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# How to Understand the Promises of God in Scripture

The Bible is full of God's promises, and it tells us that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ (2Co 1:20 NIV). But that doesn't mean we can apply every promise we read in Scripture directly to our lives today.

Here are principles to help you better interpret the promises of God. We've used God's promises to Abram (later Abraham) in Genesis 12 as an example to illustrate how these principles can be applied.

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*The LORD said to Abram:*

Go out from your land,  
your relatives,  
and your father's house  
to the land that I will show you.  
I will make you into a great nation,  
I will bless you,  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt,  
and all the peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.

...

The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

GN 12:1-3, 7

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## God's promises were originally made to specific people in unique circumstances.

Before considering if and how a promise might apply to us today, we should first understand how it was originally understood and applied.

## Not every promise made by God is absolute.

Some of God's promises depend solely on God, Who is always faithful. Others were made on the basis of certain conditions being met.

## Context is key to discerning the extent of a promise.

Oftentimes a promise from God will sound all-encompassing when taken from its original context, but further reading can clarify God's intended focus.

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God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and to bless him. We are included among "all the peoples on the earth" who would be blessed as a result (Gn 12:3).

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God's promises to Abraham were given on the condition that Abraham would leave his home and follow God to a land He would show him (Gn 12:1).

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While God did indeed promise to make Abraham's name great, that greatness was always tied to Abraham's relationship with the Lord. As God worked through Abraham's life, the watching world's respect for Abraham and his God grew in tandem (Gn 14:19-20).

Some promises have already been fulfilled, while others have not.

Since God's promises in the Bible were spoken into precise moments in history, some of them have already been fulfilled, while others are yet to be realized. In some instances, a promise can have more than one fulfillment.

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Generations after Abraham had died, when Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan to take possession of it, God's promise to give Abraham's descendants the land was fulfilled. However, the people's continued residence in the land was dependent on their obedience to the covenant He made with them through Moses (Jos 1:1–9).

While all of God's promises are “Yes” in Christ, many of them have been transformed in light of the gospel.

The gospel is part of the “mystery of God” revealed in Jesus Christ (1Co 2:1). As such, it is bigger and better than anything we can imagine. Many of God's promises in the Old Testament find a deeper and broader fulfillment in the New Testament.

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In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise” (Gl 3:29). Christ Himself is the blessing God promised the nations, and our claim as believers and heirs is not merely the land of Canaan. Rather, “the promise to Abraham” is “that he would inherit the world” (Rm 4:13).

All of God's promises are for His glory and our good.

Redemptive history is leading us into a world “filled with the knowledge of the LORD's glory, as the water covers the sea” (Hab 2:14). At the same time, we know that God is working “all things... together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rm 8:28). Therefore, we can be confident that every promise in Scripture will lead toward these ends, though their ultimate fulfillment is likely to be beyond anything we can ask or imagine: “What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived—God has prepared these things for those who love him” (1Co 2:9).

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“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gn 15:6). Abraham had faith, but at the time he could not have known that one of his descendants would be his Savior. All of God's promises were fulfilled in Christ, the Author of everything good, beautiful, and true.