

PROMISES UNFULFILLED

CHAPTER SEVEN: *Francis Anfuso*

There is no greater fraud than a promise not kept.—Gaelic Proverb

A couple of years ago, I was playing golf with a friend named Danny when he received a phone call that his stepfather had lost his fight with cancer. We immediately stopped our game and, while driving away, Danny told me this story.

His step-dad was the only man in his childhood he believed in. The abandonment and neglect of his biological father had left Danny completely untrusting of men. It would take his step-dad many painstaking years to overcome the hurts his bio-dad had inflicted.

One of these hurts happened when he promised to take Danny golfing. He adored and missed his father as a young boy, especially after his parents divorced. This made time with dad even more desirable. One day, his dad called promising to take Danny golfing. The moment he hung up the phone Danny ran to the garage to retrieve his clubs. He then spent what seemed like the rest of the night shining each club, one by one. When he finished, Danny set them by the front door so he wouldn't delay his dad once he arrived.

The next morning the 10-year old waited for his dad, but he never showed up, called, or ever apologized to his son for his broken promise. Danny was devastated. It made an indelible wound on his fragile soul. Now, with the death of his step-dad, the only loving father he had ever known, Danny put in perspective the depth of his loss by comparing him to his natural father.

Thirty years later, you could still feel the raw emotion of that one unfulfilled promise in the heart of a child. I will never forget his tear-filled eyes as he recounted the story.

What captures our imagination more than a promise?

What crushes our hopes more than a promise broken?

Broken promises overwhelm us with disappointment. Hitting the ground with disintegrating force, the breach of trust leaves us bewildered and broken-hearted. Perhaps nothing that happens in life jolts us to our core quite as much as a promise unfulfilled.

THE POWER OF A PROMISE

Ah, springtime! Anticipation of something extraordinary is awakened. In spring, new life is everywhere. Flowers bloom with the fragrance of new beginnings.

A promise is much like springtime. We believe again, letting down our guard to await a return on our dreams. We have each seen fruit that delights our senses. We have each tasted the blessed hope we so desperately long for.

Each of us is blessed when we see the first buds of promise begin to bloom. But a dying dream cuts to the very core of our being. The unthinkable has happened. Divorce...bankruptcy...disease...unfaithfulness...adultery...dishonesty, they each gouge our heart and leave us lying listless.

No promise is needed for the mundane. It must be exceptional in order to merit a level of commitment called a *promise*. At times, in order for us to buy in at this highest level of allegiance, a promise is needed; a vow is required; an oath must be made. The event is so special, people are invited to the ceremony: a marriage, a dedication, a baptism, or a grand opening. Champagne hits the hull and we are off and running.

When, on occasion, we realize our dream cruise is aboard the Titanic, our hopes plummet to the bottom of the sea.

Some of us know people who have celebrated 50 years or more of marriage. The devotion of these couples is often so rare it evokes thunderous applause.

In the business community, well-established companies print the founding year in their advertising to let people know, “We’ve been around for a while!” “We’ve weathered storms and will be here for you.” “You can count on us!” “We will keep our promises!”

This is partly why the ministry for men, *Promise Keepers*, was so life changing. In an age of broken commitments and shattered covenants, men rose up to fight to fulfill their vows, invoking a springtime of hope to the barren landscape of infidelity and divorce. Wives were elated to send their husbands. I know mine was. “Go get ‘em honey! Come back a renewed man, ready to keep the oath you made to me and our children!”

I left commissioned and returned resolute.

On our wedding day way back in 1975, I knew well the instability of my relational commitments prior to becoming a Christian. Chronic unfaithfulness, coupled with the solemnity of my marriage vows, inspired me to write and sing a song to my beautiful wife, Suzie, on our wedding day. The chorus proclaimed: “Suzie I won’t fail you, have no fear. No, Suzie I won’t fail you, until our Lord He does appear.” I sang to my life-partner with a slight level of trepidation. Now, decades later, I am humbled and blessed beyond measure to have been able to fulfill this pledge to the bride of my youth.

NUMB AND NUMBER

Broken promises are the open wound hindering the next generation from making commitments. The upshot of this chronic unfaithfulness, modeled by parents and leaders, has left masses emotionally numb to the very concept of making vows and promises of any kind.

They’ll cohabit, but will not marry.

Visit, but do not commit.

Experience, but will not fully surrender.

In the end, restrained love isn't love at all. It is conditional and muted by fear and uncertainty. A calloused heart remains unable to feel as God intended.

The Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when dreams come true, there is life and joy." (Proverbs 13:12) How many, crushed by disappointment, have lost hope that dreams or promises will ever be fulfilled? Languished with shattered hearts, the faithfulness they long for stays out of reach, unless their hearts are healed and their hope is restored.

Such is the experience of millions who imagined the best, but experienced the best. Words once dreamed of, "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part," now serve as haunting reminders of what will never be. Crushed under the weight of irreconcilable differences, past assurances are now daggers to the heart, remnants of a shattered bond.

The distrust in broken church relationships can replicate the pain suffered in a shattered marriage. Once the honeymoon was over, so was the commitment.

Dropped again.

Left hanging.

We hoped. We believed. We trusted.

In the end, we were devastated.

In many cases, this was not the beginning of sorrows, it was the sequel.

Children often replicate the life-altering ritual of promises broken. Kind will beget kind, until at some miraculous future moment the cycle of pain is broken. If it is not, then these vulnerable ones will enter a church environment, prime candidates for further wounding.

Expectations will be dashed...misunderstandings will occur...offenses will come.

Either we conquer the battle of past poor responses, or we will be jolted yet again with “the left-hook from hell.”

Nearly one in four *Church Wounds Survey* responders said they were hurt because of promises unfulfilled. One older man wrote: “Leaders set promises and implications before people that didn’t materialize.” adding, “It’s easy for leaders to mistake their personal ministries for ‘church.’ Everyone becomes part of his or her personal mission, which may be mistaken with God’s mission.”

Whether on a grand, church-wide level, or in the course of daily interpersonal relationships, promises made and commitments extended, may be yanked at the most unsuspecting moment.

PRESUMPTUOUS PROMISES

Rarely do people make promises intending to break them. At a moment of unbridled inspiration, we launch a hope-filled sentence, pledge a lofty goal, sign a legal document, or make an enthusiastic commitment that others view as an opportunity to hang their dreams on. “I’ll be there for you!” “We’ll do it together.” Like buying into an investment when expectations are high, we never anticipate the crash. Yet, the unthinkable does, on occasion, show up and plans are either changed or completely dismantled.

When it comes to speculative future events, we must be careful to not attach people’s hopes to our capacity to fulfill them. “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain.” (Psalm 127:1) God is the ultimate finisher, yet He will only commit to finish what He alone authors. We cannot send God the bill for our presumptions.

James, the brother of Jesus cautions, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” (James 4:13–17, NKJV)

If our promise to others is birthed out of pride or arrogance, it is sin, and will only bring a harvest of pain. *Any* promise we make and do not fulfill can stumble one of God’s precious ones, bringing reproach to Jesus’ name. Forgiveness must be asked and, if needed, restitution should be made.

PROMISES FULFILLED

God never intended promises to be the saboteur of relationships! In fact, promises and covenants are meant to enhance and protect relationships. The *Great Promise Maker* is also the *Eternal Promise Keeper*. “God is not a man, that He should lie. He is not a human, that He should change His mind. Has He ever spoken and failed to act? Has He ever promised and not carried through?” (Numbers 23:19) The answer to these rhetorical questions is a resounding, “Never!” God is the personification of faithfulness. “[He] has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ (Hebrews 13:5b, NIV)

The flawless faithfulness of God is that sure tower that stands ever ready to shelter us. “Praise the LORD who has given rest to His people Israel, just as He promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises He gave through His servant Moses.” (1Kings 8:56)

God cannot fail, and He won’t fail you!

We are able to fully rest in the faithful arms of Jesus when we are persuaded He truly is the *Great Promise Keeper*. He is the One who pledges and fulfills, who starts and finishes. He never leaves us hanging—abandoned and heart-broken. Frankly, we do it to ourselves.

A seasoned Christian, bruised by many church wounds, which included unfulfilled financial promises, wrote in his survey: “My church wounds are overshadowed by the wounds of Jesus! The Lord does not waste any wound. He uses ALL to reach others with His love and grace.”

Though a natural reaction to such a wounding would be anger, this man chose two supernatural responses instead. First, he disciplined his soul to focus on the sufferings of Jesus, realizing His Savior had suffered far more than he.

Secondly, over time, the Lord revealed the true value of all the pain this man had been through. It prepared him as a vessel capable of loving and caring for others. God was then able to use this humbled man to model the grace that is available to all who truly trust in Him.

Though this Christian’s extraordinary perspective provides a simple and concise description of how to pristinely respond to the greatest offenses in life, it requires both the miracles of faith and forgiveness in order to arrive at such a wise and generous place.

When the patriarch Joseph lay in prison, the victim of yet another injustice, a divine opportunity presented itself. He made an appeal to someone capable of ending his plight, Pharaoh’s chief butler. Like Joseph, the butler had fallen upon hard times and had been imprisoned himself.

Joseph interpreted the butler’s dream that described how Pharaoh would soon free him. When the dream came true, and the butler was about to be released, Joseph entreated him to intercede on his behalf before Pharaoh. The butler said he would, but forgot. (Genesis 39 and 40)

Two long years went by. Joseph’s focus became guarding his heart from becoming bitter. (Proverbs 4:23) He didn’t want an unfulfilled promise to become a stumbling block, keeping him bound in the disgruntled world of disappointment. Instead, he purposed to view it as a stepping-stone, taking him deeper into the will and purpose of God.

Each of us has the same choice today.

May we arrive sooner than later at the mature place of rest and trust what our father Abraham found so comforting, “Abraham never wavered in believing God’s promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was absolutely convinced that God was able to do anything He promised.” (Romans 4:20–21)

In the end, there are only two kinds of people inhabiting this troubled planet. Some live as mere victims of the unfaithfulness of others. And some, who view life from God’s perspective, can grow to become people who learn, through much pain and struggle, to trust the One whose promises never fail.

The choice is ours to make.

Choose wisely.