

## Obtaining the Promises

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We talk a lot about the promises of God, that faith is making choices based on those promises even though we have no idea how God might pull that off. We talk about the power of the Spirit that dwells in us, who gives us the ability to do what normal people can't do.

We could categorize those promises into three main classifications: Judgment Day, character development, and usefulness. The Judgment Day promises are pretty straightforward. On that Last Day, the question will be, "Faith or not?" The kicker is that the faith He will be asking about is His brand of faith, not some generic substitute made up by theologians. Character development is promised, through the work of the Spirit, in the areas of overcoming ourselves, cultivating a gracious nature, being at peace, having an intense desire to fix what ails others, doing what is best for others regardless of the effect on me, understanding God, making wise choices, and experiencing flashes of insight for explaining the gospel to the lost – just to name a few. The third category, becoming useful, is the one that really makes you feel good. We, the faithful humans, are essential to achieving the purpose of creation: a big family that will last. We are the vehicle by which the message is transmitted, through whom people meet God. Just the thought of pulling off such a huge responsibility can be daunting, but, again, we have the power of the Spirit to get the job done.

And how do we take advantage of those promises? Prayer. Reading the Bible. Church stuff.

And therein lies the problem. How do we leap-frog to that level of faith through which this power of the Spirit becomes automatic? In *real* life, we get a little depressed when things go wrong, so we don't have the initiative to hunker down and "endeavor to be filled with the Spirit," as Ephesians 5:18 says. Or, things are going pretty well, so we get this notion that we can skip a day or two and have a much-deserved break. Or, being part of the 1% who care anything about God, we discover that outsiders are real downers and they *infect* us with their lousy attitudes.

So, in a practical way, how do we *obtain those promises*? Is it all about having superior self-control and dogged determination? If that is the case, all we've done is converted faith back into works. Success would be dependent on me taking the time to pray without ceasing, to meditate on the Word, and to seek and save the lost. But we all know that those seemingly simple steps keep looking taller the closer you get to them.

So, I pondered that dilemma for a while and noticed something I hadn't noticed before: most of the New Testament was written to groups. Certainly not Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and 3 John, but all the rest are to groups. The underlying key to success in the kingdom is being part of the group. Why is this important? Because God has engineered the *group* to energize the individuals. It's not "Me and Jesus," and I'll interact with other faithful people when needed. No, it means that we *need* the group. The attitude of going it alone (with Jesus, of course) doesn't work. The group, not the individual, provides gateways to success. Not only will these gateways of the group enable you to have the initiative to pray and meditate on the Word, but

also you will have new things to say to your multitude of friends who have become discouraged with the churches they know and have decided to go it alone.

I've listed six simple objectives based on this group theory. The first is emotional uplift.

Here's a sampling of the uplifting words in the sections of the New Testament that talk about groups of Christians: built up, connected, having hope, peace, joy, comfort, and contentment. There are more than a hundred such passages just in the letters addressed to groups. When Christians get together, this is what is supposed to happen. And I don't mean just at stated meeting times. Any time we need a lift, we need to connect with other Christians. And, if we are doing well enough to exercise love, doing what is best for others without regard to the effect on me, these are the emotions we need to be transmitting to those not doing so well. Doing it during stated meeting times gives you a higher probability of success by virtue of the number of connections you can make in a short period of time. But, all connections are important – any day, any time.

Certainly, there are times when we don't have love in high gear. We are so down in the dumps that all we can see is our own mess. Whether others around me are doing better or worse isn't on my radar. I just assume that they are all doing better than I am. Such an attitude is normal. It does not make you a bad person. God promises comfort – and if you didn't need comfort sometimes, He wouldn't have promised it.

This is where contentment grows. When you are by yourself, what you don't have can cast a big shadow over what you want but can't seem to get. Being in the midst of people who love you reorganizes your perspective. Hope needs this kind of foundation. Peace happens. Rejoicing over the successes of other people's faith re-focuses life.

I have lost track of how many times I have heard someone here say, "I really wasn't in the mood, I was really tired, but I got up and came. And now I feel a whole lot better." If that's not happening, we, as a group, have messed up. Certainly, it is not all about me and what I receive – but on some days, it is. Plus, reaching out to lift up another Christian encourages you in the process. Some days we will have more to invest in others; some days we are just about emotionally bankrupt. Either way, this is where we need to be – or we need to manufacture some quality time with fellow Christians. Quality time with outsiders is just not the same. The connection is missing.

Some people drown their sorrows, drink liquid courage, or forget about life for a while. Others seek better living through chemistry. We have something that actually works, which may be a good enticement when talking to outsiders about why you think "going to church" should be high on your agenda.

My second reason for getting together is that it is a reminder of important stuff.

Using the Lord's Supper as the first example – fourteen reminders are built in: connection, unity, being reserved for Godly purposes, the fact that Jesus bailed us out of maxed out justice credit cards, being transformed into His image, and such like. None of this is rocket science.

But, we do tend to forget. Bible classes and sermons are reminders of obvious stuff. The lyrics of the songs are rememberable summaries of key topics.

When we have been trampled as a result of being out in the world for a while, the simple stuff somehow gets shouted down. When we come together, whether here or at other times, we are reminded of just how simple it is: trust God, love people. We are reminded of what God has promised. We are reminded that we are part of a close family that will enjoy each other's company forever. We are reminded that we are so important to God that He came here to *have* all those depressing human experiences, to demonstrate what success looks like, and to pay off the justice that was going to catch up with us in the end. Again, this is really simple stuff. But, it tends to get lost in figuring out how to raise kids and be a wife or husband. We sometimes lose it when a co-worker or neighbor or store clerk is being really obnoxious or demanding or taxing your patience. The simple reminder that clears the path is that God's got your back. Whatever this is I'm stuck in, He's got it figured out and will lead me through it. However worthless the world makes me feel – which is a trick the world uses to control you – God considers you of such value that He left heaven to come here. Seriously, would you?

And those people on the outside, when they chide you, maybe ridicule you, about needing your church fix, you can say, "I can mellow out without pharmaceuticals." What we do here is cheaper, faster, and far more reliable than the best we chemists can synthesize.

My third reason for getting together with fellow Christians: we need to burst our bubbles.

When we are alone, or with people on the outside of Christianity, reality becomes relative. I can understand how outsiders get there. Their world makes no sense. They are manipulated constantly by those who convince them that they are not educated enough or not intelligent enough or just too busy to appreciate the subtleties of their shampoo or automobile or political position, so just accept what I say. We, on the other hand, have a handful of absolutes upon which everything is built. We can come to clear, simple answers because we know the difference between the important and the immaterial. We get into trouble when we spend too much time on the other side of the fence where logic is in short supply.

At regular intervals, all of us need someone to burst our self-deception bubbles. I think that is why Hebrews 3:13 says, "Encourage one another daily." It doesn't day weekly or biweekly or when you see a need for encouragement. We need daily encouragement because we are the few among the many. Certainly, we need to be out there in the world or the world will not be exposed to that which they really seek, but just don't know it yet. But this is dangerous duty. Like a contagious disease, our excuses start making sense.

The earliest Christians in Acts 2 met daily. The Bereans search the Scriptures daily, in Acts 17, to see if the thing Paul said were true. Paul taught daily in Ephesus in Acts 19. I suspect that they did not meet all day, abandoning their farms and businesses. Rather, they made it a habit to make contact daily. That little reminder of what is really important and really simple protects us from the insanity around us.

So how did Christianity lose this daily-contact mentality? I think we can trace it back to the fourth century when the Roman emperor Constantine closed the courts on Sundays to honor his favorite citizens, the Christians. This made Christianity fashionable. The church was inundated by slick speakers with confusing theories. And, the Sunday meeting became the focal point. Until that time, Sunday was just another workday. Christians met before or after their 12-hour shift. They had no buildings; they gathered where it was convenient, usually in a house. I still smile about the guys in Pakistan who meet in a pavilion in the city park – hiding in plain sight. Over the centuries, the Sunday meeting became so dominant – because everyone had the day off – that the connection of the faithful became weekly instead of daily. The meeting took on a more formal environment. Then, as the church became more authoritarian, church leaders likened the Sunday church meeting to the Jewish Sabbath and declared that one could connect with God only at an approved meeting. You all know how many church leaders have used guilt and authority to keep the weekly meetings going. As people began to see holes in the logic, the predictable rebound effect occurred. Competition for the time slot arose. We rationalize missing the weekly meeting because of work or family time constraints.

The problem is not whether you should change jobs if you are required to work during the designated church meeting time, or if you should keep your kids out of normal kid activities for the same reason. The problem is not the competition for the time slot. You can have both. Our meetings are not weekly. The concept is daily. We need to burst that bubble that we need to choose one thing or the other. We have liberty – do both. Our connection time is essential. Burst the bubble initially blown by a pagan Roman emperor. Yes, we need to connect on Sundays, and Mondays, and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays...you get the point. On Sunday, we make a special point to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus – every Sunday is Easter. But every day we need to get our excuses popped.

I think this would be an eye-opener for your friends who would identify themselves as Christians, but don't connect with faithful people on a regular basis.

And the fourth reason for getting together with fellow Christians: love.

If we want to lay blame for our misunderstanding of love, the English language is a good scapegoat. English casts a wide net with that word, capturing everything from potato chips to God. But really, God's version of love is a gift, not a built-in. Romans 5:5 says, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." As we spend time in the world, we will not see God's version of love. Rather, if we do, we might want to strike up a conversation with that person because we may have just spotted that rare species, a fellow believer.

But what is God's version of love? 1 John perhaps is the best place to go, since it discusses this brand of love from end to end. Just as a sample, I'll start at 1 John 3:14, "We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And so we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in

need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

If we have that knee-jerk response where we just can’t stop ourselves from helping fellow believers, we know that the Holy Spirit has been busy, that God approves of our faith and has given us that down payment. Picking up in 1 John 4:12, “No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been made consistent in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.”

But because of that English-language disconnect about love, spending so much time with outsiders causes us to lower the bar. We begin to accept claims of love as real even though the selflessness isn’t there, when actions say the opposite. We need to get together with fellow believers as a refresher on what love looks like. If all you see are knock-offs, the name brand begins to look strange. And, if you don’t see the love described in the Bible among those in a congregation, look elsewhere. If we have no expectation of God’s version of love, then we have no hope, no comfort. God promised to put this love in escrow in us. If the account is empty, don’t doubt God’s promise, start looking for the embezzler.

Again, this is not a once-a-week thing, or something we pick up when we can finally not be sick and not have kid events and so forth. This is not about meeting at the appointed time. This is something for which we need boosters daily. Getting vaccinated at stated meeting times on Sunday or Wednesday is probably more cost effective. But you don’t need to worry about how much the insurance will cover if you go out of network. God’s health insurance has no deductible. Get your prescription filled daily.

For your go-it-alone friends who don’t see the need to assemble with fellow believers, try this one. You get together for a refresher course on what love is.

And the fifth reason for getting together with fellow Christians: faith.

The problems we have understanding faith are a lot like those we have understanding love, although from a slightly different direction. The definition of love has been mushed up and spread out by applying it to anything and everything at varying low levels of commitment. Faith has been squeezed into a whole new package: believing that for which there is no proof. Included in the world’s faith paradigm is a complete disconnect between faith and action. As with love, our time in the world makes us inclined to lower the bar.

Twice in 1 Corinthians and once in Philippians, Paul advised his readers, the target *group*, “Imitate me,” (1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1), or “Join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.” In Hebrews, Paul uses the term, hegemony – following someone because it makes good sense to you to do so. The word specifically excludes authority or enforcement. A hegemon is someone you see as successful, so you do what they do. In Hebrews 13:7, Paul wrote, “Remember those hegemoning you, who have spoken the Word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.”

Whose faith follow. We can learn about Jesus and His faith and love, but sometimes that example is just a little too big for us to grasp. Paul's point was not that we replace Jesus with faithful people, but to use them as object lessons and concrete examples performed by people who face the same cultural obstacles as we do. We look at the outcomes they achieve because of that faith and get a handle on how to put faith into practice. That's one of the reasons we get together, spend time together: to get a handle on faith based on the practical example of someone a few steps farther along than I am.

Understanding faith is not an academic exercise, something that can be mastered by reading a book and imagining ourselves making those faith-filled choices. We need the physical time together. Fortunately, in our electronic age, we can do that efficiently without long travel times. But we need the connection by any means necessary.

For the "me and Jesus" crowd, you might remind them that the point of getting together is not ritual but a practical exercise for learning how faith works.

And, finally, my sixth reason for getting together, perhaps a strange one but something I noticed in all those letters to groups: we need to ask the question, "What opportunities does this present for the gospel?"

Here's an example. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul related that he had prayed to God three times to remove some physical malady from him. He called it his "thorn in the flesh." Paul saw this illness or condition as hindering the spread of the gospel. God saw otherwise. He answered Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." God saw opportunity where Paul saw only hindrance.

Many early Christians experienced negative events. I'm certain that none of them wanted those bad things to happen. But hardship was a common event. They did not seek out suffering, but it surely found them. How did they handle it? Pagans under the same circumstances would see that as a defeat for their god.

When bad stuff happens to us, we are not happy about it. That's normal. But someone needs to ask the question, "How is this an opportunity for the gospel?" If the bad thing happens to you, you probably will not be in the mood to ask that question. Understandable. Normal. Probably healthy. So, you need someone else to ask the question. When bad stuff happens, you need to be around fellow Christians not just for the comfort, but also for seeing the next step, the opportunity.

This is overcoming, the kind of overcoming at which outsiders marvel. It's that 2 Corinthians 4:7 situation, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." Overcoming is not an individual sport. It's a team sport.

These are reasons to get together, to make contact, frequently. These are survival skills that make the next step possible. We can beat ourselves up for not taking enough time to pray or read our Bibles. Or, we can spend time together and let it happen naturally. The emotional uplift puts you in the mood to move forward. Reminders about the simple stuff like the love of God and

His promises put life in perspective. We need our self-deception bubbles popped once in a while so we can get back to reality. The outside world only has one option, deception, because the truth is too painful. We get to live in reality. We need those physical examples of how love works, as demonstrated by those who have the real thing. Then we will have the boldness and confidence to carry on because we see the Spirit working through us. We need to see faith in action so we can imitate it. And, we need to re-interpret the negatives of life as opportunities for the gospel. Therefore, we connect with each other as often as we can, the end result being that we mature, we pray more, and we search the Scriptures more. Sounds like a pretty good deal.