

Promise keeper

Genesis 18:1-15

by [Prince Raney Rivers](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” As a child, these were the only authentic words of promise. Crossing the heart symbolized sincerity. Hoping to die and being willing to stick a needle in one’s eye indicated that one was willing to suffer excruciating physical pain if one’s promise lacked integrity.

Now that we’re adults, sincerity and integrity are still necessary conditions of a promise. We need not look beyond our own experience to see that words do not carry much weight if we have no confidence in the one who is speaking. The integrity of the one making the promise is the currency that makes the promise valuable. Read the newspaper headlines concerning our nation’s political and corporate leadership. You’ll find carefully prepared statements and lots of promises. But those words are meaningless if we cannot trust the one who says them. Recently, hard-working people hoping to make good investments for retirement trusted the words of Wall Street analysts. But these analysts were endorsing corporations even though they knew that the corporations would soon crumble into bankruptcy. Who can you trust?

We can trust God. Our confidence rests in knowing that the promises God makes to us are connected to God’s presence with us. In fact, the most basic promise God gives us is the promise of the divine presence in our lives. Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked that what sustained him in the difficult days of the civil rights movement was the promise of God’s presence. One year after being called to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King was chosen to be the spokesperson for the Montgomery Improvement Association. Shortly after assuming his role as community leader and activist, King started receiving phone calls threatening his life and the lives of his wife and children. One night a caller ordered him to leave town in three days or risk having his home firebombed. Unable to sleep, King went into the kitchen hoping to find some relief in a warm cup of coffee. He sat at his kitchen table wrestling with the meaning of his present crisis and came face-

to-face with the fact that he could lose his newborn daughter or wife at any moment.

Looking deep within himself, King bowed his head and prayed, “Lord I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause we represent is right. But I’m weak now. I’m faltering and I’m losing my courage.” At that moment King heard a voice saying, “Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth and ‘Lo, I will be with you even till the end of the world.’” From then on, King was sustained by God’s promise to be with him.

When we answer the call to follow the God of Abram and Sarai, we are called to make and keep promises. Our culture has become so litigious that promises are often exchanged for contracts. Contracts are more convenient. If we do not like what we have (or “who” we have in many instances) we simply void the contract. Promises, however, require us to be willing to persevere and hold fast to a rare quality called integrity. Lewis Smedes, theologian, ethicist and pastor, once preached a sermon in which he recalled a scene from *A Man for All Seasons*. Sir Thomas More’s daughter Meg is begging her father to save himself by going back on a promise he made. More’s answer helps us to understand why we need to keep our promises: “Ah, Meg, when a man takes an oath he holds his own self in his hands, like water, and when he opens his hands he need not hope to find himself again.”

Abraham and Sarah (as God renames them) wrestled with a promise that God made to them. Many years earlier they had emigrated from the land of Ur because the Lord promised that Abraham’s name would become great and that a nation would come from his descendants. When we encounter the faithful couple in Genesis 18, they are settled near the great oaks of Mamre. One day Abraham is going about his everyday routine when something amazing happens. The Lord appears to him.

“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah, now an old woman, hears this incredible statement and laughs to herself. Her laughter (like Abraham’s in chapter 17) exposes her hopelessness. She forgets that the integrity of God’s promise is tied to the faithfulness of God. Clearly, the Lord’s timing in the fulfillment of a promise may not coincide with our plans, but this does not negate the validity of the promise. Paul said it best: “Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:5).

In due time Isaac was born, just as the Lord promised. Many years later, but still at the right time, another promised son was born. The prophet Isaiah hoped for him. A

devout and righteous man named Simeon waited for him. A prophetess named Anna prayed for him. And we who dare to live by faith have been made righteous by him. Truly, there is nothing too hard for the Lord.