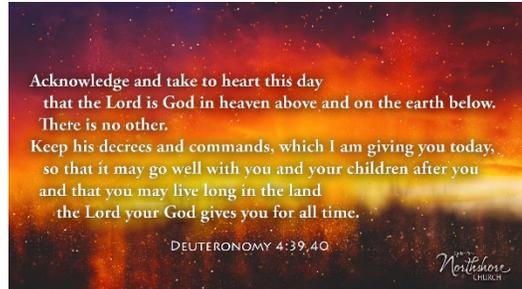
“Do, or do not; there is no try.”

Of course Yoda is a puppet and there is no such thing as *the force*... but there is some wisdom here when considering the supernatural.



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:39–40). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

When we believe “that the Lord is God in heaven and on earth below,” then we are claiming that God is all powerful, all knowing, everywhere, and unchanging. He is omnipresent not just in space, but also in time... standing outside of time, since He created it, knowing the beginning, the end, and everything in between.



How could God merely **try**? There is no try.

When God promises, there is no **risk**... at least not on His side of the promise. There is nothing that can change to disrupt God’s ability or intention to deliver on His promise. When the One who knows all, is all powerful, and does not change makes a promise, it is **done**.

When we make our promises, there is a lot of *prediction* and *prescription* as we pledge to try. But when God promises, it is not *prediction*; it is **description**.

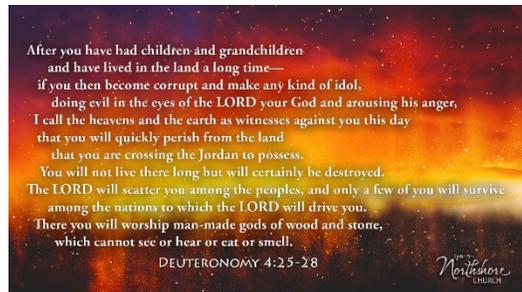
God’s promise is fundamentally different than our promise, so we would err if we understood God’s promises in the same terms as our promises. This is an easy error to make; we routinely misunderstand God because we fail to acknowledge Him as God, but rather think he behaves like us. *We like to make God in our own image.*

Our promises, for example, are often **transactional**. We promise to do one thing while the other party promises to do the other. One party determines to try to do one thing, while the other party promises to try to do the other. I pay you, you deliver a product. I scratch your back, you scratch mine.

So, for example, we might read God’s promises starting with verse 9 as *transactional*. *In a nutshell*, God reminded His people of all He had done to deliver them from Pharaoh’s tyranny, to the bank of the Jordan, ready to possess the land He promised. And then God warned His people to not **make** any other gods or **take** any other gods; don’t fashion some idol or worship the gods found in the land they were about to possess.

In verse 25, God's promise is specified on this matter:

After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God and arousing his anger, ²⁶ I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. ²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you. ²⁸ There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell. ^{29,2}

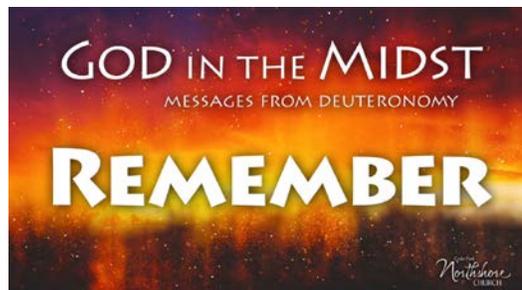


If you are like me, it is easy to read a promise like this as a **transaction**. If His people are unfaithful, becoming corrupt and turning to other gods, then God will react. So far we have thought of promise in *positive* terms... but here we have a promise of negative consequences. We could read it as the terms of a *breach of contract*... the penalty for *not living up* to the promise of being righteously devoted to God.

But if we truly acknowledge God as God, I think we will see that even this promise is more like a **description** than a **transaction**. Good behavior did not create the blessing of the land, and bad behavior would not negate it. Forsaking God and following others would merely put the people in a place in which they could no longer enjoy God's blessing.

Again, there was no *try* on God's side of the promise. The blessing of the promise is guaranteed on God's side; it is up to His people to acknowledge Him as God and enjoy that blessing... or not.

Just as **promise** is a key word in Deuteronomy, so is **remember**. And the remembering isn't merely looking back for the nostalgia of it all; the remembering is always forward-looking and for the benefit of future generations.

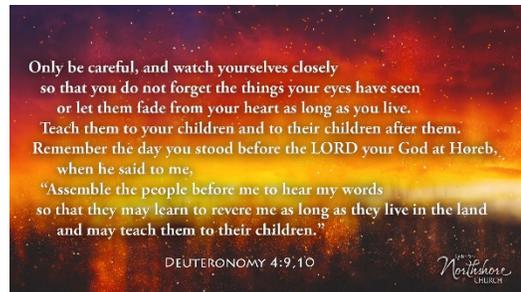


² The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:25–29). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Verse 9 puts it like this:

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

¹⁰ Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.”³



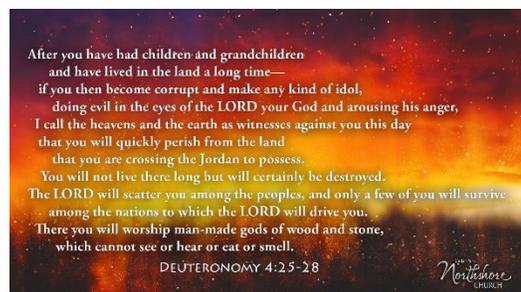
God’s directive is to look back, remember, and pour that into the future generations, so that all will never forget. I can’t think of anything more important than teaching children in this way. This is, of course, the foundation of Northshore’s devotion to kids. We love kids, just because they are kids... and we serve them and teach them with God’s mandate.

By the way... are you aware that the youth group that Chris Jensen leads on Wednesday evenings has doubled in attendance over past several weeks? The eight or nine or so kids that Chris has been pouring his life into has turned into 18 or so for the past several weeks. Kids are bringing their friends; many of those friends have not heard or understood the Gospel and they are getting that opportunity! This is just one of the ways that we are doing God’s work, responding to His call to serve kids.

When we read God’s promise like we do in Deuteronomy 4, we might wonder if God’s promise is to persons, or generations of people? Are his blessings, and even the description of the consequences of disobedience, directed to individuals, nations, or generations? The answer is, of course, **yes**. God’s promise is for each of us, all of us, and for all generations.

When we read passages like these we might wonder about this idea of *generational* promises... generational blessings, or even generational curses.

I think our understanding of the nature of a promise made by God can help us here.



³ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:9–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

If we read God's promises as merely *transactional*, that God merely reacts to good behavior with blessing and bad behavior with punishment, then the idea of generational blessing or curse seems unfair. Doesn't it? If I'm blessed merely because of some righteous thing done by my ancestors, or if I'm cursed because of some evil done before... how does that seem fair? I wasn't involved in the transaction.

But if we read God's promises more as a ***description*** than a ***transaction***, then these generational impacts make sense.

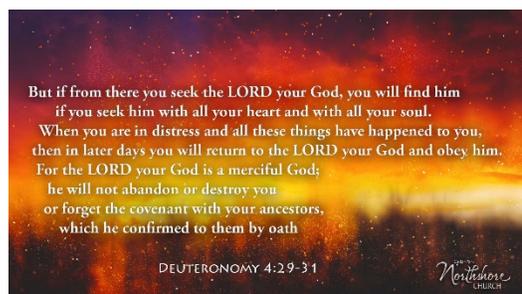
My sons believe. Their parents believe (isn't that a *relief* that Laurie and I are Christians?). Their grandparents believe. Their great-grandparents were all believers. In fact, their parents are pastors, their grandfather is a pastor, half of their great-grandparents served in the ministry, and one of their great-great-grandfathers was a founding, influential pastor in our particular church movement (Laurie's great-grandfather A.H. Argue shares roots with the founding of the Assemblies of God).

It is great to have a spiritual heritage like they enjoy, but it is no guarantee. The choices and sacrifices that A.H. Argue made did not ***save*** his great-great-grandsons Alex and Donny... but it didn't hurt. The choices A.H. Argue made did *make a way* for Alex and Donny to be raised the way they were, knowing the power and love of God through the testimony of their parents, grandparents, and even some great grandparents. They had to believe themselves (that is for sure), but their heritage paved the way.

The converse is often true as well. Just as a godly heritage may make a smooth path to believing, a *godless* heritage may result in a more difficult path. The promise isn't a curse that lasts through generations, but more accurately a ***description*** of how things generally occur.

Here, though, is the good news as we read on in Deuteronomy:

²⁹ But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. ³⁰ When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him.



³¹ For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath. ⁴

Each of us is called to believe for ourselves, regardless of our heritage, regardless of the path made for us.

This may be among the very best of God's promises:

you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul⁵

There is no generational curse keeping you, or me, or anyone from finding the love, mercy, and blessing of God.

As time is *winding down* today, know that there are other aspects of God's promises that we'll likely have opportunity to consider in the coming weeks. We'll want to talk about whether God's promises are *specific* or *general*? How do we decipher the promises made to Israel thousands of years ago and apply them to us and our circumstances? We'll continue to work through all of this.

Today, let us

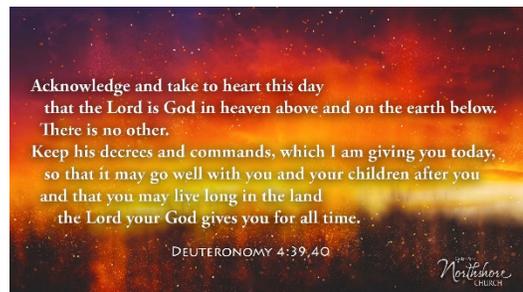
³⁹ Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.⁶

God is God, and it is up to us to:

- Know His promises
- Seek the best, most lasting promises, and
- Trust His promises

We **know** His promises when we devote ourselves to His Word, reading it, studying it, hearing it preached and taught, and living it out.

We do well to **seek** the most lasting and meaningful promises, not settling for mere material blessings and such... but looking deeper for his eternal promises... promises like **guidance** that was illustrated in the video we watched earlier. God's guidance, love, mercy, and such are lasting, eternal promises.

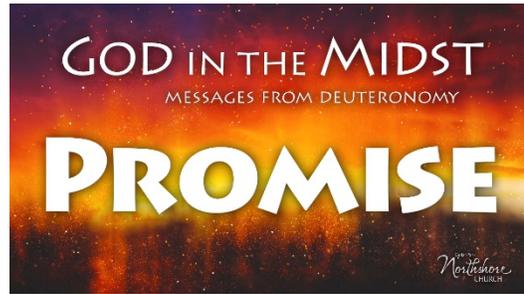


⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:29–31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:29). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:39). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And we choose today to **trust** His promises. We believe. We trust His promise because they are fundamentally different than the mere promises we make. With God there is truly no *try*. God's promise is true and trustworthy, more **description** than *prediction* or *prescription*.



Today is a day to believe in that promise; today is a day to believe in God.

Father, we believe today. Guide us into knowing your promises, deeper and better. And we thank you for your very best promise, the promise of a Savior. It is in the name that we pray... that wonderful Promise fulfilled, Jesus. Amen.