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MAX LUCADO



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PROMISES OF GOD

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

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MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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ISBN: 978-0-7180-9614-4 (HC)

ISBN: 978-0-7180-7422-7 (IE)

ISBN: 978-0-7180-9645-8 (Ebook)

Library of Congress Control Number:

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 LSC 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Mikal and Tammy Watts.

Your love and generosity remind us of Jesus.

We thank God for your unshakable faith and friendship.

He plunged into the promise and came up strong.

—Romans 4:20 THE MESSAGE

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CHAPTER 1

God's Great and Precious Promises

GOD'S PROMISE

[God] has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.

—2 Peter 1:4

The contrast between the rabbi and the king was stark. The Jew was old and bent. He had no bodily advantage. Two years in prison had left him gaunt, his cheeks hollow and smudged. His purse had but a few coins and his entourage but a couple of friends. Baldness laureled his head. His beard was full yet gray. He wore the simple cloak of a teacher, a traveling teacher. Compared to the king, he was simple, impoverished. Of course, compared to this king, most people were simple and impoverished. King Agrippa entered the court that day with great pomp. He and his sister were arrayed in purple. Roman legionnaires followed. Agrippa was the appointed ruler, the curator of religion, and the overseer of the area.

Paul, by contrast, was a simple missionary. He had every reason to fear the judgment of this monarch. The king was the latest in the Herod dynasty, the last of the Herods who would meddle with Christ or his followers. His great-grandfather attempted to kill baby Jesus by slaughtering the children of Bethlehem. His granduncle murdered John the Baptist, and his father, Agrippa I, executed James and imprisoned Peter.

You might say they had it out for the people in Jesus' circle.

And now Paul stood before him. He was in prison, and in trouble, for preaching a new religion. How would the apostle defend himself? Appeal for mercy? Call for a miracle? In what was arguably the most important speech of his life, how would Paul present his case? After a word of introduction, he said, "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today" (Acts 26:6).

Paul's defense included no reference to his accomplishments. ("I

have been known to call a person back from the dead, you know.”) He demanded no preferential treatment. (“I am a Roman citizen.”) He didn’t attempt to justify his actions. (“I was only being open-minded.”) None of that. His only justification was this: “I believed in the promises of God.”

So did Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Add to that list Noah, Mary, a prophet named Isaiah, and a preacher named Peter.

The heroes in the Bible came from all walks of life: rulers, servants, teachers, doctors. They were male, female, single, and married. Yet one common denominator united them: they built their lives on the promises of God. Because of God’s promises, Noah believed in rain before *rain* was a word. Because of God’s promises, Abraham left a good home for one he’d never seen. Because of God’s promises, Joshua led two million people into enemy territory. Because of God’s promises, David conked a giant, Peter rose from the ashes of regret, and Paul found a grace worth dying for.

One writer went so far as to call such saints “heirs of the promise” (Heb. 6:17 NASB). It is as if the promise was the family fortune, and they were smart enough to attend the reading of the will.

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. . . .

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. . . . He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. . . . And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. . . .

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. (Heb. 11:7–17)

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

The list goes on for several verses. Jacob trusted God's promises. Joseph trusted God's promises. Moses trusted God's promises. Their stories were different, but the theme was the same: God's promises were polestars in their pilgrimages of faith. They had plenty of promises from which to pick.

One student of Scripture spent a year and a half attempting to tally the number of promises God has made to humanity. He came up with 7,487 promises!¹ God's promises are pine trees in the Rocky Mountains of Scripture: abundant, unbending, and perennial. Some of the promises are positive, the assurance of blessings. Some are negative, the guarantee of consequences. But all are binding, for not only is God a promise maker; God is a promise keeper.

As God was preparing the Israelites to face a new land, he made a promise to them.

Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you." (Ex. 34:10)

God did not emphasize the Israelites' strength. He emphasized his. He did not underscore their ability. He highlighted his. He equipped them for the journey by headlining his capacity to make and keep his promises.

From the first chapter of Scripture, the Bible makes a case for the dependability of God. Nine times the text reiterates "God said." And without exception when God spoke, something happened. Something wonderful happened. By divine fiat there was light, land, beaches, and creatures. God consulted no advisers. He needed no assistance. He spoke, and it happened. The reader is left with one conclusion: God's word is sure. What he says happens.

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By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the people of the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm. (Ps. 33:6–9)

When God cleared his throat, the cosmos appeared. His authority was certain.

The same power is seen in Jesus Christ. On one occasion an officer in the Roman military asked Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus offered to go to the man's home. The officer refused, saying,

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. . . .”

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment. (Matt. 8:8–10, 13)

Why did Jesus applaud the faith of the centurion? Because the man believed in the power of Jesus to keep his word. In fact, this story gives us Jesus' definition of faith: *faith is the deeply held belief that God will keep his promises*. The Roman soldier understood this simple truth: God will

GOD'S GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES

not—indeed he cannot—break his promises. His covenants are contractually inviolable, written not in sand but carved in granite. What he says will happen.

It must happen! His promises are irrevocable because of who God is:

- He is unchanging. He sees the end from the beginning. He's never caught off guard by the unexpected. He makes no mid-course corrections. He is not victimized by moods or weather. "He never changes or casts a shifting shadow" (James 1:17 NLT).
- He is faithful. "God can be trusted to keep his promise" (Heb. 10:23 NLT).
- He is strong. He does not overpromise and underdeliver. "God is able to do whatever he promises" (Rom. 4:21 NLT).
- He cannot lie. "It is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18 NLT). A rock cannot swim. A hippo cannot fly. A butterfly cannot eat a bowl of spaghetti. You cannot sleep on a cloud, and God cannot lie. He never exaggerates, manipulates, fibs, or flatters. This verse does not say it is unlikely that God will lie or improbable that God will lie. No, the statement is clear: it is impossible! Scripture could not be more forthright. "God . . . cannot lie" (Titus 1:2 ASV). Deceit is simply not an option. "He doesn't break promises!" (Titus 1:2 THE MESSAGE).

This theme of God as a promise keeper stirs a childhood memory. When I was around twelve years old, I tagged along with my father as he went to buy new tires for the family car. Dad was from a small town and simpler times. He was unadorned of fancy dress or wealth. He was a reliable oil field mechanic who loved his family, paid his bills, and kept his word. He was insulted by those who doubted his integrity. He was certainly insulted that day in the tire shop.

He selected the tires, and we waited as they were being mounted. When it came time to pay the bill, I stood by Dad's side at the counter as he wrote the check. The salesclerk looked at the check and then requested that my father produce some identification. Such a practice is common and unquestioned today, but in the 1960s a merchant seldom asked for verification.

Dad was taken aback.

"You don't believe I am who that check says I am?"

The clerk was embarrassed. "We require this of all customers."

"Do you think I am dishonest?"

"It's not that, sir."

"If you don't think I am good for my word, you can remove those tires."

I remember a long moment of awkward silence as the clerk weighed his options.

We went home with the tires. And I went home with a lesson on integrity. Good people are serious about keeping their word. How much more serious would a good God be? What was said about God's faithfulness to Israel can be said about his faithfulness to us. "Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (Josh. 21:45).

The question is not, will God keep his promises, but, will we build our lives upon them?

I have many quirks, not the least of which is a shaky left thumb. For the last decade or so, it has quivered. It's as if my thumb lives on a caffeine drip. Were I to secure a glass of soda left-handed, I would slosh it everywhere. But I'm not left-handed, so the quiver doesn't bother me. I actually use it as a conversation starter. ("Hey, can I show you my shaky thumb? Now you show me your oddities.")

I've grown accustomed to the localized tremor. At first, however, I wasn't so calm. The shaking shook me. I thought something had come

unwired. Because my father passed away from ALS, my imagination assumed the worse. The situation was especially unnerving because my left thumb follows me everywhere I go. When I comb my hair, there's Old Wobbly. When I putt, guess who can't settle down? If I raise my left hand to make a point in a sermon, you might not trust what I say because of the knockety knuckle.

I set up an appointment with the neurologist and entered his office with a dry mouth and dread. He reviewed my blood work and examined me. He had me walk, balance, and spin a few plates on my finger. (Just kidding. He didn't make me walk.) He tapped my knee with a rubber hammer and asked me some questions. Then after an interminably long time, he said, "No need to worry."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"No treatment?"

"Nope."

"No wheelchair?"

"Nope, not from what I can see."

"You sure?"

He then did something profound. "I promise," he assured me. "The tremor in your thumb is nothing to worry about."

So I hopped down and thanked him and walked out. I felt better. I climbed in the car and began the drive home. While stopped at a traffic light, I noticed my left hand on the steering wheel. Can you guess what my thumb was doing? Yep. It was shaking.

For the first time since the tremor had appeared, I had the opportunity to look at it differently. I could ponder the problem, or I could remember the promise. I could choose anxiety, or I could choose hope. I opted for hope. As corny as this might sound, I can remember saying to my thumb, "You're not getting any more of my attention. The doctor made me a promise. You are harmless." From that moment on, each

time the thumb has misbehaved, I've thought of the promise from the doctor.

What is shaking in your world? Not likely your thumb, but possibly your future, your faith, your family, or your finances. It's a shaky world out there.

Could you use some unshakable hope?

If so, you are not alone. We live in a day of despair. The suicide rate in America has increased 24 percent since 1999.² Twenty-four percent! If a disease saw such a spike, we would deem it an epidemic. How do we explain the increase? We've never been more educated. We have tools of technology our parents could not have dreamed of. We are saturated with entertainment and recreation. Yet more people than ever are orchestrating their own deaths. How could this be?

Among the answers must be this: people are dying for lack of hope. Secularism sucks the hope out of society. It reduces the world to a few decades between birth and hearse. Many people believe this world is as good as it gets, and let's face it. It's not that good.

But People of the Promise have an advantage. They determine to ponder, proclaim, and pray the promises of God. They are like Abraham who "didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong" (Rom. 4:20 THE MESSAGE).

They filter life through the promises of God. When problems surface, they can be heard telling themselves, "But God said . . ." When struggles threaten, they can be seen flipping through Scripture, saying, "I think God said something about this." When comforting others, they're prone to ask, "Do you know God's promise on this topic?"

The promises of God serve as an apothecary shelf of remedies. Just as the doctor might prescribe a medication for your body, God has given promises for your heart. He shares them as gifts from friend to

friend. "Friendship with God is reserved for those who reverence him. With them alone he shares the secrets of his promises" (Ps. 25:14 TLB).

For every problem in life God has given us a promise. Make it your aim to get so acquainted with these promises that you can write yourself a prescription.

- I'm feeling fearful today. Time for me to open up a bottle of Judges 6:12: "The LORD is with you." I will lay claim to the nearness of God.
- The world feels out of control. Time for a dose of Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good" (NKJV).
- I see dark clouds on the horizon. What was it Jesus told me? Oh, now I remember: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

After forty (!) years of ministry I've discovered that nothing lifts the weary soul like the promises of God. This book contains some of my favorites. Many of them are go-to promises I've turned to throughout the years to encourage others. And to encourage myself. We desperately need them. We do not need more opinions or hunches; we need the definitive declarations of our mighty and loving God. He governs the world according to these great and precious promises.

The circumstances of life or the promises of God—upon which are you standing?

Jesus told a story about two home builders. They had similar supplies and plans and identical aspirations. Each wanted to build a house. But one preferred the cheap and easily accessed land of sand. The other opted for the more expensive yet more durable foundation of stone.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

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The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matt. 7:24–27)

What separates the wise from the foolish? Both men hear God's words. But only the wise man builds his house upon them.

How is your foundation holding up? I wonder if a modern-day version of the parable might read like this:

Two people set out to build their houses. The first went to RPF Home Supply: Regrets, Pain, and Fear. He ordered lumber that was rotted by guilt, nails that were rusty from pain, and cement that was watered down with anxiety. Since his home was constructed with RPF supplies, every day was consumed with regret, pain, and fear.

The second builder chose a different supplier. She secured her supplies from Hope Incorporated. Rather than choose regret, pain, and fear, she found ample promises of grace, protection, and security. She made the deliberate, conscious decision to build a life from the storehouse of hope.

Which of the two builders was wiser? Which of the two was happier? Which of the two is most like you?

By the way, I'm standing on a promise as I share these words.

As the rain and snow come down from heaven and stay upon the ground to water the earth, and cause the grain to grow and to produce seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry, so also is my word. I

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send it out, and it always produces fruit. It shall accomplish all I want it to and prosper everywhere I send it. (Isa. 55:10–11 TLB)

Note the certainty of God's promise. God's word "always produces fruit. It shall accomplish all I want it to and prosper everywhere I send it."

Picture God's words falling like rain from heaven on you. Imagine these promises as gentle spring showers. Receive them. Allow them to land on you, to soak you. I'm trusting that God's words will prosper in your life. Will you join me in believing this promise?

According to Peter, God's promises aren't just great; they are "very great." They aren't just valuable; they are "precious" (2 Peter 1:4). To bind them around your neck is to adorn yourself with the finest jewels of the universe. It is through the *great and precious promises* that we participate in the divine nature of God. They lead us into a new reality, a holy environment. They are direction signs intended to guide us away from the toxic swampland and into the clean air of heaven. They sit like golden stones in the pathway to God's world. They are strong boulders that form the bridge over which we walk from our sin to salvation. Promises are the stitching in the spine of the Bible.

The American evangelist Dwight Moody said it this way:

Let a man feed for a month on the promises of God, and he will not talk about his poverty. . . . If you would only go from Genesis to Revelation and see all the promises made by God to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to the Jews and the Gentiles, and to all His people everywhere; if you would spend a month feeding on the precious promises of God, you would not go about . . . complaining about how poor you are, but you would lift up your heads with confidence and proclaim the riches of His Grace, because you could not help it.³

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Let's be what we were made to be—People of the Promise. Keep this declaration handy. Say it out loud. Fill your lungs with air and your heart with hope, and let the devil himself hear you declare your belief in God's goodness.

We are building our lives on the promises of God.

Because his Word is unbreakable, our hope is unshakable.

We do not stand on the problems of life or the pain in life.

We stand on the great and precious promises of God.

CHAPTER 2

Stamped with God's Image

GOD'S PROMISE

Let us make human beings in our image,
make them reflecting our nature.

—Genesis 1:26 THE MESSAGE

Sometime ago I videotaped a message for our church. We recruited a film crew and drove to the Alamo. We selected a park bench in front of the shrine of Texas liberty, set up the equipment, and got busy.

Four workers managed sight and sound with lights and cameras. I sat on the bench, trying to remember my thoughts. We must have looked official. Passersby began to pause; some started to stare. *Who is that guy? What are they filming?*

One woman's curiosity erupted into a question that she shouted at me from behind the crew. "Are you somebody important?"

Every soul on earth has asked the same question. Not about a red-head on a park bench, mind you, but about themselves.

Am I somebody important?

It's easy to feel anything but important when the corporation sees you as a number, the boyfriend treats you like cattle, your ex takes your energy, or old age takes your dignity. Somebody important? Hardly.

When you struggle with that question, remember this promise of God: you were created by God, in God's image, for God's glory.

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them
reflecting our nature

So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,

And, yes, Earth itself,

and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." (Gen. 1:26

THE MESSAGE)

Embedded in these words is the most wonderful of promises: God made us to reflect the image of God.

God created us to be more like him than anything else he made. He never declared, “Let us make oceans in our image” or “birds in our likeness.” The heavens above reflect the glory of God, but they are not made in the image of God. Yet we are.

To be clear: no one is a god except in his or her own delusion. But everyone carries some of the communicable attributes of God. Wisdom. Love. Grace. Kindness. A longing for eternity. These are just some of the attributes that set us apart from the farm animal and suggest that we bear the fingerprints of the Divine Maker. We are made in *his image* and in *his likeness*.

These terms self-define a few chapters later. “When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth” (Gen. 5:3). Seth bore the image and likeness of his father. Maybe he had his father’s curly hair or dark eyes. Apart from having a belly button, Seth was like Adam in many ways.

The same is true of us. We “take after” God in many ways. There is no exception to this promise. Every man and woman, born or preborn, rich or poor, urban or rural, is made in the image of God. Some suppress it. Others enhance it. But all were made in the image of God.

Sin has distorted this image, but it has not destroyed it. Our moral purity has been tainted. Our intellect is polluted by foolish ideas. We have fallen prey to the elixir of self-promotion rather than God-promotion. The image of God is sometimes difficult to discern. But do not think for a moment that God has rescinded his promise or altered his plan. He still creates people in his image to bear his likeness and reflect his glory.

The New Testament describes a progressive work of God to shape us into his image. As we fellowship with God, read his Word, obey his commands, and seek to understand and reflect his character,

something wonderful emerges. Or, better stated, *Someone* wonderful emerges. God comes out of us. We say things God would say. We do things God would do. We forgive, we share, and we love. It is as if God is scrubbing the smudge off an old coin. In time an image begins to appear.

God's goal is simply this: to rub away anything that is not of him so the inborn image of God can be seen in us.

This was God's explanation through the apostle Paul.

You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col. 3:9–10)

We . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Pop psychology is wrong when it tells you to look inside yourself and find your value. The magazines are wrong when they suggest you are only as good as you are thin, muscular, pimple-free, or perfumed. The movies mislead you when they imply that your value increases as your stamina, intelligence, or net worth grows. Religious leaders lie when they urge you to grade your significance according to your church attendance, self-discipline, or spirituality.

According to the Bible you are good simply because God made you in his image. Period. He cherishes you because you bear a resemblance to him. And you will only be satisfied when you engage in your role as an image bearer of God. Such was the view of King David: "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness" (Ps. 17:15 NKJV).

Lay hold of this promise, and spare yourself a world of confusion

and fear. How much sadness would evaporate if every person simply chose to believe this: *I was made for God's glory and am being made into his image.*

As I was about to sit down and review this chapter, my daughter Jenna stepped into my office. She is as round as a ladybug. In six weeks she will, God willing, give birth to a baby girl. Can I tell you something about that infant? I love her. I've never seen her, but I love her. She has done nothing to earn my love. But I love her. She's never brought me coffee or called me Papa. She's never sung me a song or danced me a dance. She has done nothing!

Yet I love her already.

I would do anything for her, and that is not hyperbole.

Why? Why do I love her so? Because she carries some of me. A small part for sure but a part of me nonetheless.

Why does God love you with an everlasting love? It has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with whose you are. You are his. You carry a part of him. There is something of him in you. He made you in his image. He stamped his name on your heart. He breathed life into your lungs.

Someone called you a lost cause. Someone branded you as a failure. Someone dismissed you as insignificant. Don't listen to them. They don't know what they are talking about. A divine spark indwells you. When you say yes to God, he blows on that holy ember, and it begins to flame. It grows day by day within you. Are you perfect? No. But you are being made perfect. He bought you and owns you and has a wild and inexplicable love for you. His love for you does not depend on you.

You are God's idea. God's child. Created in God's image.

Would you let this truth find its way into your heart? You were conceived by God before you were conceived by your parents. You were loved in heaven before you were known on earth. You aren't an accident. You aren't a random fluke of genetics or evolution. You aren't defined by

the number of pounds you weigh, followers you have, car you drive, or clothes you wear.

CEO or unemployed—doesn't matter.

Hot list or not list—doesn't matter.

Blue-blooded or orphaned—doesn't matter.

High IQ or low standing—doesn't matter.

First string or cut from the squad—doesn't matter.

You are being made into God's image. Print that on your résumé. You are a diamond, a rose, and a jewel, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. In the eyes of God you are worth dying for. Would you let this truth define the way you see yourself?

Would you let this truth define the way you see other people? Every person you see was created by God to bear his image and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. This means *all* people deserve to be seen for who they are: image bearers of God.

Imagine the impact this promise would have on the society that embraced it. What civility it would engender! What kindness it would foster! Racism will not flourish when people believe their neighbors bear God's image. The fire of feuds will have no fuel when people believe their adversaries are God's idea. Will a man abuse a woman? Not if he believes she bears the stamp of God. Will a boss neglect an employee? Not if she believes the employee bears a divine spark. Will society write off the indigent, the mentally ill, the inmate on death row, or the refugee? Not if we believe, truly believe, that every human being is God's idea. And he has no bad ideas.

You and I were made by God to know him and make him known.

Children have a tendency to say, "Look at me!" On the tricycle: "Look at me go!" On the trampoline: "Look at me bounce!" On the swing set: "Look at me swing!" Such behavior is acceptable for children.

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Yet many adults spend their grown-up years saying the same. “Look at me drive this fancy car!” “Look at me make money!” “Look at me wear provocative clothes, use big words, or flex my muscles. Look at me!”

Isn’t it time we grew up? We were made to live a life that says, “Look at God!” People are to look at us and see not us but the image of our Maker.

This is God’s plan. This is God’s promise. And he will fulfill it! He will make us into his image.

CHAPTER 3

The Devil's Days Are Numbered

GOD'S PROMISE

The God who brings peace will soon defeat
Satan and give you power over him.

—Romans 16:20 NCV

The thought of the picnickers doesn't surprise us. The people weren't the first or the last to pack a meal and set out for a Sunday afternoon excursion. After all, it was a quiet and sunny July day. A trip to the countryside would be nice. No, it wasn't the picnic baskets that made this entourage notable. It is where they went to unpack them.

A battlefield. On July 21, 1861, Washingtonians rode horses and buggies to Manassas to witness their Union soldiers bring an end to what they considered to be a short rebellion. Their intent was to sit on blankets, eat their chicken, and cheer from a distance.

One soldier described them as a "throng of sightseers. . . . They came in all manner of ways, some in stylish carriages, others in city hacks, and still others in buggies, on horseback and even on foot. . . . It was Sunday and everybody seemed to have taken a general holiday."¹

A reporter from the *London Times* observed, "The spectators were all excited, and a lady with an opera glass . . . was quite beside herself [at the sound of] an unusually heavy discharge. . . . 'That is splendid, Oh my! Is not that first rate?'"²

It wasn't long before reality rushed in. With the sound of gunfire, the sight of blood, and the screams of wounded soldiers, people soon realized this was no picnic. Fathers grabbed their children, and husbands called for their wives. They jumped into their wagons and onto their horses. Some were "caught in a stampede of retreating Union troops."³ One spectator, a congressman from New York, was caught by Confederate soldiers and kept prisoner for nearly six months.⁴

UNSHAKABLE HOPE

That was the last time onlookers took picnic baskets to a battlefield. Or was it?

Could it be that we make a similar mistake? Could it be that we embrace a similar false assumption? Is it possible we do today what the Washingtonians did then? According to the Bible, we're in a war that's a-raging.

Our fight is not against people on earth but against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world. That is why you need to put on God's full armor. Then on the day of evil you will be able to stand strong. And when you have finished the whole fight, you will still be standing. So stand strong, with the belt of truth tied around your waist and the protection of right living on your chest. On your feet wear the Good News of peace to help you stand strong. And also use the shield of faith with which you can stop all the burning arrows of the Evil One. (Eph. 6:12–16 NCV)

The Bible names a real and present foe of our faith: the devil. The Greek word for “devil” is *diabolos*, and it shares a root with the verb *diaballein*, which means “to split.”⁵ The devil is a splitter, a divider, a wedge driver. He divided Adam and Eve from God in the garden and would like to separate you from God as well. He wants to take unbelievers to hell and make life hell for believers.

Do such thoughts sound outdated? Do you file discussions of the devil in the manila folder labeled “superstition” or “antiquated religion”? If so, you aren't alone. According to the research of the Barna Group, “Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan ‘is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.’ An additional two out of ten Christians (19%) said they ‘agree somewhat’ with that perspective. A minority of Christians [35%] indicated that they believe Satan is

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real. . . . The remaining [participants] were not sure what they believe about the existence of Satan.”⁶

Most Christians, in other words, refuse to believe in the existence of Satan.

Surely the current ridicule and skepticism with which he is viewed must please him deeply. As long as he isn't taken seriously, he is free to work his evil. After all, if you can't diagnose the source of your ills, how can you fight them? The devil wants to make your life a mess and to keep his name out of it.

But God doesn't let him do so.

The Bible traces Satan's activities to a moment of rebellion that occurred sometime between the creation of the universe and the appearance of the snake in the garden. When God created the world, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). In the beginning everything was good. Every drop of water, every tree, every animal, and, by extension, every angel. Yet sometime between the events described in Genesis 1 and those described in Genesis 3, an angel led a coup against God and was cast from heaven. The prophet Ezekiel described the downfall.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“You were the seal of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
You were in Eden,
the garden of God;

You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones.

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You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.” (Ezek. 28:12–15)

To whom God was speaking? This being

- was in Eden,
- was anointed as a guardian angel,
- dwelt on God’s holy mountain, and
- was blameless from the day he was made until the day wickedness appeared.

Who could this be but Satan? This prophecy is nothing less than a description of the fall of the devil.

Through your widespread trade
you were filled with violence,
and you sinned.

So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
and I expelled you, guardian cherub,
from among the fiery stones.

Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendor.

So I threw you to the earth;
I made a spectacle of you before kings. (vv. 16–17)

Lucifer’s heart became proud. He was not content to worship; he had to be worshipped (Isa. 14:12–15). He was not content to bow before God’s throne; he had to sit upon it. No wonder pride is a sin

God hates (Prov. 6:16–17; 8:13). No wonder Paul urged Timothy not to be too quick to promote a new convert “or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6).

Satan succumbed to pride, and as a result he was cast out of heaven. Jesus referred to that eviction, saying, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). When lightning falls, the descent is brief and electric. When Satan fell, his descent was the same.

But though he is cast out of heaven, he is not out of our lives. “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). He comes “only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). You’re enjoying happiness? Satan wants to steal it. You’ve discovered joy? He’ll try to kill it. Love your spouse? Satan would love to destroy your marriage. He is the enemy of your God-given destiny and longs to be the destroyer of your soul.

Don't dismiss him.

Agree with the witness of Scripture. From the Bible’s first to final pages, we are confronted with an arrogant, anti-God force of great cunning and power. He is the devil, the serpent, the strong one, the lion, the wicked one, the accuser, the god of this age, the murderer, the prince of this world, the prince of the power of the air, Beelzebub, and Belial. He oversees a conglomeration of spiritual forces: principalities, powers, dominions, thrones, princes, lords, gods, angels, unclean and wicked spirits.

Satan appears in the garden at the beginning. He is cast into the fire in the end. He tempted David, bewildered Saul, and waged an attack on Job. He is in the Gospels, the book of Acts, the writings of Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude. Serious students of Scripture must be serious about Satan.

Jesus was. He squared off against Satan in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11). He pegged Satan as the one who snatches the good news from

the hearts of the hearers (Mark 4:15; Matt. 13:19). Prior to the crucifixion Jesus proclaimed, “Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31 RSV). Jesus saw Satan not as a mythological image, not an invention of allegory. He saw the devil as a superhuman narcissist. When Jesus taught us to pray, he did not say, “Deliver us from nebulous negative emotions.” He said, “Deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13).

We play into the devil’s hand when we pretend he does not exist. The devil is a real devil.

But, and this is huge, *the devil is a defeated devil*. Were Satan to read the Bible (something he won’t do), he would be utterly discouraged. Reference after reference makes this clear: the devil’s days are numbered.

“Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of [the forces of evil], triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15). Jesus stripped Satan of certain victory. He and his minions are being held on a short leash until the final judgment. On that day, the great Day, Jesus will cast Satan into a lake of fire from which the devil will never return (2 Peter 2:4; Jude v. 6). Evil will have its day and appear to have the sway, but God will have his say and ultimately win the day.

My friend Carter Conlon has ministered in New York City for more than two decades. Yet he spent many of his early years on a farm. He recalls a barnyard scene that illustrates the status of Satan. A family of cats lived in the barn. The mama cat would often be spotted in the field with a mouse. She would taunt and tease it until the mouse was exhausted. She would then bring the rodent to the kittens to teach them how to catch and kill it. Carter remembers how the mouse, upon seeing the kittens, would rise up on its hind feet and prepare to fight. The rodent would bare its tiny yellow teeth and flare its little claws. It would then attempt to hiss. Its only hope was to convince the kittens it was something other than what it was: a defeated, wimpy, outnumbered mouse. It had already lost. The kittens didn’t even have to fight to win the victory.⁷

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Jesus has already defeated the rat of heaven as well. Be alert to the devil, but don't be intimidated by him. Learn to recognize his stench. Since he comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10), wherever you see heists, death, and destruction, turn to God in prayer. Since his name means "divider," wherever you see divorce, rejection, and isolation, you know the culprit. Go immediately to Scripture. Stand on the promises of God regarding Satan:

The God who brings peace will soon defeat Satan and give you power over him. (Rom. 16:20 NCV)

God's Spirit, who is in you, is greater than the devil, who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 NCV)

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. (1 Cor. 10:13)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

[The devil] is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short. (Rev. 12:12)

Put on God's full armor . . . with the belt of truth tied around your waist and the protection of right living on your chest. On your feet wear the Good News of peace to help you stand strong. And also use the shield of faith with which you can stop all the burning arrows of the Evil One. (Eph. 6:13–16 NCV)

Soldiers know better than to saunter onto the battlefield wearing nothing but shorts and sandals. They take care to prepare. They take every weapon into the conflict.

So must we! Every conflict is a contest with Satan and his forces. For that reason “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–4 NKJV).

What are these weapons? Prayer, worship, and Scripture. When we pray, we engage the power of God against the devil. When we worship, we do what Satan himself did not do: we place God on the throne. When we pick up the sword of Scripture, we do what Jesus did in the wilderness. He responded to Satan by proclaiming truth. And since Satan has a severe allergy to truth, he left Jesus alone.

Satan will not linger long where God is praised and prayers are offered.

Satan may be vicious, but he will not be victorious.

On several occasions I have known the name of the victor before the end of the contest. Being a pastor, I’m often unable to watch the Sunday football games. While I am preaching, the teams are playing. I don’t complain, however, since I can always record the games. So I do.

Yet on many Sundays a well-wishing parishioner will receive a text or e-mail and learn the outcome of the game and feel the burden to share it with me. I’ve considered wearing a sign that reads “Recording the game. Don’t tell me anything!”

I remember one contest in particular. My beloved Dallas Cowboys were playing a must-win game. I’d been careful to set the recorder and was looking forward to an afternoon of first downs and touchdowns. I avoided any mention of the event. I even avoided eye contact with anyone I thought might spill the beans. I made it as far as my car in the parking lot when an enthusiastic fan shouted out to me, “Max, did you hear the news? The Cowboys won!!!”

Grrr.

Gone was the suspense. Gone was the edge-of-the-seat anxiety. Gone was the nail biting and eye ducking. Even though I knew the

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outcome, I still wanted to watch the game. As I did, I made a delightful discovery. I could watch stress-free! The Cowboys fell behind in the second quarter, but I didn't worry. I knew the outcome. We fumbled the ball with six minutes to play. I didn't panic. I knew the winner. We needed a touchdown in the final minute. No problem. The victory was certain.

So is yours. Between now and the final whistle, you will have reason to be anxious. You are going to fumble the ball. The devil will seem to gain the upper hand. Some demon will intercept your dreams and destiny. All that is good will appear to lose. But you do not need to worry. You and I know the final score.

The next time you smell his stinky breath, remind him of the promise he is loath to hear: "The God who brings peace will soon defeat Satan and give you power over him" (Rom. 16:20 NCV).

It's a battle, so don't pack a picnic basket.

Yet it is a battle God has won, so don't give the devil more than a passing glance.