

Promises, Promises

Bible Promises Worksheet*

I. Guiding principles

A. What is a promise?

1. A promise is a binding pledge from one person to another to do, or not to do, some specific act. In Scripture, the central promise-giver is God.
2. The person to whom the promise is made has a right to expect the promise to be fulfilled.
3. Before anyone can “claim” a promise, however, he must be certain the promise is for him.
4. This is determined by looking closely at the details of the promise itself and applying two foundational principles of sound interpretation.

B. First principle: The correct meaning of any biblical passage is the meaning the author had in mind when he wrote it.

1. God is the principle author of scripture. He has an idea in his mind that he conveys through the ordinary conventions of language.
2. If we ignore these conventions, we can have no confidence in our conclusions.

C. Second principle: Context is king.

1. We discover the author’s intent by paying attention to language—the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs and how they relate to each other grammatically.
2. We also note the historical setting—the specific circumstances and the cultural background of the writer and recipient. That is also part of the context.

II. The Parts of a Promise

A. Who?—The particular people the promise is made to

1. The promise may be for a specific person or group, or it may be for anyone.
2. Ask the question “Am I the person the promise is made to?”
3. If the promise is to a group (e.g. Jews, Gentiles, Christians) ask, “Am I part of that group the promise is made to?”

B. What?—The particulars of the promise

1. Specify what the promise actually commits to, what will happen when the promise is fulfilled
2. Ask, “What is promised? What will happen or not happen?”

C. Why?—The requirements or conditions of the promise

1. Identify the requirements or conditions that the recipient must fulfill to qualify for the promise, often signaled by an “if/then” clause.
2. Ask, “Do I meet the requirements?”

D. When—The promise time

1. The promise may be for a particular time (“...at this time next year ...”) or for any period of time.
2. Ask the question “What is the time of the promise?”

III. Sample Exercises

A. Instructions

1. With each passage below, answer the four questions: Who? What? Why? When?
 - Who is the promise given to? Identify the person or the group.
 - What is promised? What will happen or not happen?
 - Why? Is the promise conditional, and if so, what are the conditions?
 - When is the promise for, a specific time or anytime?
2. Be sure to get your answers by looking carefully at the words of the promise itself *in light of the larger context of the passage*.
3. Keep in mind that in order to answer all the questions you may have to read the entire chapter or more to be faithful to the context.
4. In the first example I filled in the answers for you so you can see how it works.

B. John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

- Who is the promise given to?
“Whoever”
- What is promised? What will happen or not happen?”
They shall not perish.
They shall have eternal life.
- Why? List the conditions or requirements of the promise.
Believe in Him (Jesus)
- When is the promise for, a specific time or anytime?
Timeless

That was easy. Here’s another easy one (they’ll get harder).

C. Genesis 9:8-11—Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come.”

- Who is the promise given to?

- What is promised? What will happen or not happen?

- Why? List the conditions or requirements of the promise.

- When is the promise for, a specific time or anytime?

Now for a more tricky one...

D. Joshua 1:9—“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

1. This scripture was printed on the cover of biblical materials given to our troops fighting in Iraq. Do our soldiers have the right to claim this promise, and is God obligated to respond if they do? Let’s find out.
2. First, answer the four questions below by using only Joshua 1:9 in isolation from its context (the way many Christians read it). I’ll answer the first one for you.

- Who is the promise given to?
“you”

- What is promised? What will happen or not happen?

- Why? List the conditions or requirements of the promise.

- When is the promise for, a specific time or anytime?

3. Notice that if we read only Joshua 1:9, the verse seems to be an unconditional and timeless promise, to any person or persons (“you”), of God’s continued protection and help. If the “you” refers to men in the military in general, they can expect God to fulfill His promise. But we really don’t know who God is talking to simply by looking at Joshua 1:9. Instead, we need to examine the larger context to understand what is really going on. Let’s do that next.

4. Read the larger context (Joshua 1:1-9) and answer the same questions.

- Who is the promise given to?

- What is promised? What will happen or not happen?

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- Why? List the conditions or requirements of the promise.

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- When is the promise for, a specific time or anytime?

Do you see how the context changes everything?

Here are a few more passages you might want to look at and apply our four questions to. Be forewarned, what you discover about the Jeremiah 29 and 2 Chronicle 7 passages may be painful.

- John 1:12
- John 8:32 (note 8:31-36)
- John 3:18
- Romans 8:28-29
- Jeremiah 29:11 (The context begins at the beginning of the chapter).
- Jeremiah 24:4-7
- 2 Chronicles 7:14 (The full context starts in chapter 6. Make note of the details of Solomon’s prayer in 6:17-27 in light of God’s response in chapter 7.)

IV. Wrapping Up...

- We can only legitimately claim a biblical promise if it is rightfully ours.
- We know if a promise applies to us by answering four questions: Who? What? Why? When?
- If the promise is for us, and we have satisfied the conditions, and the promise is for our time, then we can count on God to keep His word.
- If not, then we must leave the promise to its rightful owner and profit from the text by learning what we can from God’s faithful dealings with them.

* Adapted from the “Understanding Scripture” syllabus, by David B. Koukl