

KEEPING BROKEN PROMISES

Have you ever made a solemn promise to God, only to find yourself breaking it just a few days later? Well, then join the long list of people who have done exactly that over the centuries. Now, let us dig a little deeper into this topic.

Steve was an unhappy man who found himself getting angrier and angrier about his life as the years went by. Secretly, he knew he had a problem, but he wasn't about to admit it to his family. Instead, he made them pay the price for his frustration, and

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he took it out on them by becoming violent with the people who were closest to him.

Then, when it was over, he would leave the house with his head down, because he couldn't handle the shame of how he had just treated his family. In his heart, he knew he was wrong, and so with tears burning his eyes, as he drove down the highway, he whispered a hoarse promise under his breath, "Man, I'll never do that again!"

And when he said it, he meant it – but just a week later, after battling a tough day at work and riding on not enough sleep, he did it again. He yelled at his wife and shouted at the children without provocation, and again, he found himself secretly hanging his head in shame.

And then there was Phoebe who secretly knew that her drinking habit was becoming a problem, and one night, after having

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too much to drink, she found herself going way too far with a man she hardly knew, and when she woke up the next day, she hated herself for it.

“That’s it!” she said, “I’m never going to drink again!” And she took all the bottles in her house and poured the contents out in the back yard. But sure enough, a couple of weeks later, when some of the girls at work got together on payday, she couldn’t help herself. One drink led to another, and eventually, one of her friends had to call a taxi for her because she wasn’t capable of doing it herself.

So, what actually happened to these people? Why couldn’t they keep a simple promise to themselves to stop doing something they knew was destructive behaviour? What is it about our human nature that gives us such terribly short memories and makes us

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so bad at keeping our promises?

I can't help but think about the way church attendance shot through the roof after the World Trade Centre collapsed in 2001. Millions of frightened people suddenly became very determined to be on a right footing with God. Prominent ministers got excited, because it promised to become a major North American revival, but within two short months, it was over. Church attendance went right back down to where it was before the terrorist attacks.

And, of course, the question is “why?” Why did the revival only last a couple of months? Didn't the people, who suddenly went back to church, actually mean it?

For the most part, I'm convinced they did – at least for the time being. Fear was enough of a motivator to make them very religious, but it wasn't enough to keep them that way.

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When the planes stopped dropping out of the sky, and life started to go back to normal, they quickly forgot all their promises, and went back to the way things were.

POWERLESS TO CHANGE OUR SINFUL NATURE

We spend a lot of time as self-sufficient human beings talking about will-power and the strength of sheer determination, and in some arenas, like the world of business or politics, there's something to be said for that. But in the world of faith, will-power simply isn't enough, because most temptations are bigger than the will-power you can generate all by yourself.

Take, for example, the case of the Israelites in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, they have just been delivered from Egyptian slavery, they have seen the hand of God

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part the Red Sea and drown the Egyptians, and they have seen the fiery presence of God come down on the top of Mount Sinai. And while they are caught up in the spectacular wonder of the moment, they make a solemn promise to God. Well, actually, they made it several times, and the first time was before God appeared on Mount Sinai. Listen to this – Moses has just spoken with God, and he's bringing a report to the Israelites:

“And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord had commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord.”
Exodus 19:7,8

Now let me ask you a question: when the

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Israelites made that promise to God, do you suppose they meant it? I believe they did, and I think it was an easy promise to make after they had followed God's presence out into the desert. In fact, they made the same promise a couple more times, after Moses had received a copy of the Ten Commandments:

“And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do.” Exodus 24:3
And amazingly, they make the same promise again a couple of verses later:

“And he (that's Moses) took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient.” Exodus 24:7

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I think that when the Israelites made these promises, they meant to keep them. But the rest of the book of Exodus, and the rest of the Bible, for that matter, is the sad record of God's people breaking these promises over and over again. And just like you – and just like me – they found themselves doing the things they had promised God they would never do again.

So, what's the problem? Is it that we don't mean it when we promise to stop committing a certain sin? I don't think so. I think we mean it – but I also know that we don't have what it takes to keep that kind of promise.

You see, the problem of sin is more than just keeping a list of dos and don'ts. The Bible tells us, in 1 John 3:4, that sin is the transgression of God's moral law, and so there's no question that dos and don'ts have

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a role to play, but the problem of sin runs much deeper than that.

Sin is not just something we do, it's also something we are. If sin is just something we do, then God could have solved the whole problem by just eliminating the laws that we were breaking. But instinctively, we all know there's more to it than that. The Bible tells us, in Isaiah 59:2, that our sins have separated us from God. And the Bible also says, in Jeremiah, that we are powerless to change our sinful natures.

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.” Jeremiah 13:23

According to the Bible, you can no more change your sinful nature than you can change the colour of your skin. If sin was

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just a matter of breaking the rules, all you would have to do is stop breaking them, and everything would be fine. But there's something about the human heart that has been changed by sin - so much so that we find ourselves powerless to do what we know we should be doing. Note something else that Jeremiah said just a few chapters later:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Jeremiah 17:9

Now, let me emphasise something again: breaking God's law really is sin, and there's no question that God expects you to keep it. But the sin problem runs much deeper than mere behaviour; it has trickled down into the very essence of our being, so that everything we do is infected by sin. Even the good things we do, according to the Bi-

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ble, are tainted by sin.

“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.” Isaiah 64:6

According to Isaiah, even the good things we do – which he calls our “righteousnesses” – are filthy rags. Sin has infected us so thoroughly that it completely contaminates anything and everything we do. Sin has perverted our thought processes. It has altered our appetites. It has misaligned our priorities. And most importantly, it has taken our focus off God and put it squarely on ourselves.

And that’s why we sometimes find ourselves completely unable to walk away from a sinful habit. We know that cigarettes are

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killing us, but we can't seem to break free. We know that our temper is ruining our family, but we can't seem to lengthen our fuse. We know that a foul mouth or gossiping tongue is doing damage to people we love, but we can't seem to help ourselves.

So, what in the world are we supposed to do? First of all, take comfort in the fact that you are not alone, and that everybody struggles with something. The Bible says, in the book of Corinthians, that you have never experienced a temptation that somebody else hasn't experienced.

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man." 1 Corinthians 10:13

In other words, if you're going through it, you can be sure somebody else has gone through it, and so I'll let you in on a lit-

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tle secret: some of the biggest names in the Bible have struggled with the same temptations you're struggling with. Moses had a hot temper. David struggled with lust. Abraham lied to save his skin. Peter struggled with taking a stand in public. Noah had a very bad encounter with alcohol, and most of the disciples proved to be cowards when it came to standing by Jesus.

The whole Bible is full of people – just like you. And all through the Bible, God refused to leave people suffering where they were. If you are willing to be used by God, and you are willing to let Him make the changes in your life, you'll be amazed at how He can turn things around.

Take a look at a passage written by the Apostle Paul as he struggled with the tendency to do the wrong thing even though he wanted to do what was right. It's found

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in Romans chapter 7:

“I find a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is my members.” Romans 7:21-23

Now, if you're a human being, that should sound awfully familiar, because Paul is describing the very thing that most of us struggle with – that tendency to do what's wrong even when we don't really want to. And in the next verse, he cries out with an anguish that most habitual sinners have experienced:

“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” Romans 7:24

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Let me ask you a question. Have you ever prayed that same prayer? Have you ever thrown up your hands in frustration because you can't seem to stop doing something you know is wrong? Consider carefully the answer that Paul gives in the very next verse:

“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 7:24,25

No matter what the self-help books might tell you, and no matter how much will-power you think you have, you're never going to solve the problem apart from Jesus Christ. You might have enough will-power to stop a certain behavior, but you don't have what it takes to give your heart a complete overhaul. You might be able to stop doing something wrong, but you can't change

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your sin-contaminated heart. For that, you need divine intervention.

Let me show you something really interesting that you may have never noticed in the Bible - the promises that Israel made to God, and how they were completely unable to keep them. If you take a close look at the life of Jesus, however, you'll notice something absolutely remarkable: Jesus succeeded exactly where Israel failed.

In fact, much of the life of Jesus is an amazing repeat of the experience of the Israelites in the desert. In the book of Exodus, the Israelites are called out of Egypt, they cross the Red Sea, and then they are subjected to 40 years of wandering in the desert, where time and time again, they completely failed when tempted.

Now take a look at the life of Jesus Christ.

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Before His ministry began, He was taken to Egypt by His parents to save Him from the persecutions of Herod, and then, just like Israel, God called Him out of the land of Egypt to serve His purpose. In fact, there's this passage in the book of Hosea where God speaks about the nation of Israel as if it were His son.

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.” Hosea 11:1
Now, what's amazing is that Matthew refers to this same passage when the Bible speaks about Jesus' stay in Egypt:

“And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying Out of Egypt have I called my son.” Matthew 2:15
The whole experience of Israel was meant to point us specifically to Jesus Christ! Not only did Jesus come out of Egypt, but He

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was baptised before His ministry began, and then He spent forty days - not thirty-nine or forty-one - but exactly forty days in the wilderness, where He was tempted by the devil.

Now that simply can't be a coincidence. In the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 10, Paul compares the crossing of the Red Sea to a baptism, and you'll remember that right after the Red Sea, the Israelites spent 40 years in the desert, facing temptation after temptation.

And of course, the whole point is this: Israel failed miserably, but Jesus succeeded on every point. The Bible makes this all-important point:

“Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profes-

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sion. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:14-16

As it turns out, the answer to your sin problem is remarkably simple. You’re never going to stop doing that thing you wish you could quit all by yourself. You’re going to have to go to somebody with experience for help, and that Somebody is Jesus Christ. He succeeded where Israel failed, and He succeeded where you’re failing, too. And the promise of the Bible is this: If you just take the problem to Him, and admit that you need His help, He not only forgives you, but He gives you His spotless track record as a gift.

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In the books of heaven, where it could be written, “he succumbed to sexual temptation,” or “she succumbed to alcohol again,” you’ll find an interesting entry; as far as God is concerned, it’s as if you never sinned.

But that’s not the only thing God does for you – not by a long shot. Not only does He forgive you for what you did in the past, but He also gives you a new heart so that you can start building the strength – by the power of the indwelling Christ – to resist temptation. We read in the book of Corinthians:

“Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17

A new creature isn’t just somebody with

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a forgiven past, it's also somebody with a brand-new future. It's somebody who has a new strength infused into the soul that gives power to walk through life following the footsteps of Jesus. It's somebody, according to the book of Hebrews, who not only has all his or her sins forgiven, but also has the laws of God written right in the heart.

There's a reason that Jesus said, "Go and sin no more," after He forgave the woman caught in adultery. It's because He not only forgives us, He gives us the strength to begin a brand-new life. That doesn't mean you're never going to make a mistake again – in fact, the Bible provides reassurance for Christians who find themselves struggling with sin. But it does mean that you'll be on the path to being recreated in the image of Jesus, and it does mean you don't have to be a slave to your habits any more.

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The important thing is to walk by faith, and cling desperately to Jesus. Begin your day with Him, end your day with Him, and cling desperately to Him at every moment in between. Claim His amazing promises, like this one, found in 2 Peter:

“According as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue.” 2 Peter 1:3

You see, not only does God call us to “glory and virtue,” but He also promises to give us everything we need for a life like that. In your heart, you know you’d like to live that kind of life if you were given a chance.

Well, that chance is right now. Whatever it is that you’re struggling with, let go of it. I know you’ve tried a million times to quit,

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and it's never worked. But giving it to God is different. In the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, Paul writes something that is absolutely breathtaking when you stop to think about it:

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:57

God is saying you don't have to struggle with it any more. As a gift, He wants to hand you victory. All that He requires is that you believe He's given you victory, and start living for Him. And don't let the devil convince you that God didn't really set you free, because it's one of his favourite lies.

When you feel your temper flaring, remind yourself that God has given you victory over that. When you don't think you can withstand sexual temptation, remind

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yourself that God has made you victorious over it. And then live your life that moment, knowing that it's true. Remind the devil that he's been defeated by the blood of Christ, claim the promise of God's power, and make the right choice – because thanks to Jesus, you really do have a choice.