

# BELIEVING GOD

TWELVE BIBLICAL PROMISES  
CHRISTIANS STRUGGLE TO ACCEPT

R. C. SPROUL JR.



*Reformation Trust*  
PUBLISHING

A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES • ORLANDO, FLORIDA

Believing God: *Twelve Biblical Promises Christians Struggle to Accept*

© 2009 by R. C. Sproul Jr.

Published by Reformation Trust

a division of Ligonier Ministries

400 Technology Park, Lake Mary, FL 32746

[www.Ligonier.org](http://www.Ligonier.org) [www.ReformationTrust.com](http://www.ReformationTrust.com)

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Reformation Trust. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Cover design: Kirk DouPonce, [www.DogEaredDesign.com](http://www.DogEaredDesign.com)

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked “NKJV™” are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked “KJV” are taken from The Holy Bible, King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sproul, R. C. (Robert Craig), 1965-

Believing God : twelve biblical promises Christians struggle to accept / R. C. Sproul Jr.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-56769-112-2

1. Promises--Biblical teaching. I. Title.

BS680.P68S67 2009

231.7--dc22

2008040182

TO MY MOM AND MY DAD,  
who, in His grace, believe God,  
and in their grace, believe in me.

## ENDORSEMENTS

*Believing God* addresses one of the most significant problems in the church today: We do not take the Bible seriously. Specifically, in regard to God's amazing promises, we tend to believe only those that seem logical to us. R. C. Sproul Jr. helps us see that in Christ Jesus all of God's promises are "Yes" and are meant to be believed and relied upon. This book will stimulate your faith.

—JERRY BRIDGES

Bible teacher, conference speaker,  
Author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*  
and other titles

Most of us only scratch the surface of what it means to believe God. We say we "take Him at His Word," but do we? The book you hold in your hands presents the supreme promises of God we fight to hold on to, and what each one conveys about our awesome Creator and Redeemer. Thank you, R. C. Jr., for showing us how to enter—how to believe—the promises of God and truly live.

—JONI EARECKSON TADA

Founder, Joni and Friends  
International Disability Center  
Agoura Hills, California

Many years ago, I first heard the cute catchphrase "Some people are just sitting on the premises instead of standing on the promises." As a fired-up young Christian, I was quite sure it didn't apply to me. More than fifty years later, *Believing God* has challenged me to have a reality check. R. C. Sproul Jr.'s excellent approach to twelve key biblical promises achieves the combination of being both forensic and pastoral, clinical and tender, surgical and sympathetic. Read it carefully, apply it diligently—then be sure to pass it on to somebody else. I predict it will do a power of good.

—JOHN BLANCHARD

Preacher, teacher, and apologist  
Author, *Does God Believe in Atheists?*

This book is rich provision for all of us who have cried out, “Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief.” R. C. Jr. has marshaled the hope of faith for a host of our recurring doubts—that we might be tossed to and fro no longer.

—GEORGE GRANT  
Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church,  
Franklin, Tennessee  
Founder, King’s Meadow Study Center

## CONTENTS

FOREWORD – <i>Ray Comfort</i> . . . . .	ix
PREFACE . . . . .	xiii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	xvii
1. ALL SCRIPTURE IS PROFITABLE (2 Timothy 3:16) . . . . .	1
2. OUR HEAVENLY FATHER LOVES US (1 John 3:1). . . . .	11
3. CONFESSION, FORGIVENESS, AND CLEANSING (1 John 1: 9) . . . . .	21
4. WISDOM FOR THE ASKING (James 1:5). . . . .	31
5. CHILDREN ARE A HERITAGE (Psalm 127) . . . . .	41
6. THE DESIRES OF YOUR HEART (Psalm 37:4) . . . . .	53
7. OPEN WINDOWS OF HEAVEN (Malachi 3:10) . . . . .	65
8. MOUNTAINS CAST INTO THE SEA (Mark 11:22–24). . . . .	77
9. ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER (Romans 8:28) . . . . .	89
10. HE HAS OVERCOME THE WORLD (John 16:33) . . . . .	101
11. THE GOOD WORK SHALL BE COMPLETED (Philippians 1:6). . . . .	113
12. WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM (1 John 3:2) . . . . .	125
SCRIPTURE INDEX. . . . .	137



FOREWORD

# THE SHADOW OF DEATH

BY RAY COMFORT

**A**n atheist is someone who pretends that there is no God. Creation screams of the genius of the creative hand of the Almighty, yet the skeptic shuts down his mind. You can lead an atheist to evidence, but you can't make him think. He wrongly assumes that the Christian has made a decision to believe in an invisible God for whom there is no evidence. Yet all sane people "believe" in God (see Rom. 1:18–20). Creation and conscience leave the doubter without excuse. However, the requirement for salvation isn't an intellectual acknowledgement of God's existence. Rather, it entails *believing God*. Trusting Him is to implicitly trust His Word, not only accepting it as absolute truth, but appropriating it as though your very life depends on it. And it does. He who believes God repents and trusts in Him who saves us from the wrath that is to come.

An atheist once sent me an email with which I was in total agreement. He said:

You are really convinced that you've got all the answers. You've really got yourself tricked into believing that you're 100 percent right. Well, let me tell you just one thing. Do you consider yourself to be compassionate of other humans? If you're right, as you say you are, and you believe that, then how can you sleep at night? When you speak with me, you are speaking with someone who you believe is walking directly into eternal damnation, into an endless onslaught of horrendous pain that your "loving" god created, yet you stand by and do nothing. If you believed one bit that thousands every day were falling into an eternal and unchangeable fate, you should be running the streets mad with rage at their blindness. That's equivalent to standing on a street corner and watching every person that passes you walk blindly directly into the path of a bus and die, yet you stand idly by and do nothing. You're just twiddling your thumbs, happy in the knowledge that one day that "walk" signal will shine your way across the road. Think about it. Imagine the horrors hell must have in store if the Bible is true. You're just going to allow that to happen and not care about saving anyone but yourself? If you're right, then you're an uncaring, unemotional, and purely selfish (expletive) that has no right to talk about subjects such as love and caring.

I wrote back and said that I couldn't sleep at night because I was so horrified by the thought that anyone would go to hell. Since 1982, I have risen from bed around midnight most nights each week to cry out to God to save them. I told him that for more than thirty years I have been "running"

the streets, pleading with the unsaved to turn from sin. When we read the book of Acts, we see that this is nothing special. It is our reasonable service and should be the testimony of every believer who professes to possess the love of God. Charles Spurgeon knew what it was to have a deep concern for the lost. He pleaded: “Save some, O Christians! By all means, save some. From yonder flames and outer darkness, and the weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth, seek to save some! Let this, as in the case of the apostle, be your great, ruling object in life, that by all means you might save some.”

I like R.C. Sproul Jr. I count him a friend. He truly loves God and he loves the lost. It is my earnest prayer that *Believing God* will cause you not only to trust and love your God with a greater passion, but that it will cause you also to reach out to those who sit in the shadow of death, who, apart from Jesus Christ, will face the wrath that is to come.

—*Ray Comfort*  
Bellflower, California  
August 2008





## P R E F A C E

All of us tend to take offense rather easily, and I am no exception. Still, as I look back on one such occasion, I'm embarrassed that I was so offended.

Some people were involved in a discussion of my book *Almighty Over All*. In that book, I argued that, as the title suggests, God's sovereignty is over all things. Chapter after chapter looked at different situations, asking whether God was sovereign even there. Was He, I began, sovereign over creation? Was He sovereign over the fall? Was He, I eventually asked, sovereign over suffering? One particular gentleman objected to my perspective and committed the informal logical fallacy known as Bulverism. With this fallacy, rather than refuting an argument, we suggest that our opponent holds to the argument only because of some special unrelated advantage it brings. He argued that the only reason I believed in the sovereignty of God over suffering was that I had led a terribly comfortable life and had never really experienced any serious suffering.

I took deep offense. I set fingers to keyboard and presented my life as practically Job-like. I told him about the many hardships of my life, pouring on the pathos. I stepped back from my computer confident that I had made my case—my life isn't easy.

It was a foolish thing to take offense at, and my response was equally foolish. Despite that, I begin this study in believing the gracious promises of God by putting forth my suffering bona fides, or my bonafide sufferings.

My father suffers from a dilemma. The book of his with which he is most often identified is titled *The Holiness of God*. It is a potent exposition of that

most potent reality. The problem is that people have so come to identify him with the holiness of God that they make the mistake of thinking he is a peculiarly holy man. He explains wisely and humbly that he was driven to study and to teach on the holiness of God not because of his holiness, but because of his lack of it. He sought to look deeply into God's holiness because of his emptiness rather than his fullness.

In like manner, I would be loathe to learn that anyone reading this book would walk away thinking of the author, "Now, there is a man who obviously believes God." The truth of the matter is that I am a man who knows that I need to believe God and that I fail bitterly. But I came to this study knowing that sin began in the garden with a failure to believe the promises of God and with the conviction that the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom, begins with saying "Amen" to all that He speaks—including when He speaks blessing on us.

I knew I needed to learn better to believe God, not because my life was moving from comfort to ease, but because God—for His own good purposes, and for my good as well—was putting me through a time of significant challenge. In other words, I do not find it easy to believe God's promises because He's given me an easy life. Instead, I know I need to believe God's promises because He has, wisely, sent me some hard providences.

Five years ago, I was watching the church I had planted, Saint Peter Presbyterian, experience rapid and significant growth. Our body life, our sacred community, was enjoying such rich blessing, such sweet fellowship, that families from across the country were packing up and moving to be a part of it. My little ministry, the Highlands Study Center, was just beginning to grow. My book on homeschooling was taking off. I was getting ready to travel to South Korea to teach homeschoolers there, as well as teach at a seminary for a week or so. Three times I had been invited to teach for two weeks on a Christian radio program that ran on nearly three hundred stations. God had blessed my wife and me with six lovely children. It was a joyful time.

Then, on New Year's Eve, we received word that my dear wife had breast cancer. The next day, I lost a job that I loved, that I had prayed I would have until the day I died. My trip was cancelled.

Our church body responded in power, offering love and assistance such that we felt most potently the love of Jesus. Denise was positively heroic, never complaining through the surgeries, the chemotherapy, and the radiation. The children likewise were heroes, taking this challenge in stride and trusting in the providence of God. We determined, even while Denise was going through treatments, to move forward with our plans to build a new house. We sold our house and moved out, but our new house would not be ready for two more months. Over those months, we "moved" our rather large family twenty-four times, from this family to that, from these friends to those.

Denise's body began to heal. Her hair grew back, and we happily moved into our new home. It was not long, however, before we faced more challenges. Less than two years after Denise's treatments ended, I was diagnosed with cancer. I had surgery and went through six months of intense chemotherapy. About this same time, controversy erupted in the church where I serve, controversy fueled by a deadly combination of my sins and failures and the sins and failures of others. God had sent me a long string of hard providences.

This was the context in which I was writing this book. Throughout these ordeals, God was tender toward me. I went to bed each night not thinking about this ministry success or that, but remembering that while my enemies were rejoicing over my sin, my Father in heaven was rejoicing over my forgiveness. I went to bed knowing that even if all the world believed me to be the Devil, the Devil himself knew that I belonged to Jesus. I went to bed knowing that given how much this all hurt, it must be good for me.

God, of course, did not leave me with only words. He reminded me throughout all this that I still had friends. I woke up each morning knowing

that my wife loved me and was with me. I sat down to every meal knowing that God had blessed me with flourishing olive plants (Ps. 128). Indeed, in the midst of these trials, God blessed our family with our youngest blessing, Reilly, who came to us via adoption.

Neither has God left me in such hardship. The church where I serve is prospering. God blessed the Highlands Study Center with faithful co-laborers in Dante Tremayne and Eric Owens. Denise and I are both cancer-free, and at least she again has a full head of hair. We have been busy ministering to the saints of Saint Peter and to whomever God should allow in the broader evangelical world. And I have been busy, among other things, putting this book together.

When the legions of the Serpent attack, the best way to fight back is to enter into God's good gifts, to feast at that table that He prepares in the presence of our enemies (Ps. 23). His gifts, His promises, are legion. Believing them is no fool's errand, but is to enter into wisdom's paradise. My prayer is that this little book will help urge you along that way, that it will help you step closer to the Celestial City. There we will see Him as He is and will be like Him.

—*R.C. Sproul Jr.*  
Mendota, Virginia  
July 2008



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are not written in vacuums. Neither are they written by loners. This book was born of a particular context and is the fruit of the labors of many.

I would like first to thank the saints of Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, where I serve. These men and women, and their beautiful children, embody what it means to believe God. Whether fasting or feasting, they move through their days with a quiet confidence in His goodness. Because He loves them, they show forth His beauty, making it all too easy for me to love them.

I would like to thank, in turn, all those who have worked with me at the Highlands Study Center over the years, including our board of directors and our faithful ministry partners. Laurence, Jonathan, Randy, Jim Bob, Eric, Dante—over the years, you have been an encouragement and an example to me.

Thanks are due as well to my friends at Reformation Trust, especially Greg Bailey. Greg was patient with me when we worked together on *Tabletalk* magazine, and has grown only more patient over the years.

Thanks, finally, again to my own dear family. You are the most present and potent witness to the grace of God in my life. In you, I remember His love.

To once more borrow an idiom from a friend, the soundtrack of this book was provided by the Tallis Scholars, Jamie Soles, and Nathan Clark George.

—R. C. Sproul Jr.  
Mendota, Virginia  
Reformation Day, 2008





CHAPTER ONE

# ALL SCRIPTURE IS PROFITABLE

2 TIMOTHY 3:16

Where did it all go wrong? It is a rather important part of my particular calling as the founder of and teacher at the Highlands Study Center to decry the folly of the world. The study center exists “to help Christians live more simple, separate, and deliberate lives to the glory of God and for the building of His kingdom.” That is a rather sophisticated, if not worldly, way of saying we try to help Christians be less worldly in their thinking and in their doing. But to help Christians in this way, I must be able to show the problem, to expose as foolishness the foolishness of the world, and then I must expose how even we in the church succumb to the same foolishness. Not coincidentally, people sometimes end up in despair. They come to the study center relatively content with the world, only to have the world taken away from them. That is why it is so natural for them to ask, with longing in their hearts, “Where did it all go wrong?”

It is true enough that we in the West yet enjoy the bitter remains of a once-Christian civilization. But that simply means things are not now as good as they once were. In the valley of despair, we want to know exactly when we had hit the peak and what brought on the descent. For too many of us, our historical eyes are so myopic we see only in terms of decades. We confuse civil religion with the Christian faith, and so long for the halcyon days of the 1950s. In this scenario, it was Timothy Leary or Abbie Hoffman who brought on our slide. Others look for grander giants, speculating that all was well before Darwin, Marx, or Rousseau came along. Still others aren't content with big names, but look for whole movements. No, it was the Enlightenment that started it all, or the coming of the romantics, or the rise of neoplatonism. The kingdom of God has never lacked enemies.

Sometimes when people ask my view on the matter, when they want me to pinpoint the turning point of history, I point them to Genesis 3:6b: "she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." Where did it all go wrong? In the garden of Eden.

Of course, it was not long before history took another tack. In Genesis 3:15, God promised that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the Serpent. History, strange as it may seem from our peculiar perspective, is actually getting better and better. We miss it because we are so parochial, with respect both to space and time.

With respect to space, we judge the progress of Christ bringing all things unto submission by the standards of these United States. While this country may be the world's only superpower, it is not the entire planet. The gospel of Jesus Christ is making great strides below the equator and in the East. But since such doesn't show up on the evening news, we miss it.

In the same manner, as noted above, we look at the progress of the kingdom of God in terms of decades rather than centuries. While things may not be as good here as they were fifty years ago, we would be wise to remember that four hundred years ago you could count the number of those on this

continent who were, by God's grace, among the flock of God on your fingers and toes. The conquest of all things by Jesus is not a straight, ascending line. Rather it is like a stock ticker that has both ups and downs, and yet has an upward trend.

## WHAT IS CULTURAL DECLINE?

Our original question, then, ought to be modified. We know when it all went wrong and we know that Jesus is about the business of making it all right again. The narrower question is, when did our current downturn begin? To answer it well, however, we first must measure what cultural decline actually is. It is not, in the end, the embracing of Darwinian evolution. Neither is it succumbing to postmodern ideologies. As ghastly as it is, it isn't even precisely the spirit of *Roe v. Wade*. Cultural decline isn't revealed ultimately in some index of leading cultural indicators. Rather, a cultural decline, like an individual's decline, is measured by one standard only, that of believing the Word of God.

The problem in the garden, after all, wasn't in the fruit. Both Adam and Eve fell simply because they didn't believe God. All that we, in turn, strive for as those in Christ is to believe God. This is what faith is, what trust is, what sanctification is. To disbelieve God is death, for a person, a family, a church, or a culture. Conversely, to believe God is life itself. We do not, after all, live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. That is why I am writing this book.

We rightly worry that God's warnings sometimes fall on deaf ears. He tells us that judgment is coming, and it comes, precisely because we do not believe Him (remember that He promised to judge Nineveh, but because they heard Jonah and repented, He showed them grace). But as strange as it is that we don't believe His warnings, even inside the church, stranger still is that we don't believe His promises. Therefore, we are going to look, in due

time, at twelve promises that God has given us in His Word, promises that Christians find difficult to believe. My goal is that as you read this book, you not only will believe each of these twelve promises, but that you will in turn believe *all* that God has promised.

This is how Paul begins chapter 3 of 2 Timothy: “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (vv. 1–4). That sounds like us, doesn’t it?

It is because we are so worldly, however, so proud, such despisers of good, that we misunderstand the nature of the problem. As children of the Enlightenment, we, both within and without the church, believe that the solution to our problem is education. It is, we think, because we are ignorant that we have become so wicked. But we must believe God enough to know that life comes from believing God and death from not believing Him. Our problem isn’t that wisdom and obedience are too complicated. Our problem is that we are too sinful. The great Western sacrament is education. But look again at the list of sins Paul gives us. Will any of these be remedied by earning a higher degree? Will any of this evil dissipate if only we read the right book, attend the right seminar, or go through the right program at our local church?

Our problem isn’t that we haven’t sufficiently mastered the progression of sundry worldviews throughout history, though of course there is nothing wrong with that. Our problem is abundantly simple, and it is the same problem we have had from the garden—we don’t believe God.

Paul proves the point in his counsel to his beloved Timothy: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I

endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:10–13). Again, we are given a dark picture here, but one ensured to be accurate because this comes from the Holy Spirit. What must we do in evil times? “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (14–15).

Paul not only tells Timothy where to go for what he needs, he tells him what he needs. This is the same Paul who, in writing to the Ephesians, warns them lest they be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. That’s where we are in the evangelical church. We think that we need to do what Jesus did, keeping our promises and praying that our territory would be enlarged so that we can have wild hearts filled with purpose, lest we be left behind. But God says we need to become wise through salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. And we get that by knowing the Holy Scriptures, by believing all that God has told us.

## HELPING GOD’S PEOPLE TO STAND

When we think back on the grace of God in the Reformation, we too often miss where the real glory was. It was good and right and proper that Martin Luther boldly and bravely upheld the doctrines of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*, Scripture alone and faith alone. What was recovered can scarcely be overvalued. But we spend less time remembering Luther’s quieter work. His bold stance at Worms—declaring before the tribunal that demanded he recant his biblical doctrines, “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God”—found flesh when he quietly, indeed secretly, set about the work of allowing all of God’s people to stand. Luther left that meeting and, as soon as he stepped

out of the building, a horseman swooped down and snatched up the monk. Off they rode to an unknown castle, where Luther donned the disguise of Sir George the Knight. While in hiding, he translated the Bible into the German tongue, giving God's words to God's people.

The Reformation recovered the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. Though it is identified by a rather unclear term, this doctrine affirms that the Bible *is* clear. It concedes that some parts are clearer than others, but denies the notion that only the specially trained should handle such lofty prose. Such doesn't in any way deny the biblical truth that God has gifted the church with teachers (Eph. 4:11). It denies that only a teacher can grasp the teaching of the Bible.

Our problem in the evangelical church isn't, I believe, that we aren't trained well enough to grasp the hard teachings of the Bible, but that we are too worldly to believe the plain promises of the Bible. The difficulty isn't that the Bible is esoteric, but that it is profligate. The problem isn't that God speaks with a forked tongue, but that He speaks such incredible promises that we find them to be less than credible. The answer isn't to run from what God speaks, but to run to it. Thus, Paul makes perspicuous what he hopes for Timothy, and for us: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16).

What are we seeking? That we might be "competent," or complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. And that is exactly what God promises here. I know that this promise hasn't been hidden from the evangelical church. We are more than familiar with this passage. The trouble is that we don't believe it.

In my tradition, I am a part of a historical, conservative, Reformed, and Presbyterian church. We grasp at something true and important here, but we settle for far too little. That is, we see this verse as a proof-text for the inerrancy of Scripture. This passage truthfully teaches that every passage in the

Bible teaches truthfully all that it teaches. But if we would believe God, we not only must believe this verse is without error, we also must believe, because we believe that this verse is without error, that all the Bible is without error.

The problem is that this probably isn't the exact point that Paul had in mind here. Paul wasn't writing Timothy to warn him that men who would deny that the Bible is without error would come into the church millennia later. Rather, he wanted Timothy to know that because the Bible is breathed out by God, it is not only true, but profitable for doctrine.

Here again, we delightedly concur. The Bible *is* profitable for doctrine. But once again, at least in the circles I run in, we too often stop there. My theological tradition is known for being persnickety about its theology. That's a good thing. If we're going to be sloppy, the last place we want to be that way is in dealing with our understanding of the things of God. But doctrine not only isn't the whole of the Christian life, it isn't the whole focus of this passage. The Bible here promises that the Bible is profitable for reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.

Again, my theological tradition tends to wiggle out from the implications here. Because we are, again, wisely careful with our doctrine, we make the mistake of thinking that Paul is stuttering here. We believe in reproof, as long as what we are being reproofed for is wrong doctrine. We believe in correction, as long as we are having our doctrine corrected. Paul, however, is leading us somewhere. What we need is instruction in righteousness, which is rather a different standard of spiritual maturity than having our theological i's dotted and t's crossed. That means, in turn, that we do not believe this promise, because we have missed its point.

## ALL OF THE BIBLE FOR ALL TIMES

We miss both the nature and the scope of the promise. We are told that not simply our favorite parts of the Bible, the red letters in our Bibles, or the

epistles of Paul are good for instruction in righteousness, but *all* the Bible. Wherever we go in the Word of God, there we find power for changing our lives. We cannot write parts of it off by “contextualizing” it, whereby, while claiming to believe the Bible is God’s Word, we treat some of it as no longer applicable to us. We do this by constructing elaborate interpretive systems that affirm that parts of the Bible were for then, parts are for now, and still more parts are for later.

A friend once asked my counsel about a touchy ethical issue. He was eager to apply God’s Word to his situation, so he asked me, “Does the Bible anywhere address this particular issue?”

“Yes,” I told him, “I believe in Deuteronomy, we are told this about that particular issue.”

Unfortunately, he wasn’t satisfied. This “Bible-believing” Christian asked then, “Is there anything in the New Testament that talks about this?”

I hesitated a moment and then told him, “Yes, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount”—and you could see the relief in his eyes—“not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18b). It is all the Bible, even the parts that make us uncomfortable (perhaps especially the parts that make us uncomfortable), that corrects, reproves, and instructs us in righteousness.

There are, however, still more subtle ways in which we fail to believe this promise. I’m afraid that we think the Bible is magic in a somewhat superstitious way. Too often we think that when we sit down and open the Bible that the Devil scurries away like a vampire confronted by garlic. The truth of the matter is that the Devil sits down right beside us. He encourages us in the diabolical art of what I call “simultaneous translation.” Just as at the United Nations gifted linguists hear the words of the speaker and in an instant repeat those words in another language, so we, as our eyes roll across the page, translate what we are reading. There we are, sitting down at our quiet time. We come across this familiar passage, one that we may have even committed to

memory. Our eyes see, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work,” and we say to ourselves in the quiet of our minds, “The Bible is good.” Of course the Bible is good, but our translation of it, or rather our reduction of it, has stripped it of its power.

I suspect we do this because we are fundamentally indifferent about our calling. If I were to promise you that I would eat ten watermelons in one sitting, you might have trouble believing me. More important, however, you probably wouldn't much care whether I could do it. Simply put, we need to develop a biblical hunger for the thing promised. We are told here that we can be made complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. If you're like me, you probably spend far more time daydreaming about what it might be like to win the lottery than you do wondering what it might be like if you took enormous strides in your sanctification, if you became a hero of the faith, if you better reflected the glory of Jesus in all that you do. If we spent more time entering into the kind of anguish the apostle Paul goes through in Romans 7—“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (vv. 19, 24)—then perhaps we would rejoice when confronted with this sure promise from God. All Scripture is able to make us complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Our problem, however, may follow a different tack. Perhaps we have a profound hunger and thirst for righteousness. Maybe our hearts long to grow in grace. Maybe, however, we need to start with this very passage. It could be that our hunger is thwarted by our very unbelief. We come to this promise and are embarrassed by it. It is too much, too grand, too good to be true. It is a good thing that those words of wisdom, “If something seems too good to be true, it probably is,” carry that important hedge, “probably.” When God makes a promise, unlike every other promise that we encounter,

it is too good *not* to be true. God not only has given us the promise in His Word, He has given us the promise of His Word. We are equipped, ready to go. We do not need the latest Christian fad to come down the pike. We need instead the oldest Christian habit to come down the pike. We need to read, to understand, and most important, to believe the Word of God.

This is God's promise, that if we will avail ourselves of the Word of God, we will find it profitable for doctrine. The Bible isn't a wax nose that can be molded and shaped any way we please. No, the Bible shapes us and our doctrine. As Luther put it to Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Spiritus Sanctus non est skepticus*. "The Holy Spirit is not a skeptic." As the Spirit breathed out His Word, He equipped us for finding sound doctrine.

This is God's promise, that if we will avail ourselves of the Word of God, we will find it profitable for reproof. We are not stuck in our solipsistic errors. We can see ourselves from outside ourselves, by the power of His Word. It will reprove our errors, in our thinking, in our feeling, and in our doing; in our minds, in our hearts, and in our hands.

This is God's promise, that if we will avail ourselves of the Word of God, we will find it profitable for correction. Where we err, it will set us on the right path. Like the rod and staff of our Great Shepherd, it will comfort us, for it will keep us on the narrow way. Where we walk crooked, it will make our paths straight.

This is God's promise, that if we will avail ourselves of the Word of God, we will find it profitable for instruction in righteousness. It will bring us closer to our end, when we will be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. We will become ever more complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. If we would lay hold of these promises, we must look to His Word, that we might in turn believe His Word.