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MARK BATTERSON, *author of The Circle Maker*

PRAYING
OVER
GOD'S
PROMISES

The Lost Art of Taking Him at His Word

THOMAS R. YEAKLEY

This is a rare book on a vital subject; the key that unlocks the power of prayer is invariably the promise of God. Tom Yeakley shows us how to activate God's will in our lives and in the world around us.

PETE GREIG

Author, *Red Moon Rising* and *God on Mute*

If you've ever felt like the promises of God are unattainable or inapplicable to you, read this book. Tom Yeakley encourages us to boldly pray the promises of God. Your faith will thrive as you dare to believe, trust, pray, and prove the promises of God. As a result, I believe you will see God do immeasurably more than you could ask or imagine in your life and in the lives of those around you!

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Author, *Freedom from Performing* and *The 30-Day Praise Challenge*

This book is a treasure trove. A collection of God's promises. A library of stories. All a reminder that prayer need not be a hard task but a joyful experience of holding on to what God promises for you.

MARK BATTERSON

New York Times bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*

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Praying over God's Promises: The Lost Art of Taking Him at His Word

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Preface

THERE ARE NUMEROUS BOOKS on the market about the topic of prayer and no small number on God's promises in the Bible. However, the number of books on claiming God's promises in prayer is much more limited, and to my knowledge there is no other book available that develops the concept of *pleading* God's promises in prayer. In fact, to find a book that takes an approach at all like this book's, we have to go back more than a century (see my limited bibliography).

Praying over the promises of Scripture has been a distinctive of the ministry of The Navigators, of which I am a part, since its origins in the 1930s. So it's fitting that NavPress would publish a book on this important and often neglected topic.

This book is written for a general Christian audience but not necessarily for new believers. It is *not* a basic book on how to pray. Rather, it is a call for followers of Christ to deepen their prayer life as they see God faithfully answering prayers based on the promises of Scripture.

To you whose prayer life is dull or empty, this book is designed to help revive and add vitality to prayers that seem powerless.

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To you who are currently growing in your prayer life, I hope this book will encourage you to trust the Lord even more and to continue to grow in your faith.

Acknowledgments

MANY HAVE CONTRIBUTED DIRECTLY and indirectly to the writing of this book. Without their encouragement, critique, and examples, this book would not have been possible.

Special thanks go to my wife, Dana, and our three children: Michael, Amy, and Stephen, who have been fellow adventurers in our walk by faith. They have seen how the Lord is faithful to His promises.

I would also like to thank Lee and Debby Maschhoff, whose many hours of investment in our lives laid a good foundation upon which others were able to build. Their walk by faith, based on the promises of God's Word, remains a model and a challenge.

Thanks also to Badu and Wati Situmorang and the rest of the Indonesian Navigators staff, who have always demonstrated love and encouragement to me and my family. And thanks to the United States collegiate Navigators staff, whose ministries continually challenge my own faith as they live and minister from the promises of God.

And finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the generations of fellow Navigators who have gone before me. They have left a rich inheritance of faith in the promises

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of Scripture, from which I continue to draw inspiration and courage. I agree with Jesus' summary to His disciples: "Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor" (John 4:38).

Introduction

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 PETER 1:3-4

AN OLD PROVERB STATES, “Promises are like pie-crusts, lightly made and easily broken.” Though this may be true concerning the promises of men, the same cannot be said concerning the promises of God. God’s Word is always trustworthy because it is founded on the character and power of God Almighty.

The Christian life begins by trusting the promises of God, such as “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Or “My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40). Or “I am the light of the

world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). By putting our trust in these promises and others like them found in the Bible, we obtain forgiveness for our sin, having been born again (2 Corinthians 5:17). After trusting Jesus as our personal Savior, we are given the Holy Spirit to live within us, helping us live the godly, Christian life (Romans 8:9). We become children of God (Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 3:26) and are made alive with Christ (Colossians 2:13).

The time when I called upon the Lord to keep these promises started during my third year of college. I was sitting in a dorm lobby at Florida State University waiting for Dana (now my wife) to come downstairs for a movie date. I looked across the lobby and saw a man with whom I had played football seven years earlier. We reintroduced ourselves and began to catch up on our lives but were cut short when his date arrived. After brief good-byes he headed off.

Upon reaching the lobby door, he turned and came back to me, pulling a small booklet out of his pocket. "Tom," he said, "I'm sorry I don't have time to explain this to you, but I wish you would read this booklet. The message in here changed my life." I thanked him, and off he went. I have not seen him again since.

That night before the movie began, I pulled the booklet from my pocket and read about God's plan of salvation. For the first time in my life I understood God's promises for forgiveness and eternal life through Christ. And there in that theater I claimed in prayer God's promises related to

salvation, acknowledging my sin and my need for a Savior and trusting Him for His forgiveness and eternal life. That began a lifelong adventure, praying over God's biblical promises and trusting Him to keep His word.

Just as the Christian life begins by trusting the promises in God's Word, if we are to live the life God intends, we must continue to base our lives upon His promises. For many believers, the Christian life is one of mediocrity and spiritual dullness. The reality of a personal relationship with the holy, infinite, eternal Creator of the universe seems to have little impact on their daily existence. Their problems and trials seem insurmountable, and prayer becomes a formality or a "spiritual talisman." Where in this experience is the spiritual vitality of a living union with the risen Christ?

The Puritan pastor and author Samuel Clark (1684-1750) wrote in the introduction to his *Scripture Promises*:

A fixed, constant attention to the promises, and a firm belief of them, would prevent solicitude and anxiety about the concerns of this life. It would keep the mind quiet and composed in every change, and support and keep up our sinking spirits under the several troubles of life. . . . A thorough acquaintance with the promises would be of the greatest advantage in prayer. With what comfort may the Christian . . . enforce his prayers, by pleading the several gracious promises!¹

Referring to the preceding quotation, J. I. Packer, in his modern classic *Knowing God*, writes,

These things were understood once; but liberal theology, with its refusal to identify the written Scriptures with the Word of God, has largely robbed us of the habit of meditating on the promises, and basing our prayers on the promises, and venturing in faith in our ordinary daily life just as far as the promises will take us.²

Historically organizations such as The Navigators have talked about “claiming the promises” to mean placing our trust and faith in God and asking Him to do for us as He has promised in His Word. Today I would suggest a more accurate and biblical term is “pleading the promises.” *Pleading* has a twofold meaning. One meaning is the sense of “pleading a case” in court, which implies the logical (and sometimes emotional) presentation of facts to make one’s case. When we “plead” a promise in this sense, we’re bringing God’s own words before Him and saying, “God, You promised this. That’s a fact. Please do for me as You have promised.”

But just as a lawyer before a judge should be humble and respectful in view of the judge’s authority, so also we must state the facts of God’s promises with humility and respectful reverence. Though we boldly ask, we humbly submit our wills to His will. Holding God to His word doesn’t imply disrespect or a demanding attitude. That’s why we must also

note the second aspect of the word *plead*—namely, “implo-
ring” or “begging,” which should elicit from us a bowing-to-
the-ground attitude of humble submission.

The purpose of this book is to call believers back to prayer—specifically, back to praying over and pleading the promises of God. This habit of regularly reminding the Lord of His promises to us in prayer will bring vitality to our prayer lives and increase our faith as we see the Lord’s faithfulness to His Word. Many have lost or neglected this habit, but God always stands ready to demonstrate His reliability and faithfulness. May we be quick to recognize our great loss and begin today to correct our neglect. Let us learn once again to pray over the promises!

1

WHAT IS A PROMISE?

There is something more necessary than the effort to exercise faith in each separate promise that comes to our attention. That is the cultivation of a trustful attitude toward God—the habit of always thinking of Him, of His ways and of His works, with bright, confident hopefulness. In such soil alone the individual promises take root and grow up.

ANDREW MURRAY

IT HAD BEEN A HECTIC DAY. The phone started ringing at six in the morning and I had been going nonstop since. Meetings with people—comforting some and exhorting others—had filled my day, and now I was ready for some time alone to relax and recharge my mental and emotional batteries. The delicious dinner was just settling and I had begun to look for some interesting reading material when my daughter, Amy, approached me and said, “Well, Dad, what game are we going to play tonight?”

I groaned inwardly and tried to plead some excuse about being tired, but to no avail. Her entreaties were now joined by the chorus of her two brothers, Michael and Stephen, all

suggesting possible activities for our family fun night. Still I was slow to respond to their enthusiastic suggestions, thinking more of my own needs than theirs, and they were quick to perceive my reluctance.

“But, Dad, you promised!” they said in unison.

They were right; I had promised to spend the night playing with them, and they had the right to expect me to comply with that promise. Remembering that the image children have of their heavenly Father is formed to a great extent by their relationship with their earthly father, I put down my reading material and enjoyed an evening playing Monopoly with my family.

The Bible contains God the Father's promises to His children, along with other types of teaching and guidance to help us come to know and serve Him better. In fact, there are three main types of Bible content that we should note in our personal devotions and Bible study times: commands, principles, and promises. These are given to us that we might know more of God's character and that we might demonstrate this character in our daily lives.

Commands, Principles, and Promises

Let's look briefly at each of these categories and consider how to apply each one to our lives.

Commands are God-given laws and instructions. They demand obedience from us. The most well-known are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Other examples are

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”
(John 13:34)

“Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

Principles differ from direct commands. Principles are spiritual truths from the Bible that are found using accepted rules of interpretation. When interpreting a passage of Scripture, we observe the facts of the passage and then derive the meaning for the original audience, always being careful to note the historical, cultural, and literary context of the passage. Then we ask ourselves what application, if any, this interpretation has for us today, remembering that there is one interpretation, but many applications for a given passage of Scripture. This three-step method of Bible study—observation, interpretation, and application—will help us discover many biblical principles that we can apply in our daily lives.

An example of a biblical principle is found in Romans 14:23: “The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats,

because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” The context concerns whether or not a believer should eat meat or become a vegetarian. Paul declares that all food is clean and therefore may be eaten by Christians (verse 20). But in addition to considering the effect on others if we eat meat, we must also examine ourselves to see if we have doubts about it. If we do have doubts, it is better not to eat meat, for it would be sin for us to do so. The principle for us today is this: When facing practices in which our participation is morally dubious, we must examine ourselves to see if we have doubts about participating. If we have doubts, we should not proceed, for to do so would be sin for us.

Besides commands and principles, the Bible also contains numerous *promises* for believers. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines a promise as a “declaration that gives the person to whom it is made a right to expect or to claim the performance or forbearance of a specified act.” Thus, a worthy promise is a statement we can trust, one in which we can put our full confidence. But promises are only as good as the character and resources of the promise maker.

Suppose that today I were to promise to give you one million dollars tomorrow. No doubt you would be excited about the possibilities of spending or investing the money. However, you're in for a disappointment. I may have had the best intentions in making my promise, but unfortunately my resources are not adequate to fulfill it.

But praise God; His promises are different! A promise

from God is a pledge or declaration made by the living God. It gives us, as believers, the right to claim in our prayers His faithfulness to His pledge. We can expect that God will fulfill His promises because His perfect character and infinite resources back up what He has promised. He will be faithful to His Word. We can depend on it!

God gives promises that we might grow in Christlikeness and that we might live victorious lives above the current of sin in the world. Ask the Lord to help you become more proactive in pleading the promises in His Word.

Types of Promises

There are a couple of different ways of categorizing promises, but let us note first that all promises require faith for their fulfillment, for as Romans 4:16 reminds us, “The promise comes by faith.” Faith is necessary in order to receive God’s promises, but not a great amount of faith. What we need is faith in a great and faithful God. As we grow in our knowledge of God—His character and greatness—our faith will also grow.

One way to categorize the Bible’s promises is to divide them into *general* promises and *specific* promises. General promises are given to many people and for all time. Key words in some general promises are “whoever,” “he who,” “believe,” and “obey,” indicating the conditions for the fulfillment of these promises. Some examples of general promises are

“Whoever believes in him [God’s Son] shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“Whoever has my commands and obeys them . . . will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” (John 14:21)

“Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” (Galatians 5:16)

“Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’” (Ephesians 6:2-3; see also Deuteronomy 5:16)

I can’t tell you how precious my wife and I found God’s general promises during the months rapidly approaching the delivery date of our first child, Michael. We lacked all of the necessities for a new baby. As struggling graduate students with little money, saving as much as possible to pay the anticipated doctor and hospital bills, we had no extra funds for those essential baby items. We were brand-new at this; we needed everything. What should we do?

As Dana and I prayed together about this, the Lord reminded us of His promise in Philippians 4:19: “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” We made a list of all the things that we needed—genuinely, desperately *needed*—for our new

addition. Everything from two dozen diaper pins to a bassinets, from a changing table to rattles. We daily prayed and asked our heavenly Father to provide for us as He had promised. And one by one these items were given to us until everything on our list was provided. God cared not only for the physical provision for our child, but also for our confident peace of mind. Our faith took another step of growth through that experience.

Besides general promises, God sometimes gives us specific promises that relate to our unique situations and times. The Holy Spirit impresses these special passages of Scripture on our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that this is part of His special leading. The immediate context of the passage may seem unique to a biblical person in ancient times, but today's recipient hears God's voice speaking to his or her heart concerning his or her current situation.

Though such personal promises are a means by which God reveals and confirms His will to us, we must always remember that this is a very subjective process. "The heart is deceitful above all things," Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, and we are capable of reading into certain passages of Scripture what we want to see. We can deceive ourselves if we are not careful.

General and specific promises are given to believers for guidance and encouragement. Though general promises are many, specific promises are few. We should not expect to have specific promises given to us very often, and when we do find one, we must be certain that it is God speaking to us. A key is to have an attitude of expectancy as we approach the Scriptures, longing to

meet with God and to hear His voice, expecting to fellowship with Him through His Word. Most of the time we will find encouragement and comfort from the general promises in the Word. But occasionally the Lord may also impress upon our hearts some passages of Scripture that will be very specific for our current situation or need, involving an interpretation that most people would not take from the passage. We are also to believe and act upon these special promises.

Another way to categorize the Bible's promises is to divide them into *conditional* and *unconditional* promises. Some promises are conditional upon our fulfilling certain acts of obedience before we will see God's fulfillment. Without our meeting these conditions, the promise will not be fulfilled. Abraham was given a great promise of blessing from the Lord, yet he still had to leave his home, extended family, and friends and go to a place that would later be shown to him. The great potential of the promise would have gone unrealized had he not acted upon it. The promises of God are ours as well, full of potential blessing and encouragement. Yet we sometimes have to act upon them if we are to experience the potential.

For example, in Galatians 5:16, the promise, "You will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" is dependent on the condition that we "live by the Spirit." And the promise "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" will be fulfilled when we obey the associated command, "Honor your father and mother" (Ephesians 6:2-3; see also Deuteronomy 5:16).

In contrast, unconditional promises will be fulfilled for the believer in Jesus who simply accepts them by faith as being true. For example, the one who has placed genuine faith in Jesus need do nothing more in order to be assured of eternal life (John 3:16) or any of the spiritual blessings listed in Ephesians 1:3-14. That said, even though we are freely given these unconditional promises, we still must choose, by faith, whether or not to live in the full experience of their assurance and enjoyment. Pleading these promises in prayer is one way to enter into their fullest blessing.

Promises and Discerning God's Will

Knowing how to discern God's will for us and finding His path forward can be challenging. With so many options and competing voices, the cacophony can be distracting or confusing at best. How can we know His will for us?

Specific promises are helpful, but, because discerning such promises is a subjective process, this type of guidance should be used in conjunction with the five other means the Lord uses:

- *Clear commands and principles from the Word of God.* Since God is always truthful, no subjective guidance from Him will ever lead us in a way that would contradict His revealed Word (Psalm 119:105).
- *Inner conviction and peace from the Holy Spirit.* When we pray about our situation, God's Spirit, who dwells

within us, will confirm with our spirits that we are on the right path. This does not mean that we will have all the answers for our questions, but there will be quietness within our souls that He is leading us (Isaiah 30:21).

- *Wise counsel from mature believers.* In the abundance of counselors is much wisdom (Proverbs 15:22). Therefore, we seek a general consensus from those who are mature in the Lord, who want God's best for us.
- *Critical thinking.* I often write out pro-con lists when making a major decision. Dawson Trotman, the founder of The Navigators, said that "God gave you a lot of leading when He gave you a brain. So use it!" Proverbs 3:5-6 doesn't tell us not to *use* our understanding; it says not to *lean* on it—that is, don't place your total confidence in your ability to think or use logic alone for discovering God's will. His will for us can be counterintuitive or illogical from the world's perspective.
- *Providential circumstances.* The Lord can direct through open doors as well as closed doors. But we are not necessarily expected to walk through every open door. Our adversary can also open doors of opportunity to get us off track. Paul was directed by God on his second missionary journey when he ran into three closed doors, finally receiving a vision that directed him to Europe (Acts 16:6-10).

God wants us to know His will. He designed us to accomplish it. Thus He will direct us if we ask Him and use discernment to ensure it is His voice we're hearing, not just our own desires. As Romans 12:1-2 confirms, the key to knowing God's will is our willingness to obey it. God, being God, has no trouble communicating; He can easily cause all five of these guidance methods to align and point to a common pathway. The challenge is in following the path! For God's path requires faith and often sacrifice, and those can scare us.

I remember facing just such fear at a key turning point in my life. It was the fall of 1979, and I was two years into my veterinary medicine practice at a central Indiana equine clinic. For some time I had been wrestling with the idea of leaving the practice to join Navigator staff full time. We had been involved with a ministry to married couples at Purdue University for about seven years, and God seemed to be leading us into a full-time ministry position. As I thought through this decision, one of the nagging questions that persisted was how would I provide for my family? Or rather, how could God provide for my family? At that time we had two children, and I knew that joining The Navigators meant living by gift income. The Navigators, being a faith mission, do not guarantee a salary for their staff. All staff live by faith on the donations of interested friends and churches. Poverty—even a lack of the necessities of life—was a major concern as I considered this calling.

One morning in my devotional time I was studying and

meditating in the book of James. God spoke to my heart as I read James 2:5:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

It was as if God was saying, "Tom, what's the worst that could possibly happen?"

Well, I thought, we could become poor, not having enough money for what we need. But actually, James says that God has given the poor great faith; so in reality being poor would be a blessing rather than a burden. A lack of money would become an opportunity to grow in faith as we see God provide.

From that day I began to pray over this passage, asking God to make me rich in faith as we stepped out from a regular salary and began to live by faith from gift income. The Lord used this passage, along with several others, to help confirm His will in leading me out of a career in veterinary medicine and into a career in missions. And I can now testify to God's faithfulness; He has increased our faith as well as provided very well for our family for the past thirty-six years.

The more we use the five means of guidance, the more confidence we can have that God is leading us. If, for instance, I had a specific promise and inner peace about something, yet godly counsel and circumstances were against it, it would be unwise to proceed. It may be that I have misinterpreted

God's leading, or it may simply be wrong timing. In either case, waiting would be the best solution. Time tends to clarify the uncertainties. Those people who press ahead in situations like these usually regret it afterward. As Proverbs 19:2 reminds us,

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,
nor to be hasty and miss the way.

Or, said another way, "There are good decisions and fast decisions, but few good, fast decisions." Impatience is often a sign of spiritual immaturity.

It is not difficult for God, being sovereign and omnipotent, to lead us, and He knows our difficulties in discerning His will. We have Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit, who lives within us, will guide us (John 16:13; Psalm 32:8). A sincere believer, who is truly seeking God's will, can be certain of being led by Him.

FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

Think of a scriptural promise you would like God to fulfill in your life. Is it a general promise, or is it specific to you? Is it conditional or unconditional for you as a believer in Christ?

In light of your answers, what is your next step in this journey of faith as you trust Him and His promises?