

TAKING GOD AT HIS WORD

(2 Samuel 7:1–29)

By F. W. Tyler

Introduction

Many rifts within Christendom have occurred over the meaning of the word *believe* and its relation to the reception of eternal life. In the gospel of John, passages like 3:16, 5:24, 6:47, 11:25–27, and 20:30–31 are straightforward regarding the issue, but unfortunately, much of Christendom is steeped in a gospel brew of faith mixed with works.¹ In Acts 16:31, Paul and Silas urge the Philippian jailer, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*² What does such a startlingly simple message mean? Can evangelical Christians continue to share the good news with the same simplicity and confidence today?

Second Samuel 7 is often remembered for the Davidic Covenant, but before God's words became a point of concern for theologians, they were foremost a promise to David.³ By their very nature, promises are either true or false. The integrity of the source contributes to one's persuasion that the promise is indeed true.⁴ Although the word *believe* is not used in 2 Samuel 7, various elements of persuasion are present in this passage.

¹ In Martin Luther's day, such gospel was preached by the Catholic Church. Today, the best example of a grace-works gospel is the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. LeGrand Richards, formerly one of the cult's twelve apostles and a well-respected LDS theologian, writes, "What then is this grace Paul speaks of by which we are saved, being saved 'not of works, lest any man should boast'? . . . All these glorious gifts, and many more . . . come to us through his grace as free gifts and not of works, lest any man should boast. (see Ephesians 2:8–9) . . . Nevertheless, to obtain these 'graces' and the gift of eternal salvation, we must remember that this gift is only to 'all them that obey him.' (Hebrews 5:9.)" See LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, 2d ed., Missionary Reference Library (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1990), 265–66.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

³ 1 Chron. 17 records this event also.

⁴ The point at which a person believes a promise is the point at which he or she is persuaded the promise is true. Can a person believe something he knows to be false? Contrary to what some philosophers may believe, the answer is "No."

Context and Audience

The Lord makes His promise to David at a time when Israel and David enjoy relative peace. In these moments of ease, King David pauses for reflection.

Now it came to pass when the king was dwelling in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies all around, that the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells inside tent curtains." Then Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you."
(2 Samuel 7:1–2)

David wishes to rectify what he considers an inequity: *See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells inside tent curtains.* Nathan the prophet answers David in a general sense: "The Lord has blessed and continues to bless you and Israel; therefore, do what you please, because what you do pleases God."

The Lord's Response: A Correction

When Nathan spoke to David in verse three, he spoke not as a prophet, but as a servant of the king. The Lord corrected Nathan by commanding him to speak *the word of the Lord* to David regarding this matter.

But it happened that night that the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying, "Go and tell My servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: "Would you build a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about with all the children of Israel, have I ever spoken a word to anyone from the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'"'" (2 Samuel 7:4–7)

The content of the correction comes in the form of a pair of rhetorical questions in verses 5 and 7, and its strength is apparent in light of the lengthy instructions God gave Moses for building the tabernacle in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40. Indeed, God gave Moses very specific and

detailed directions regarding the tabernacle, but He never asked: *Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?*

A Reason to Trust

Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel. And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and have made you a great name, like the name of the great men who are on the earth. Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously, since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused you to rest from all your enemies.’” (1 Samuel 7:8–11a)

Note that in verse 8a the Lord Himself commands Nathan to speak nothing less than the very Word of God: *Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, “Thus says the Lord of hosts.”* In verse 8b God reminds David that He made him ruler over His people and then in verse 9 states that He made David a great king. The message could not be clearer: God is David’s personal God attending to the king’s every need while fulfilling His divine purpose in a lowly chosen vessel. The relationship between God and David is a vital element of persuasion of the promise that follows.

One of the king’s responsibilities is to provide peace, that his people may prosper. In verse 10 God tells David: *I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore.* Verse 11 confirms that, even though David was then resting from his enemies, this peaceable condition would not remain permanently: *[S]ince the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused you to rest from all your enemies.* God reiterates a promise given to Abraham (Genesis 15:7–21) that this specific people, *My people Israel*, will inherit the land.⁵ The text clearly identifies Israel as a people with an historic covenantal relationship with God. Nathan has now reminded King David that God is not only his

⁵ This promise and the manner in which it is reiterated to David ought to dispel any notion that God has replaced Israel with the Church.

personal God, but also the one true God of Israel. The message could not be clearer to David: “My purpose in you is very much a part of my purpose for My people.” In other words, the Davidic covenant inextricably links God’s plan for David with His plan for the nation.

The Promise

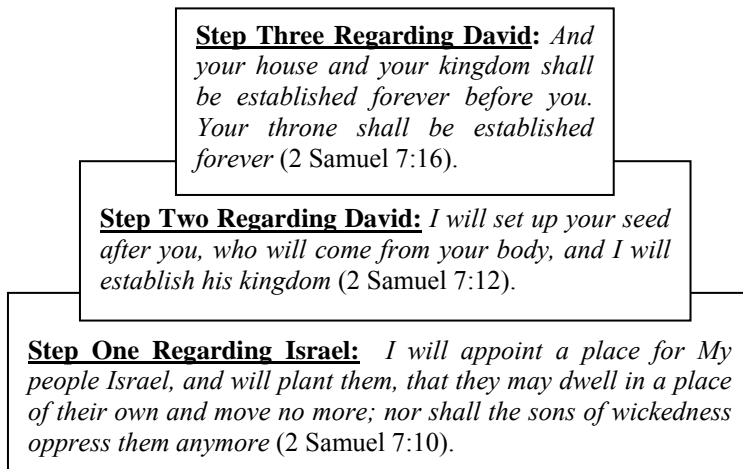
“Also the Lord tells you that He will make you a house. ‘When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.’” According to all these words and according to all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David. (1 Samuel 7:11b–17)

Verse 11b echoes what the Lord has already said, that this is His word to David: *the Lord tells you*. In verses 12 and 13 God promises David that his seed shall continue: *I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*. Seed culminates the lineage in Israel’s Messiah eternally, but the seed promise involves each link in the lineage, starting with Solomon.⁶ If God had only promised that Israel would one day enjoy the land in peace (7:10 and 11a), it would have been a wonderful confirmation of His original promise to Abraham. If God had only promised that David’s descendants would continue to rule Israel (7:14–15), this too would have been a wonderful promise. However, God promised that Israel’s Messiah would come through David’s lineage, thus making a promise of immeasurable import to David.

The Lord continues in verse 16, *And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established*

⁶ In other words, the seed promise refers to the Messianic line. No Messiah (apart from the lineage) could fulfill the promise and no lineage (apart from the Messiah) could fulfill it. In other words, it is both a lineage promise and a Messianic promise.

forever. The promise is now expanded to include an eternal house, kingdom, and throne through David's seed. Moreover, these things *shall be established forever before [David]*. The following diagram shows the aspects of the promise made by God to King David.



The three rectangles overlap, symbolizing the remarkable progression in the three aspects of God's promise to David. The content of the first step (bottom rectangle) is a refinement of God's promise to Abraham, which David would have easily recognized as such. The content of the second begins to move away from the obvious, especially when it is developed in verse 13: *He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*. Since this aspect followed the first, David could see the progression. Although the content of the third step is utterly staggering in magnitude and scope, it does not become a source of confusion, because it is linked in a carefully laid out progression to the two previous aspects of His promise. Once again, this last aspect is recognizable as a further elaboration of God's promise to Abraham.

If instead of saying in verse 3, *Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you*, Nathan had spoken the words of this prophecy on his own authority, would David have believed him? Why is it so important for God to emphasize that it is His Word being spoken to David?

- *But it happened that night that the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying,*
- *Go and tell My servant David, Thus says the Lord.*
- *Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, Thus says the Lord of hosts.*
- *Also the Lord tells you that He will make you a house.*
- *According to all these words and according to all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David (2 Samuel 7:4–5, 8, 11, 17).*

Verses 4 and 17 delineate the beginning and the end of the prophecy that Nathan spoke to David. Verses 5, 8, and 11 echo a persistent theme: *Thus says the Lord*. Clearly, the promise to David is believable only if it comes from the Lord Himself. Given its magnitude, any other source would have appeared absurd. This illustrates that knowing the source of a promise is an essential element of persuasion.

Theologians rightfully refer to God's promise to King David as the Davidic Covenant. In it, God promises David something only He can fulfill. David at the moment of hearing must either believe or disbelieve God's promise. Has David been persuaded? Will he take the Lord at His Word?

David's Response: A Prayer Reception of God's Promise

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord; and he said: "Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that You have brought me this far? And yet this was a small thing in Your sight, O Lord God; and You have also spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come. Is this the manner of man, O Lord God? Now what more can David say to You? For You, Lord God, know Your servant. For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, You have done all these great things, to make Your servant know them." (2 Samuel 7:18–21)

In verse 18, David recognizes his own unworthiness and God's unmerited favor toward him. The sheer magnitude of the promise precludes any possibility of fulfillment outside of the will of God: *Is this the manner of man, O Lord God?* In verses 19 and 20, David articulates

the basis of God's grace: *For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, You have done all these great things.*

The meaning of David's words is reflected in Romans 9:14–23. According to Paul, David and Israel are *vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory* (Romans 9:23). As king of Israel, David had relied on the grace and mercy of God repeatedly, but never had the expanse of God's grace appeared so vast as in the promise before him.

Reflection

David reflects on who God is and what He has done for Israel. Specifically, he recalls the many *awesome deeds* the Lord performed in redeeming Israel from Egypt:

Therefore You are great, O Lord God. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like Your people, like Israel, the one nation on the earth whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people, to make for Himself a name—and to do for Yourself great and awesome deeds for Your land—before Your people whom You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, the nations, and their gods? For You have made Your people Israel Your very own people forever; and You, Lord, have become their God. (2 Samuel 7:22–24)

The Exodus from Egypt, including the parting of the Red Sea, was the greatest sign to David and his contemporaries. However, this does not preclude David's many miraculous victories on the battlefield from also being signs to him (e.g., before becoming king, David miraculously defeated Goliath).

For the Church Age, the greatest sign is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This sign, along with all the other signs Jesus performed, vindicates and demonstrates the truth of Christ's promise of eternal life.⁷ King David's faith was based on signs, because

⁷ John 2 makes it clear that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are the eighth and greatest sign of the apostle John's account. See John Niemelä, "The Message of Life," *CTS Journal* 7 (July–September 2001): 2–20, for a helpful and insightful exposition of the eighth sign.

the God of his fathers is true in both His Word and deed.⁸ Sadly, many commentators view faith that is based on signs as temporary or spurious.

As king, David reflects on how God manifested His will in making Israel His people: *For You have made Your people Israel Your very own people forever; and You, Lord, have become their God.* God has not hidden His will for Israel, but has openly covenanted Himself to His people in accordance with His designs. Again, the Lord's promise to David is consistent with His will for Israel and David.

Rejoicing in God's Promise

Now, O Lord God, the word which You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as You have said. So let Your name be magnified forever, saying, "The Lord of

⁸ One of the disheartening features of many commentaries on the gospel of John is their presumption that faith based on signs is spurious or temporary. Neither King David nor the Lord Jesus shares this presumption. Consider John 5:31–36: *If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.* Vv. 31–35 make it clear that John the Baptist's witness was not only true, but sufficient for a person to believe in Christ. V. 36 indicates that Jesus' works (signs) are a greater witness than John's witness. The signs must be a more than sufficient testimony of Christ for a person to be saved. Vv. 37–40 only confirm the significance of the signs: if Jesus draws a comparative inference between John the Baptist's witness and His works or signs, He makes no such distinction between His signs and the witnesses of the Father and the Word. If signs as a witness are on par with the Father and the Word, the notion that faith based on signs is spurious is preposterous. After all, who would ever imagine that faith based on the witness of the Father or the Word is spurious. In John 10:37–38, Jesus again highlights the importance of His works in relation to believing in Him: *If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.* Likewise, in 2 Samuel 7 and indeed throughout the Old Testament, signs are an essential element of persuasion used by God in dealing with His people.

hosts is the God over Israel.” And let the house of Your servant David be established before You. For You, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, have revealed this to Your servant, saying, “I will build you a house.” Therefore Your servant has found it in his heart to pray this prayer to You. And now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are true, and You have promised this goodness to Your servant. Now therefore, let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You; for You, O Lord God, have spoken it, and with Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever. (2 Samuel 7:25–29)

Although the word *believe* appears nowhere in this passage, obviously, David believed God’s promise to him. Otherwise, how could he rejoice in that promise? Indeed, David is persuaded: *Now, O Lord God, the word which You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as You have said.* In verses 27–28 David’s rejoicing reveals his reasons for believing: *For You, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, have revealed this to Your servant, . . . You are God, and Your words are true, and You have promised this goodness to Your servant.* David takes God at His Word. He is convinced that God’s promise is true.

Would David’s emotional state or his prayer make his faith genuine and seal the promise?⁹ Absolutely not! David has already recognized his unworthiness to receive such a promise. His jubilant prayer of thanksgiving sheds light on how he was persuaded: 1) The promise was made by God Himself. 2) God’s relationship to both David and Israel has caused David to ponder the nature of God’s grace. 3) David recalls specific deeds, or signs, performed by God on David’s and Israel’s behalf, along with the Lord’s consistent and open manifestation of His will for Israel and David. These three reasons reveal a Lord whom one can trust completely—a Lord who always does what He says, being consistent in His purposes for His people. The Lord is infinitely capable of fulfilling what He has promised to His servant David, and the king is persuaded of the truth: he believes! What

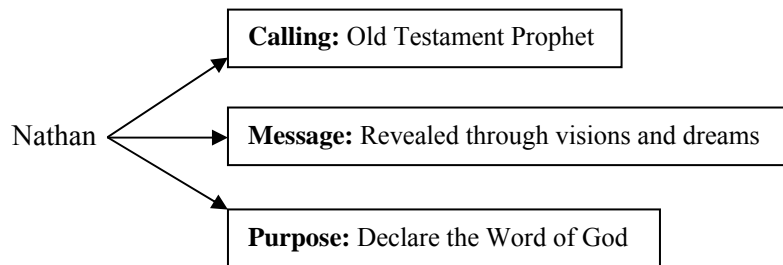
⁹ Some theologians contend that the personal commitment of emotion or affection is a necessary aspect of biblical faith. For a contemporary example, see R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 72.

2 Samuel 7, and especially verse 28, demonstrates is plain: to believe God's promise is to be persuaded that it is true.¹⁰

Relationship to Evangelism

Although Nathan is an Old Testament saint, we can make a comparison between his calling as a prophet and the Christian's calling as a sower of seed.¹¹

The following diagrams may help in comparing the two. Although Nathan is a believer, he is not a Christian, nor are church-age believers of this generation prophets. However, just as God called Nathan to proclaim the Word, so too God has called church-age believers to proclaim the Word.¹²

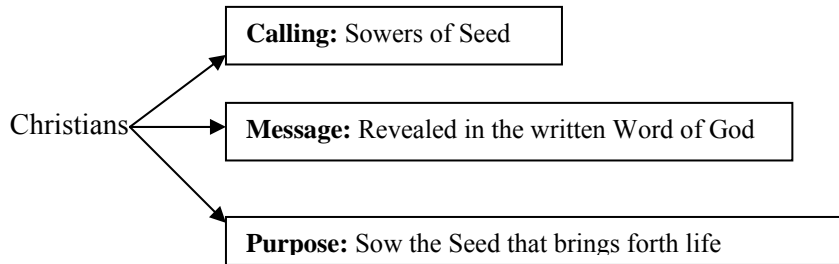


The Lord called Nathan as a prophet to declare a specific message to King David. God revealed the message to Nathan in a vision or a dream. Nathan then declared the Word of the Lord as a prophecy.

¹⁰ V. 28 also reveals a profound change in David's and Nathan's attitudes. In v. 3, Nathan was not functioning in his capacity as a prophet, but was speaking as a servant to the king. For his part, David showed a spiritual lethargy in pondering a solution to what he perceived to be an inequity, without personally consulting the Lord. His query of Nathan could easily have been misunderstood. Was he asking Nathan as a prophet to reveal the Lord's will to him? Or was David merely interested in the wisdom of one of his key advisors? After hearing God's promise to him, David is no longer filled with spiritual lethargy.

¹¹ Matt. 13:3–23; Mark 4:2–20; Luke 8:4–15.

¹² Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; 2 Cor. 5:19; 2 Tim. 4:2.



The Lord calls Christians to be sowers of the seed of God's Word both among believers and unbelievers. The seed is a specific message already revealed in the written Word that brings forth life in the person who hears and believes it. For the individual without life, the seed is the opportunity to receive the gift of life. For those who have life already, the hearing of the gospel is an encouragement to have life more abundantly by sowing the seed and being rewardable servants (John 10:10).

In sharing the promise of eternal life with others, Christians can learn from the example of God's promise to King David.

1) *Share the promise of eternal life.*¹³ The One who gives eternal life promises to do so for all who believe in Him. John 6:47 is one of the clearest expressions of the promise: *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.* The moment an individual hears the promise, he either believes or disbelieves it. The moment he is persuaded the promise is true, God, according to the measure of His good work, gives him eternal life.

2) *Do not obscure the source of the promise.* The promise of eternal life is so vast and magnificent that it is believable only if it comes from God Himself. Believers too often obscure the true source of the promise with their personal testimony or gospel tracts, leaving the impression that a promise is based upon their personal integrity. Only the Lord God can promise eternal life, because He alone has procured it through the

¹³ See Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ," *JOTGES* 13 (Autumn 2000): 3–12 and 14 (Spring 2001): 9–18. If one must define the word *gospel* as a technical term, then it ought to be defined as God's promise of eternal life. John 6:47 is a wonderful example of the elegant simplicity of this good news.

crucifixion and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, when sharing the good news, believers should remind their hearers, *Thus says the Lord*, and show them the Scriptures where God reveals the good news of eternal life.

3) *Share the miraculous signs that vindicate the Lord's character and the truthfulness of His promise.* John wrote his gospel, in part, explicitly to share God's promise of eternal life with the unbeliever. He organized his gospel around eight signs (John 20:30–31). The promise of eternal life is supernatural; therefore, the One anointed to bring life to this world, the One making the promise, must also be supernatural! Jesus refers to His crucifixion and resurrection as a sign in John 2. Not only is this event the means by which Christ fulfills His promise of eternal life, but it is also a miraculous sign designed to persuade of the truth of His promise.¹⁴

4) *Know that God is responsible for persuading of the truth of His promise.* Believers often feel they have fallen short in sharing their faith when the people they share with do not appear to believe their message. A better reflection of success is whether the believer shared the promise of eternal life accurately and clearly. If the unbeliever has understood who makes the promise of eternal life and has heard of the signs designed to persuade of the truth of His promise, a Christian should not force the issue, but instead rest in God's ability to persuade. In Revelation 21:6 and 22:17, Jesus says, *I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. . . . Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.* The one who hears the promise of life drinks either freely or not at all.

David received and reflected on God's promise. In this manner, God persuaded David that His promise was true. What good work did David do? Absolutely none! As Christians sow the Word, those who receive God's promise of eternal life may or may not reflect on God and His promise. They may or may not be persuaded of the truth, but what

¹⁴ Regarding his evangelism of the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote, *For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2). As both the means and the greatest sign, the crucifixion and resurrection is the ideal for sharing how Christ is able to promise life in His name. The work of the cross—Jesus' atonement, redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation—is a powerful element of persuasion.

remains is an opportunity for them to take God at His Word, without relying on their own good works.

Conclusion

The clarity of Paul and Silas's words to the Philippian jailer is the result of the earnest, straightforward nature of God's promise of eternal life. The promise will never change, nor will the simplicity of taking God at His Word. Just as God persuaded King David of the truth of His promise, so He persuades those lost and without hope of the truth of His promise of eternal life. Despite the best efforts of cults and others to promote a gospel of works, God keeps it plain: *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved* (Acts 16:31).

—End—

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