

A Sure Promise

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Date: 01 July 2018

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[0 : 00] What we're doing today is, if you've just joined with us, we're going through a series, a four-part series on Christian foundations.

Last time I introduced the series, my name's Mark Norman, most of you know me by now, I'm sure, I'm lecturing at the George W. Hill College, and it's great to be with you again this morning.

Last time we started out by just having a look at the foundation of God's Word. But, because we live in a world, don't we, where so many people have no foundations.

It's important for us to remind ourselves of the foundations we enjoy in the Gospel as Christian people. What is it like to live in a world without real hope, without foundations?

Just imagine the world for a moment as a great spaceship. Imagine all eight billion of us living in this huge spaceship.

[1 : 06] And we're flying along through space. We're very busy. We're working in the spaceship. We've each got our job and our children and our daily grind.

And after about a hundred years, we feel a little bit uncomfortable. We don't really know why. We send a delegation to the pilot's cockpit.

We knock on the door and the co-pilot opens the door and says, what do you want? And we say, sir, we'd feel a lot more comfortable in the spaceship if we could just have an answer to a question, please. And the co-pilot says, you know, you guys, have you guys got nothing to do down there in the spaceship?

No, sir, we're working nine hour, ten hour, twelve hour days down there. Kids are driving us crazy. Well, then what's your question? Get on with it. Sir, where have we come from?

And the co-pilot closes the door and says, wait. Two minutes later, the door opens and the co-pilot says, the captain says, nobody knows. So we go back down to our big spaceship and we carry on working twelve hour days and sending the kids off to school and paying off our bonds and another 150, 200 years go by and there's this unsettling question, this sense of unease throughout the spaceship and it won't go away and we go back to the pilot's cockpit, we knock on the door and the co-pilot opens and says, you again.

[2 : 32] What do you want this time? Now, sir, we would feel a lot more comfortable if you could just answer one other question. The co-pilot says, wait, and the door closes and he talks to the captain, he opens the door and again the captain says, what's your question?

Sir, why are we here? Wait a minute, the door closes and shouting inside the captain's cockpit and the door opens two minutes later and the co-pilot says, the captain says, nobody knows.

Haven't you got enough work to do? No, sir, we're working like 14 hours a day inside this big spaceship. Go back to your work. 300 years go by and this uneasy feeling just won't go away and we send another delegation back to the cockpit, knock on the door and the co-pilot opens and says, what do you want this time?

Sir, sir, just one more question and we won't disturb you any longer. What's the question? Haven't you guys got enough work to do down there? No, sir, it's 15 hour days now. What's the question?

Sir, just ask the pilot, where are we going? Just wait, door closes and he's like arguing and shouting, going on in the cockpit and four or five minutes later the door opens and the pilot says, nobody knows.

[3 : 48] So we go back and we carry on our job and we work and we work and another 500 years go by and we, oh, you know, this uneasy feeling, the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness won't go away.

So we go back to the pilot's cockpit. We've just got to get answers. And we knock on the door, we knock on the door, nobody answers. Finally, we break the door down and there's nobody there

because the pilot and the co-pilot having been forced to consider these questions and not coming up with any answers, they've jumped out.

See, that's what it's like, isn't it? So many of our peers, South Africans, Capetonians, who are living in a world with no hope and no foundations.

So with that in mind, we're going to look at our second part in our installment on Christian foundations because we at St. Mark's believe that the gospel provides us with foundations and the gospel alone.

And what I want us to do today is to take a few minutes as we consider the foundation of God's promises. There are four foundations that we're going to be looking at over the next couple of weeks.

[4 : 57] Last time we looked at the foundation of the word. Today we're looking at the foundation of God's promises. Next week, the foundation of marriage. And then finally, the foundation of prayer.

Those are the four Christian gospel foundations that we're going to be looking at. Now today we're going to look at the foundation of God's promise. And I want us now to look at the book of Numbers. So if you've got your Bible open, let's turn to the book of Numbers. And we're going to have a look at this well-known story of the spies that are sent over the river into the land of Canaan.

And so let's turn to the book of Numbers chapter 13. And I'm going to read some verses to you there. And then we're going to have a look at the foundation of God's promises.

Now I don't have a page reference number, so you'll just have to look it up. But verse 1, So these are leaders.

[6 : 12] From the tribe of Zebulun, Gadiel, the son of Sodhi, from the tribe of Joseph, that is from the tribe of Manasseh, Gadhi, the son of Susi, and so it goes on.

These, verse 16, are the twelve men, says our writer. These are, verse 16, the names of the men who Moses sent out to spy the land.

And then Moses called Hershia, the son of Nun Joshua. By the way, he's the person on the basis of which the book of Joshua is named. Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, Go up to the Negev and go into the hill country and see what the land is and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak and whether they are few or many and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds and whether the land is rich or poor and whether there are trees in it or not.

Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes. And so they went out and they spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob near Lebo Hamath.

They went up into the Negev and came to Hebron, Ahiman, Sesai, and Talmi. The descendants of Anak were there. The Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.

[8 : 02] And they came to the valley of Eshcol and cut down from their branch with a single cluster of grapes and they carried on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs and that place was called the valley of Eshcol because of the cluster that the people of Israel cut down from there.

And at the end of 40 days, they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation and the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. And they brought back word to them, to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey and this is its fruit.

However, the people who dwell in the land are strong. And the cities are fortified and very large and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.

The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negev. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the Jordan. But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, Let us go up at once and occupy it for we are well able to overcome it.

[9 : 15] Then the men who had gone up with him said, We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we are. So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out saying, The land through which we have gone to spy it out is a land that devours its inhabitants and all the people that we saw in our great height.

And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim and we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers. And so we seem to them.

So our title today is Trusting in the Promises of God and we're going to share some comments there and some insights from God's Word. I don't know how often or whether at all you've thought about what a promise is.

Because living the Christian life is about trusting in the promises of God. And as we look at the first part of our story here in Numbers, what we learn is that the Christian life or the life of faith, whether we are Israelites or whether we are Christians, is really about believing a promise.

Did you know that? That if you are a gospel person, if you are a Christian person, you believe a promise from God because that is what the gospel is.

[10:45] Did you know that? The gospel is a promise. And there are four characteristics about God's promises in the Bible that we need to briefly ponder as we come to our text.

And the first characteristic of a promise is that God's promise comes to us in the shape of a word. The promise of God is just a word and nothing else. That's what God's promise is. Number two, the second characteristic of God's promises is that God's promises, like all promises, point to the future and not now.

So promise is a word that points the person receiving the promise to something in the future, especially when something is being promised.

That is what faith is, is it not? What is faith? Faith is trusting, in a promise. Faith is trusting that God will do something for me in the future.

[12:06] For example, in Hebrews 11 and verse 1, our writer writes, now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Romans chapter 8 verse 24, the apostle writes, but hope that is seen is no hope at all.

Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. So the second characteristic of any promise, particularly God's promises, is that they always point to the future and not now.

Now the third characteristic of God's promises is that it's never the thing promised. Because a promise calls you to look forward to the future when the thing promised comes to you.

Now that's exactly what we see here in the story in the book of Numbers. Now if you don't know much about the book of Numbers, I think Nick's done some work in the Old Testament with you, but the book of Numbers is a story of Israel having escaped, having been rescued from Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt.

[13:26] Israel was in slavery for 430 years and the Lord took pity on his people, as you know, and parted the Red Sea and Pharaoh and his soldiers tried to stop the Israelites from escaping and they drowned and God miraculously parted the waves of the sea and allowed Israel to go and as you know, God had been saying to Israel, I have a promise for you.

I will settle you in the promised land. That is the great promise. So you've got more than a million Israelites that should have, had they trusted in the Lord, they would have inherited the promise, they would have probably have gone into the land within just a few, maybe a couple of months. And instead, because they doubted God's promise, you know the story, don't you? They wandered in the desert for how long? 40 years. And yet, way back in the book of Genesis, God had already promised their ancestor, Abraham, that he would give them something in the future.

that he would give Abraham's descendants the promised land. In Genesis chapter 12 and verse 1, the Lord spoke, the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And more than a thousand years later, after Israel has come out of Egypt, 400 years of slavery and numbers. Chapter 13 from verse 1 to verse 2, the Lord spoke to Moses, that's our passage, isn't it, for this morning?

[15:11] The Lord spoke to Moses saying, send men to spy out the land of Canaan which I am giving to the people of Israel.

There's the promise, isn't it? From each tribe of the fathers you'll send a man, a spy, each one of them a chief. So what's the third characteristic of God's promises?

Well, a promise is never the thing promised. It calls you, doesn't it? It calls you to look forward to the thing promised. I will give you the land, will you trust me?

it's the most wonderful, fertile land in the area. But, they haven't got it yet. A promise isn't the thing promised.

Fourth characteristic of God's promises. We think about this wonderful story in the Old Testament. Number four, God always calls us to anticipate his promise coming true in the way we live now.

[16:19] In other words, I must trust him. If I believe in the gospel, if I believe that God really will deliver on his promise, let's look at it as New Testament Christians, if I believe in God's promise that tells me today, on this wintry Sunday morning, that Jesus will come back, that's to put it into New Testament thinking, isn't it?

If I believe that the Lord will take me to be with him in eternity, will that or will that not affect the way I live now?

The Christian life is to be lived in such a way that it reflects trust in a coming reality. In our case, the return of Jesus and living with him forever in heaven, not like all of those silly people in the spaceship.

Christians have foundations, and one of those great foundations is the foundation of the gospel promise.

If I believe in the promise, then the way I live now will anticipate the promise coming true. That's what Numbers chapter 13 is all about, in my lifestyle, you see.

[17:41] So on the basis of his promise, God gave the promise to Israel over a thousand years before this particular date. God commands Moses to spy out the land that God has already decided to give to them, and you see that in chapter 13 from verse 1 to verse 20.

Now, why does God do that? God is God? Surely God doesn't need somebody to go and spy out the land that he's already decided to give them.

Surely God knows what's in the land. God is God. God knows everything. And yet God says to Moses, well, we better find out what's going on in the land, don't you think?

Well, send out 12 spies. Now, what is God up to? Well, 12 men chosen from the 12 tribes.

What is God doing? God and there's one particular spy that I want you to focus on, because his name is going to come up a bit later, and that is Caleb, son of Jephunneh, in verse 6.

[18:53] What is God doing? Well, let's follow the story. They go and they investigate the land. It's not theirs yet. It's been promised to them.

now it's occupied by others. Why doesn't God just prepare this wonderful piece of real estate for Israel that isn't occupied?

Why doesn't God just give them this land flowing with milk and honey, and these shopping malls are ready for them, all these McDonald's everywhere, and free ice rinks, and rugby matches, and large screen televisions, and free spit-brives?

Wouldn't that be wonderful? You just have to go into the land and settle in and find yourself a double story for yourself, and it's all ready for you, and the sheets are turned down, and your lawn is already mown for you.

Why doesn't God do that? What is this land all about? Well, they go out and they spy.

[20:04] But notice the kind of questions that Moses issues to the spies, because experience will often seem to indicate to us that life circumstances are such that God's promises won't come true.

God's promises often seem to be unrealistic. So what are the kind of things that the spies are commanded to check out?

well, it's very, very interesting because they've got to specifically spy out for those things that seemingly make the land impossible for Israel to take for themselves.

Very interesting what God's up to here. So the spies, what have they got to do? Well, they've got to first of all appreciate the size of the armies of these citizens, armed to the teeth, living in the land as well.

They've got to appreciate these large fortified cities with very, very high walls. Sure, there's a lot of good things in the land. It is flowing with milk and honey, it's a great place to stay, but what about the armies?

[21:27] What about the bad gods? They're not just going to go into the land, they're not just going to settle into three storey houses where their sheets turned down for them and the butler waiting at the door.

No, not at all. They're scary things in the land too. They've got to defeat these armies of people living in the land if they want the land for themselves. And why does God do this?

Why does God choose to promise Israel a land bristling with fortified cities and enemies and giants? Even giants in the land, the spies come back and say we are like grasshoppers compared to these scary guys.

Life would be so much easier wouldn't it? for Israel if there was no opposition. They've got to check out the fortifications in the land. They've got to look at all their armies and their weapons.

If God has promised the land to Israel, however, does the power of the enemy really matter? What's God doing?

[22 : 34] do? Well, he's testing their faith, isn't he? A promise is never the thing promised. But will I as a man or a woman of faith live my life now trusting that the promise will come true in the future?

If they really believe he's promised, they will show this in their willingness to trust in the Lord's word despite the giants and the weapons and the machine guns and the walled cities and the tanks or whatever the Canaanites had.

That's our fourth characteristic of God's promises. The way we live and trust the gospel now as Christians, because the gospel is a promise, is it not? We're saved as Christians, sure, but we're still waiting for the full fulfillment of our salvation.

We get old, we get sick, we die, we're living in a broken world. We also have to face our own version of the Canaanites at work, don't we? We all have our own problems.

Our lives often seem to indicate that Jesus will not necessarily come back. Well, that's the challenge. The way we live and trust God now as Christians must anticipate our belief that his promise will come true.

[23 : 58] Now let's see what happens with the spies from verse 21 to verse 25. Well, as we saw, firstly, they come back with good and bad news from verse 26 to verse 33.

The question, of course, in our text is, how do we respond to God's promises? Well, what about the good news? Let's have a look at the good news about the land, verse 27.

And they tell everybody they come back from spying, they come back, they sneak back over the river and all the other Israelites are waiting for the spies and waiting for the news and the spies slither back over the river, no doubt, under the cover of darkness and they say in verse 27, the good news is it's fantastic.

This is a great place to settle down, flowing with milk and honey, all the McDonald's you want.

Assuming you like McDonald's, I don't really like McDonald's.

But look at the bad news because in their feedback only one verse is devoted to the good news.

You notice that? They're just like us, aren't they?

[25 : 11] From verse 28 to verse 29 it's all about bad news. Very little about the good news, it's all about the bad news and they are very, very negative about God's promises.

They're very negative about the land. Oh, we can't do it, we can't invade it, we just aren't up to it. You read the passage with insight, you realize that they are doubting the word of God, the gospel promise.

Now in their defense, of course, Israel is a nomadic people. She's not necessarily the highest trained army in the world, she doesn't have the best equipment, it's true. I mean, I would probably side with the negative guys, I'm ashamed to say.

I would probably say, listen guys, let's go live somewhere else. What chance do we have the spies feel? No chance at all and they don't hesitate to tell Moses, look at verse 31, there are giants in the land.

They won't anticipate the promise coming true because they don't have faith. except for this one guy, Caleb, what a guy. They must have thought that he was crazy.

[26 : 26] What a great man. He stands out in the text in verse 30. Just imagine everybody shaking their heads and looking at him in amazement because he quietens the people.

Now you can imagine all these people crying, the children are whining and thousands of these people all moaning at the same time and Caleb has got to shout to everybody to shut up and he says, let us go guys.

Let's go up and occupy it for a week. We can do it. We can overcome it. Wow. Either this guy is crazy or he is a real man of faith.

What a different attitude. Because he lives by faith and not by sight. It doesn't matter guys what the circumstances are.

Even if they oppose to the promise coming true. If we trust God's promises, no matter what our circumstances, God is always bigger than our enemies. Think about Nick taking out a group of people to do evangelism in an area full of people who are cynical.

[27 : 42] It's tough, eh? Going around doing evangelism. will it really make any difference? See the challenge? I won't really be fully excited and powered up to go and approach my neighbor and share the gospel with my neighbor if I don't believe in the power of the promises of God and the gospel.

The challenge is not only for the spies, but the challenge is for us. It's the same challenge. Caleb anticipates that the promise will come true even if he's got to suffer in the meantime.

He's going to trust and do what he's got to do. Let's look at those four characteristics of God's promises once more. Number one, God's promises come to us in the form of a word from God and nothing else.

We don't get an energy package to make it all happen. We don't get a special infusion of power necessarily that we can see. We don't necessarily get a hundred thousand dollars to build a new church.

Sometimes we've got no resources. We just have a word from God, a word. And number two, God's promises point to the future.

[29 : 00] That's why Christian people need to live with a certain attitude to the future. God's promises point to the future and not now. I love to quote John Lennon's song.

Remember that song by John Lennon? Some of us who are golden oldies, imagine, imagine there's no heaven, imagine if you care, imagine all the people living for today.

God's promises and there's no future. So all you're going to do is live for today. Number two, God's promises point to the future and not now.

Number three, God's promises are never the thing promise. That's the challenge. And number four, God calls us to anticipate the promise coming true in the way we live now.

God's love. I must trust him. I will involve myself in Christian ministry and Christian work even if I'm tired and irritated and not in the mood because other Christians irritate me at times.

[30 : 15] I will not give up. Thinking about giving up? Well, don't give up. God's love. Because we are people, we are men and women who believe in a certain promise and a certain future.

Let me close. Firstly, how does God respond to those who trust in his promises? Well, first of all, let's have a look at what God does with those who do not trust in his promises.

Look at verse 11. Those who don't trust his promises are barred from inheriting them. Now, that is scary stuff.

This is critically important. It's not a small thing to trust in God's promises. I can go to church and go through the motions but have no real faith in God's coming future for me.

Well, if that's the case, I won't inherit heaven. The Lord said to Moses, how long will this people despise me? We don't trust in the promises of God.

[31 : 23] We despise God. How long, says the Lord to Moses? The spies come back and they whine and they complain and the Israelites start complaining and God says, how long will they not believe in me?

Look at Numbers 14. You just go forward to the next chapter, roughly from verse 22 to verse 24. None of the men who have put me to the test and have not obeyed my voice shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers and none of those who despise me shall see it, but my servant Caleb, the crazy guy, I mean people do regard us as crazy as Christians, don't they?

But my servant Caleb, because he's got a different spirit and has followed me fully, I'll bring him to the land into which he went and his descendants shall possess it. So God decrees in this Old Testament passage to those of us who are Christians that none of these so-called people who have heard his promise but reject it will inherit the land, will inherit eternity with Christ.

Do you know that just about every single one of those Israelites, more than 600,000 of them died in the desert because they didn't believe and were barred from entering the land.

So remember as Christians there's a great application for us today and that's why it was great that Alan read out that passage from Peter at the beginning of our service. 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.

[33 : 06] Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises. promises. So Peter tells us here that a Christian is defined as a person who trusts in the promises of God.

Reminded of what Jesus says in John 14, do not let your hearts be troubled. We know those verses don't we? Trust in God, trust also in me, in my father's house are many rooms.

If it were not so, I would not have told you I'm going there to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am.

Jesus tells us today that no matter what the obstacles, despite the fact that life circumstances seem to suggest that his promises are not going to come true, why are you taking so long, Lord?

We mustn't be troubled because he's giving us a land too. And our promises, of course, are far greater than the promise that was given to Israel. God's promise is a word which looks forward to tomorrow and not now.

[34 : 29] Because a promise is never the thing promised. And this is why you have to anticipate it coming true by the way you live today.

In faith, patiently, through faith and not by sight. But you will only receive the thing promised tomorrow if you believe in the promise today.

So God's challenge and test to all of us this morning is, will you trust the gospel promise? Amen.