

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Modern fund-raising techniques provide us with a good analogy for the promise of our text. Perhaps you have heard of something called the “challenge grant.” The challenge grant is money given under the condition that other contributors match the amount of the grant. I want to use the challenge grant as an analogy for the promise of our text, the promise that challenges us, just as the challenge grant challenges would-be contributors. And so, our theme is the challenge of the promise.

Actually, our text contains several promises, but they are not all as challenging as the one to which our theme refers. The promise that challenges us is the other promise:

*¹⁰“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

The challenge of this promise is, in one sense, no different than any other. It is the challenge to believe it. The promise of forgiveness is a promise that either you believe it or you do not. It doesn't task you. You cannot feel forgiveness. Either you accept that it is so, and are comforted, or you don't. The promise of the resurrection is similar. It is a promise for the future, and you don't expect to see it in this world, so either you accept it or you do not, but it matters little to day-by-day things for most people. Life will still go on no matter how you think about the resurrection – at least until you need the resurrection! But believing the resurrection isn't going to make today a whole lot different.

The promise that challenges us will change your life and your living of it significantly - if you believe it. And there's the rub! It is so hard to believe! The promise is that God's Word works. We struggle with that. We want to devise ways to be effective and find things we can do around the Word to make it seem more powerful, or feel more substantial, or accomplish our goals clearly and demonstrably. But the problem is, God's Word doesn't accomplish our goals. It was never intended to.

The promise challenges us to trust God, and take Him at His Word, and stand back and see the glory of God! Our flesh often wants

to see something else –like our own glory. We want these churches full of people. We want the admiration and approval of the community. We want to feel something special and good when we leave the worship service. We want financial security, maybe even prosperity!

But that is not what the Word of God is about. It is about the member who comes to the pastor and say, “I used to be troubled by growing old and the prospect of dying. Now, thanks to what you have preached and taught, I am no longer afraid.” You might want to ask, “But how does that help the congregation’s bottom line?” I would answer that the congregation’s bottom line or the effect on that bottom line does not matter.

The Word of God was not spoken to enhance the bottom line of the congregation. It was spoken to comfort, to heal, to forgive, and to save. In the example I gave, the Word of God accomplished what it was spoken to accomplish, the comfort of a child of God as he or she faced the great and frightening questions of illness and death. It brought that peace, of which the prophet spoke so eloquently by the inspiration of God.

The challenge of the promise is that it takes us and our ambitions out of the equation. God says, “My Word shall not return to me empty without accomplishing what I desire...” So what if the Word doesn’t

accomplish what you desire? It isn't your word. It isn't my word. What it accomplishes is what God intends it to accomplish...because it is His Word. And it accomplishes it every time.

Now, our modern and very empirical sense tells us that it cannot be 100% effective. We look around us and see how the church is faring and we say, "It must not be working!" But the truth is, the Word works every time.

All that is required of us is faithfulness. We need to use the Word. We need to learn the Word. We need to live the Word. We need to study the Word. We need to speak the Word. And we need to trust the Word. And we need to do all of that faithfully. We don't need to dress it up so it can be more acceptable. We don't need to structure our presentation of it so it can be more effective. We don't need to decorate the church so it the context of the Word is more inviting. None of those preparations is evil, but none are necessary. The Word works because God gives it the power to do so.

That is why the promise challenges us. It flies in the face of our expectations. It ignores our egos. It says something that strains against our human nature. Just use the Word of God, be faithful, and trust God, and everything will work out right – not "everything will work out pleasantly," or "every moment will be happy," or "you will be the envy

of the community," but it will all work just the way God wants it to work. And what is the will of God? (Our salvation.)

That is the chief thing. God wants us to know Him, to trust in Him, and to live with Him in joy and peace forever. The peace is the fruit of trusting God, and believing that your sins have been forgiven, and expecting that when you stand faithfully with Him, it can't get any better than it is or will be. Our flesh wants to see things. We want to be able to measure and appreciate what is happening. But the Church happens in the hearts and lives of men – it is not a quantifiable thing for us, only in the eyes of God, who speaks His Word to create and sustain His Church. It is our hunger for the measurable results that makes social ministry so inviting – you can count coats distributed, you can count the money donated to “worthy causes,” you can measure ‘how much’ and ‘how many’ and feel like you are accomplishing something.

But the work of the Church is accomplished by the Word of God – not by our efforts and fund-raisers and what-not, however good and praiseworthy such acts of charity may be. God's Word works. That is the promise that challenges us. And it doesn't always do what we want or think it ought to do. Some people in our circles believe that if the Word of God is effective, then good things must be happening. That is

true, if believers are involved, if faithfulness is being exercised. The comfort and salvation of men is the proper work of the Word of God.

But there is that work which theologians call the alien work, the strange work of the Word of God. That work is to judge the unrepentant, and to condemn and make more guilty those who reject the work of the Holy Spirit in them to bring them to repentance and faith. Sometimes guilt, and shame, and anger, and rejection, and walking away from the Church is the work of the Word, the thing which God sent His Word to accomplish in those that stubbornly will not believe. This is another of the things that makes this the promise that challenges us. We are challenged to see that when the Word brings division to the visible church and the cross to God's faithful people, that it is what God intended His Word to do, so that the truth and error, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, belief and apostasy might be clearly distinguished.

The Church belongs to God, and it is His creation. We belong to God and He is free to deal with us in any way He sees right and good. The Word is His and it accomplishes what He spoke it to do, not what we want it to do. The promise we rejoice in is the promise of forgiveness, salvation, and life – peace and rejoicing just as Isaiah said in the final verses of our text. The promise that challenges us is the

promise that His Word will not fail ever, but will succeed and will accomplish what He desires. It challenges us to trust. It challenges us to faithfulness. It challenges us to be in the Word, and speak the Word, and cling to the Word like our lives depended on it – because, frankly, they do. It is the promise that God will do it, that challenges us to deny the flesh and walk humbly in faith with our God. This is the promise that challenges us!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.