

Standing on the Promises of God: The Problem of Loose Ends

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God seems to specialize in clear beginnings, full of the promise of prosperity, and moves us through uncertain journeys towards an ending, full of mystery. There is a very definite pattern in scripture of promises, full of promise, never quite being fulfilled as God promised or at least, how we expect them to be fulfilled.

God spoke Creation into being (Genesis 1 & 2). This was a clear beginning - a prosperous start full of the abundance of life and the promise of a grand role for humanity. And then it went awry. The climax is clear in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus but again, the destination, whilst certain, is still vague. How is the promise of a New Heaven and New Earth going to come about at the End of Days? (Heaven, I'm ok with but a New Earth? It is a mystery to anyone who has insight into the necessary violence, death and decay in healthy ecosystems?)

God tells Abraham (then Abram) to leave his country, his people and his father's household and to go to a land God would show him (Genesis 12). The starting point was clear and Abram simply had to act. The destination was vague - to a land God would show him? God clearly promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15), which he never saw become a reality in his lifetime.

Moses also springs to mind. God says to Moses he is being sent back to Pharaoh to bring his people out of Egypt (Exodus 3). The calling was clear and required obedience. The journey to the Promised Land was a bit vague and demanded faith. It would involve many hardships, not least, a lifetime going round in circles in a desert. (And Moses never made it into the land of milk and honey.)

The prophets lived in constant tension with the promises of God, pending judgments, and with exile. Jeremiah uttered catchy sayings for proponents of today's Prosperity gospel, most famously, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Yet in reality he had a hard time calling God's people back to obedience in circumstances that were less than prosperous.

The early disciples of Jesus experienced this switch between a clear start and mysterious end. The starting point was clear, "Come, follow me," said Jesus. The Way after that first step of obedience was not quite so straightforward. Before the crucifixion they had been arguing about who would get the best seats next to the Messiah when he established his promised kingdom. Then Jesus got himself killed, which really confused his disciples at the time and was not the prosperous ending they had anticipated. Their experience forever after was rooted in the ongoing mystery of faith, the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus Christ: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again (as an ancient saying goes). The Way of Christ always seems to lead to the Mystery of God, whose paths are beyond tracing out.

The writer of Hebrews realized that "all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13). The writer concludes that "God had planned something better for us that only together with us would they be made perfect" (v40). Hebrews is a loose end that is not easily tied up since the fulfillment of God's promises is over the entire life-span of humanity? Now that's an uncomfortable mystery!

Our journey into the spoken promises of God therefore requires continued acts of obedience, which is independent of seeing those promises being fulfilled in our lifetime or seeing God's blessing upon our lives (in the sense of health and wealth). Our journey into the inherent mystery of God, through Jesus Christ, demands ongoing faith.

?Faith seeking Understanding? has been replaced by ?Faith seeking Prosperity? under the tenets of the Prosperity gospel. ?Faith seeking Faithfulness? is the faith that God calls us to through the full breadth of the scriptures. This type of faith can live with the limitations of our intellect to understand the unfathomable ways of God and with the loose ends of God?s unfulfilled promises. This type of faith can sustain mission and ministry under the hardest circumstances.

To the only God, who alone is all-wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever! Amen.