

## Promises you can trust

Message for Sunday, August 9, 2015  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Acts 16:12-34

### Children's Message:

Good morning! I have a story to tell you, but I can only tell it with your help.

*Ask for four volunteers. After I have chosen the volunteers, assign roles. One is "Traveling Christian", one is "First Person," who has one cup, one is "Second Person," who has a cup and a plate, and one is "Third Person, who has a cup, plate, and a blanket.*

The rest of you help with sound effects. Every time someone is walking, the group will say "Clump, clump, clump." When a person is knocking on a door, you will say "knock, knock, knock." When you hear "good news", you will say "God loves you."

Let me tell you the story now. Once upon a time there was a traveling Christian, who would walk everywhere telling people the good news. One day she came to a house and knocked on the door. When the first person answered the door, the Christian told him/her the good news. The first person believed, and noticed that the traveling Christian had been walking a long way. The first person said that he/she was thankful for the good news and that he/she wanted to help the traveling Christian. So he/she brought the traveling Christian a drink of water. *Person gives Christian a cup, pretending it has water in it.*

*Retell the story using the "second person" in the same way, except the "second person" gives the traveling Christian water and food, bringing a cup and a plate.*

*Then retell the story using the "third person" in the same way, except the "third person" invites the Christian into the home, giving food, water, and a place to sleep by giving the blanket.*

Now, of the three people, who was the most grateful for hearing the good news?

The third person! That person showed gratitude by helping the visitor.

That's what we read in today's Bible passage. Lydia was so grateful to know about Jesus that she invited her visitors to be her guests during their stay.

The good news — yes, God loves *you* too! That's great, *wonderful* news! And when we have experienced God's love, that gives us more love for others.

### Message "Promises you can trust"

The night before Jesus was taken away to be killed, he had a long talk with his disciples. He told them the parable of the vine: that he is the vine, and they are the branches; and that as long as they live in the vine, the vine enables the branches to live and grow and produce fruit. He told them to remain in his love, to continue to obey him. And at the end of that part of the conversation he gave them this promise:

**John 15:11, New Living Translation:**

**"I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!"**

In the version of the Beatitudes in Luke's gospel, Jesus promised that they would be ridiculously happy, even in the worst circumstances:

**Luke 6:22, Contemporary English Version:**

**"God will bless you when others hate you and won't have anything to do with you. God will bless you when people insult you and say cruel things about you, all because you are a follower of the Son of Man."**

This is exactly what we see happening in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were severely beaten, and then thrown into prison. What did they do? Well, what do many people do when things go wrong?

- Look around for someone to blame it on: "It's all your fault."
- Whine and complain about "poor me"?
- Curse God for their misfortune?

What did Paul and Silas do? Listen to this:

**Acts 16:25, New Living Translation:**

**Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening.**

The jail house was rocking that night! And I don't mean because of the earthquake that came in the next verse. I mean it was hopping with hymn-singing! They were grooving to gospel songs! They were praying — praising and worshipping God. They were HAPPY! They were full of JOY!

How? Why? Very simple: Jesus made a promise. They trusted him. Jesus kept his word.

You can have the same power in your life. When things look bleak, don't give up!

The very same thing happened to two lost hikers. They were following a trail, but when it started getting difficult, they decided to take what looked like an easy shortcut. Before they had gone far, though, a storm broke. Rain was pouring down so hard they couldn't see well enough to get to their intended destination. Finding a shelter under a cliff, they sat down until daybreak. But they were weary, so they both fell asleep.

What they didn't know was that they had wandered onto the grounds of a terrible, mean giant. Unfortunately, the next morning when the giant walked around his property, he found the two hikers and took them captive. They politely explained that they were on a journey and were lost and did not mean any harm, but that didn't make any difference to the giant. And, because of his size, the travellers were afraid to quarrel with him.

The giant, therefore, pushed them up to the castle. There he put them into a very dark dungeon, a filthy and foul place, sure to make them miserable. They lay there from Wednesday morning until Saturday night, without one bit of food, without one drop to drink, without any light, without any friend or visitor, with no one to ask how they were doing.

This novel was written by John Bunyan. The year was 1676. The book is about a person who becomes a Christian, and strives to follow the way of Jesus in his new life. The Christian life is seen as a pilgrimage, where the believer follows the path that leads to heaven. Thus the title: *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>1</sup>

Let's pick up the story where we left off:

The giant's name was "Despair", and his home was "Doubting Castle." When Giant Despair arose the next morning, he grabbed a nearby tree to use as a club, and went down into the dungeon. He first called them names as if they were dogs, although they gave him no cause. Then he fell upon them, beating them so fiercely that they were helpless to defend themselves, so bruised they couldn't even move. This done, the giant withdrew, leaving them to mourn in their distress. They spent the rest of the day in nothing but sighs and bitter lamentations.

The travellers had been so excited about their journey to their new home — and now they are in this seemingly impossible situation. They begin to discuss their options.

One of the pair, the one named "Christian," is terribly discouraged and cries out, "The grave would be easier for me than this dungeon!"

His partner, aptly named "Hopeful," replies:

"Who knows but that God, who made the world, may cause that Giant Despair may die, or that he may forget to lock the door, or that he may take ill? And if that opportunity should come to pass, for my part, I am resolved to pluck up my courage and try my utmost to get out from under his hand."

Later, Giant Despair returned, took them to his castle yard and showed them bones and skulls scattered around the grounds. He threatened them:

"These were pilgrims once, just like you, and they too trespassed on my grounds, just like you. When I tired of them, I tore them into pieces, just like I shall do with you in a few days."

Christian starts wondering again whether a quick suicide might be the best solution to a hopeless situation. Hopeful is able to talk him out of it, by reminding him that their troubles, however severe, are only temporary, and nothing to compare with the glory they will have in heaven.

Discouragement is bound to come to those who travel the path of Jesus. At times we may feel that we are trapped in a no-win situation.

- We feel dismay: "It wasn't like this before."
- We feel hopeless: "No one cares. Nobody asks how we're doing. Why should we continue?"
- We feel despondent: "What difference does it make? If this is all the thanks I'm going to get, it's not worth it."

Yes, old Giant Despair still stalks these parts. Despair is such a big monster, you'd think travellers would see him coming and run away. But that's not always the case. Sometimes Despair grabs you before you know it.

Bunyan's book was — and still is — popular, mainly because believers saw themselves in the story. They know what it's like to be exhausted from travelling hard, following the path that Jesus has laid out for us. Who hasn't left that trail when it started getting difficult, opting instead for what looks like an easy shortcut, only to end up getting lost? Many of us can identify with

<sup>1</sup> The idea of linking the Scripture with *Pilgrim's Progress* is from David Mains, in his book *When Life Becomes a Maze*.

someone stopping to rest in the wrong place, then waking up to realize what a mess they're in.

Once you've been captured by Giant Despair, or you're a "guest" in Doubting Castle, it's extremely difficult to get free by yourself. Just because you tell your giant "Leave me alone," doesn't mean it will. You may not have the strength to keep searching for ways of escape. You need a Hopeful to stand by you, to encourage you, even to step in and *do* something, if need be.

Maybe I should pause and ask whether you brought any discouragement with you. Did someone tell you that you weren't needed? Do you wonder, "If that's all the thanks I get, then why bother?"? Did someone treat you like a dog, and call you names, even though you've done nothing wrong? If so, do you have someone on your side to counteract those lies? Do you have a Hopeful who will support you, when you need it the most?

That's why being part of a church is so important. We support one another.

Back to the story... The pair are nervous as they wait for their final beating. Suddenly, Christian excitedly jumps up.

**"What a fool I am!" he calls to Hopeful. "Here we lie in this stinking dungeon, when we could easily walk out to freedom. I have a key in my pocket which is called Promise, which I am sure will open any lock in Doubting Castle."**

Christian and Hopeful rush to the cell door, insert the key, and easily open the lock. The door to the outside gives way just as readily. Even the iron gate at the outer fence, rusted with age, opens before them. Giant Despair hears the creaking hinges and comes running after them, but once they were on the Lord's Highway, no one could touch them.

The name of that key was Promise. It is a reference to the many promises that God has given to us in the Bible. When we are prisoners to doubt and despair, even to the point of suicide, we can recall these promises. God's Word is true, and God is trustworthy; we will find strength and hope to get up and go once again.

### Next Steps:

- Scan through the pamphlet "Where to Look in the Bible." When you find something that connects with what's going on in your life, look up that passage. Is there a promise for you? A message of hope? A challenge to be different? Whatever it is, let God's word speak to you. Pray about it, and then write down how you will respond.
- Read Acts 17 in preparation for next Sunday.