

When Our Promises Fail



Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one whose promises never fail, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some promises are easy to make. “I’ll call you this week.” “I’ll get to that tomorrow.” Then the week gets away from us. Tomorrow brings something else that needs our attention. We meant what we said. We just didn’t follow through. Other promises reach deeper. “I will be there for you.” “You can count on me.” We make those promises because we love someone. Keeping them may mean showing up when we’re tired, listening when we’d rather talk, or just being present with someone whose problems we can’t begin to fix. We know what it feels like to disappoint someone who trusted us. That’s heavy baggage to carry into church on Sunday morning. We know the lives we ought to live. We also know what happened this past week. Sometimes even our best intentions fail the people who count on us most.



Today Joshua gathers Israel and asks the people to make a promise.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.” We know that verse. Some of us may have it hanging in our homes. “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” It’s a good word to put on the wall. The harder thing is living it when we walk out the door. Before we get to their promise, listen to the beginning of the story.

Joshua gathers the tribes at Shechem. They’re already living in the land God promised them. They have homes and food growing around them. They’re enjoying a life earlier generations could only hope to see. God reminds them how they got there. “I took your father Abraham.” “I sent Moses and Aaron.” “I brought you out.” “I rescued you.” Over and over, God speaks about what God has done. Can you hear the grace in that! When they were enslaved, God heard their cries. Through the wilderness, God continued with them in cloud and fire. Their life together rests on gifts they could never have provided for themselves. God says, “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built.” They’re eating from vineyards and olive groves they did not plant.

When Our Promises Fail

Imagine sitting down to a meal and realizing how many people made it possible. Someone planted, tended the fields, and harvested. Someone transported the food to market. Someone prepared it. Long before we picked up a fork, others were giving their labor so we could eat.



Faith has come to us that way, too. Someone told us about Jesus. Someone prayed for us and taught us to pray. Someone opened the Scriptures and helped us hear God's promise. Many of us were carried to the baptismal font before we could speak. Just look around this Sanctuary. We worship in a place others helped provide. We sing hymns handed down through generations. Each of us could name people whose love helped carry us here.

So, before Joshua asks what the people will do, he reminds them what they have received. We need that remembering too. When we forget the gifts, we can take our blessings for granted or begin believing everything depends on us. We have to hold it together, secure the future, and prove we're good enough. That's too heavy a load to carry. Then Joshua asks, "Whom will you serve?"

When Our Promises Fail

Other gods are already among them. Joshua tells the people to put them away. Their loyalties are divided. We understand something about that as well. We trust God, then spend the night worrying as though we've been left entirely on our own. We want to be generous, then fear tells us to hold everything tighter. We want to love our neighbors, until loving a particular neighbor asks more than we expected. Money can govern our decisions. Approval of others can become something we cannot bear to lose. Our need to be right can matter more than the person standing before us. Those things claim our time, attention, and our loyalty. They promise security or control, but they can take an awful lot without delivering what they promise.

Joshua calls the people back to the God who brought them out of slavery. They answer enthusiastically. Of course we'll serve the Lord! God rescued us. God has been with us all along. "We will serve the Lord!"



Then Joshua says something that stops us dead in our tracks. "You cannot serve the Lord." Wait, what?! What a thing to say after people have just made their commitment! The following words are harder still. Joshua speaks of God's

When Our Promises Fail

holiness, judgment, and refusal to forgive their rebellion. We should let those words wash over us and trouble us at least for a minute because the harm we do is serious. Our neighbors bear the consequences of our unfaithfulness. A promise spoken today cannot excuse the damage we do tomorrow.

The people insist they will serve, but the story that follows reveals how often that promise is broken. Anyone who knows their own heart understands what I'm talking about. We confess it almost every Sunday. We have failed to love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. We mean our confession. We mean our promises afterward. Still, we return week after week with things to confess. What hope is there for people like us?

Let's bring that question to Jesus. He knows how fragile human promises can be. Peter promised to remain faithful even if everyone else fell away. Before the night ended, Peter denied knowing him three times. The disciples shared his table at the Last Supper, yet when he was arrested, they all fled.



Jesus knew the people gathered around him that last evening. He knew their fear and how quickly their courage would fail. Still, he took bread. He gave

When Our Promises Fail

thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. “This is my body, given for you.” He gave them the cup, the new covenant in his blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Listen to what Jesus gives people whose promises are about to fall apart. He gives himself. He goes to the cross bearing the sin of the world. His love carries him into the suffering and death from which his friends run. When God raises him from the dead, Jesus returns to his frightened disciples speaking words of peace. He meets them in their shame with forgiveness and then gives them work to do.

That is our hope, too. We belong to the crucified and risen Lord. He knows the truth about us and still comes to us with mercy.



Today, when we come forward to receive communion; some will come grateful; some will come worried; some will carry grief that makes ordinary things difficult. Still others will be thinking about words they wish they could take back. Into every broken heart Jesus comes and makes the promise personal. “The body of Christ, given for you.” “The blood of Christ, shed for you.” For you, with the week you’ve had. For you, with the burdens you carry. For you, who want to be faithful and need help beginning again. Our communion invitation calls this a

When Our Promises Fail

“table of promises kept.” Jesus meets us here with the life he has given for us. We receive forgiveness and nourishment for the life to which he calls us.



Then we're sent into the world. Joshua's question still matters. Whom will we serve? What will our neighbors experience through our choices? There may be an apology we need to offer. We may need to loosen our grip on money or make room for someone who is lonely. We can begin with the neighbor before us. This afternoon, that may mean welcoming someone at the Fall Festival and learning their name. This week, it may mean helping food reach a household through the FISH Choice Food Pantry. It may mean sitting with someone who cannot get out, listening to a familiar story, and reminding them they remain part of this community and a child whom Jesus loves. These are ordinary places for faithfulness to take flesh.



When Our Promises Fail

Then, when we fall short, we can tell the truth before God and our neighbors, receive God's forgiveness, and begin again. Our God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Spirit continues working in us, drawing our hearts toward Christ and opening our hands toward our neighbors.

In a few moments, we'll hear the invitation. Come and be fed. The Lord who calls you to serve knows how much you need his grace. He gave his life for you. He is risen and present among us. When our promises fail, we can return to the One whose mercy holds us. He sends us from His table forgiven, strengthened, and ready to share what we have received. This is our life of repentance. May the promises of God, demonstrated in His only Son, give us hope when we fail to keep our promises. May the faithfulness of Jesus Christ cover us with God's mercy and love so we can be free to service God by serving our neighbor. Amen.