

Introduction

One of our favorite scripture passages here at GCC is 2 Peter 1:3-4. Peter writes, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great PROMISES, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." Believers in Christ do not become like Christ through our own hard work but through the precious promises of God. The promises of God assure us that whoever believes in Christ Jesus will be saved. The promises of God also assure us that he who began a good work in his people will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. The promises of God are the ground of our faith in him for salvation. They are also the fertile ground from which fruitfulness and holiness in our lives spring forth. And the promises of God take center stage as Paul continues his case for the undistorted gospel in Galatians 3:15-18.

[Read text and Pray]

Without tracing the entire outline of Paul's letter, let us get our bearings. Remember Paul is setting forth the case that the message that was being preached by the people we call the Judaizers was nothing less than a distortion of the gospel. He has set forth his authority as an apostle. He has further set forth the distinction of the true gospel—that justification is the gift of God. It cannot be earned or deserved. Human works of the law are completely insufficient. Justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Nevertheless, the historical reality is that the law was instituted by God. And that leaves questions. What then did the law have to do with the promise? Why did God give the law if it were not meant to be a means of justification? Did God go back-and-forth in his mind? It is probable that the Judaizers were arguing that the promises given to Abraham were merely the appetizers, that the law was the main and most important course. So there is still work for Paul to do in bringing the Galatians beyond perplexity to a thorough and sound understanding of the relationship between the law and the promises. We need this grasp as well, for these questions naturally ensue when we consider that works of the law are insufficient to save and in fact have no part in our justification. So Paul turns to the nature of God's promise and points out here that God is no less bound to fulfill his covenant promise than any human would be. In the course of his explanation, Paul provides four aspects of God's promises which spell out their particulars and their inviolability. It is good news that should undergird our faith this morning.

First, let's consider ...

I. The Maker of the Promises.

Whenever you are trying to understand a complex matter, it is always helpful when the teacher can refer you to a concrete example with which you are familiar. It is one thing to learn that $2 + 2 = 4$. But when you have two quarters and you add two, then you can count 4 and know you now have a dollar. You not only have learned some math but you see why it is important. Paul is providing a concrete example in these verses. He refers to an example with which his readers would all be familiar. He calls it a human example. Of course the human realm is to be distinguished from the divine realm. But Paul's contention is that if we can understand this certain thing about the human realm, it will make complete sense about how things operate in God's realm as well.

We are going to get to his explanation later. For now I want you to realize that Paul's point is to explain how things work for God in light of how they work for humans. The important principle he wants to teach is founded upon the fact that God himself makes promises, that God himself makes covenants. God commits himself to certain courses of action. God binds himself and informs us of these promises.

It is worth pondering that Almighty God is a maker of promises. It is an everyday part of human life that we make promises. We promise our employers in essence that we will work a certain amount of time each week. They promise us that they will pay us a certain amount for the work we do. We make promises within our families and among our friends. In marriage promises are made to love, honor, and cherish. We promise to pay loans back. Every use of our credit cards is a promise that we will pay back the loan we have just taken out according to the terms to which we have agreed. Tenants promise to pay landlords each month. Companies promise to stand behind the items that they manufacture with a guarantee or warranty. But what happens in every one of our lives with respect to our promises? We fail to keep them all. We just do. Every late payment breaks a promise. Every time we forget and fail to show up when we said we would, we break a promise. Every human being leaves a trail of broken promises in our wake. Just because it is common does not make it okay. Every Christian, in the power of the Holy Spirit, should strive to be faithful in our word. Paul tells us later in this very letter that one aspect of the Spirit's fruit in our lives is faithfulness.

However, my point is to ponder for just a moment what it means that God makes promises, that God ratifies covenants between himself and human beings. God's glory shines through his making of promises and covenants. For one thing, the promise-making of God highlights his grace. Yes, it highlights his grace and mercy. That's because he owes us nothing. Since sin came into the world, the only thing God owes us is his wrath, his justice. Why would God stoop to give us words of assurance that he will do good for us? God's promises can fill our hearts with hope and address the miseries of hopelessness. But no promise of God was ever deserved. Making promises magnifies the kindness of the Lord.

And there is another thing. The promises of God highlight his capability. God is omni-competent. He can do anything he wants to do. Nothing that he wants to do is beyond his power and resources. It is not beyond his mind's ability to plan and his strength's ability to perform. So God never promises something he cannot do. He is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we can ask or think. So we need never fear that God has overextended himself.

And one more thing about God's promises. Unlike human beings, God is completely faithful. He always keeps his promises. He is totally trustworthy and completely true. He is a determined promise-keeper. So while Paul wants to show us a way in which God's covenant-making is LIKE human covenant-making, we can rejoice that here is one way in which God's covenant-making stands apart from ours. We are frequent covenant-breakers, but God is the consummate promise-keeper.

Paul not only show us who makes these inviolable promises, he also draws attention to ...

II. The Recipients of the Promises.

In verse 16, Paul drives home the point that the covenant-promises of God were made to Abraham and to his offspring. God's promise to Abraham was to give land to him and his offspring. He further and explicitly declares that the offspring to whom God made the promise was not the many, as in Abraham's many biological descendants, but to one descendant in particular. And Paul

identifies that one as Christ. The record of the promises God makes to Abraham is found in Genesis 12, 13, 15, and 17. And it is clear that sometimes he is promising to a plural number of offspring. However, Paul by divinely-inspired interpretation, is explaining that the recipients of the promises of God here are Abraham and Jesus the Christ. It appears that what Paul is doing is reading the Genesis promises down through the course of divinely ordained history.

And what history shows is that God had more in mind than Isaac, the son who would be born to Abraham and Sarah. He had in mind the ultimate son whom Abraham's biological son would signal. Consider that in Genesis 3:15, right there in the wake of the Fall, God had already promised a seed, an offspring, who would crush the head of the serpent. Then God made astounding promises to Abraham and his offspring. Later in the Old Testament with the emergence of the Israelite monarchy, God promised David that he would raise up his offspring after him and establish the throne of his kingdom forever. With that in mind consider how Matthew begins his unfolding of the good news. Matthew 1:1 says, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." And he traces the lineage from Abraham to David to Jesus who is called Christ.

That the promises God made to Abraham looked beyond his immediate circumstances was plain to Abraham himself. The testimony of the New Testament confirms this. Jesus claimed that "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Speaking of Abraham and other ancient saints, Hebrews 11:13 testifies that they "all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar." Paul's contention is that the promises made to Abraham are ultimately actually and fully fulfilled in Christ Jesus. It is as he wrote to the Corinthians. In Second Corinthians 1:20 we read, "all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]."

And the fact that these promises were made to Christ himself indicates the way in which others become partakers of the promises. They are united with Christ through faith. Again, it is not by working that we earn God's favor and receive his blessing as a wage that is due. It is by faith—receiving the gift that God has purchased through the work of his son.

We turn next to ...

III. The Substance of the Promises.

The text draws our attention to specific promises that God made to Abraham and then through him to Christ. Looking back in the scriptures, to the promises made to Abraham, we find the following. God promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation. He would bless him. He would make his name great. Abraham himself would be a blessing. In him all the families of the earth would be blessed. He also promised the land of the Canaanites; it was to be an inheritance.

God did grant those blessings to the descendants of Abraham. The Israelites were blessed and multiplied. They came and took the land over by the mighty hand of God. But enjoying the blessing of God and possessing the land of inheritance in this age on this earth provides but a small glimpse into the glorious inheritance that awaits those whose hope is in Christ. The Old Testament looked ahead to a time when the entire world would be under the rule of the Lord. Psalm 22:27-28 says, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all of the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations." Psalm 47:7-9 even mentions Abraham: "For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather at the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God."

Paul says in Romans 4:13 that the promise to Abraham and his offspring is that he would be heir of the world.

Can you see that the substance of these promises foreshadows what we come to know in the New Testament as the new heaven and the new earth? Hebrews 11:10 says that Abraham was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. Listen to Hebrews 11:13-16. "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

Here is the promise. Here is the inheritance. It is not a kingdom here on earth, but belonging as citizens to the kingdom of God under the universal rule of Christ in the new heaven and new earth. It is as Peter writes (2 Peter 3:13), "But according to his PROMISE we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." It is as Revelation 21 tells us through the vision of John: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

Brothers and sisters—and by the way did you notice that is how Paul addressed the Galatians in this section? Previously he said they were bewitched. They were foolish Galatians. They had caused Paul great consternation. Nevertheless, here he calls them "brothers," a term of endearment and affection. It is a term that recognizes a sharing in something common. And how can you not be drawn to tenderness and joyful comradeship when you think of the inheritance we believers will share for eternity in Christ. In him is our mutual hope and in him we are one family. Brothers and sisters, how about this hope that is signaled by speaking of the promises God gave to Abraham and to Christ?

Can you sympathize with those who have gone before, those who lived on earth as strangers and outsiders? Buddy Green wrote a song that captures where we are in the current day.

It's not home Where men sell their souls
And the taste of power is sweet
Where wrong is right And neighbors fight
While the hungry are dyin' in the streets
Where kids are abused And women are used
And the weak are crushed by the strong
Nations gone mad Jesus is sad And I don't belong

I don't belong And I'm going someday
Home to my own native land
I don't belong And it seems like I hear
The sound of a "welcome home" band

I don't belong I'm a foreigner here Just singing a sojourner's song
I've always known This place ain't home And I don't belong

Don't belong But while I'm here I'll be living like I've nothin' to lose
And while I breathe I'll just believe My Lord is gonna see me through
I'll not be deceived By earth's make-believe
No, I'll close my ears to her siren song
By praisin' His name, and I'm not ashamed
'Cause I don't belong

And I belong To a kingdom of peace Where only love is the law
Where children lead And captives are freed
And God becomes a baby on the straw
Where dead men live And rich men give
Their kingdoms to buy back a song
Where sinners like me Become royalty And we'll all belong

Yes I belong And I'm going someday
Home to my own native land

Where I'll belong And it seems like I hear
The sound of a "welcome home" band
Yes, I'll belong No foreigner there
Singin' a sojourner's song
I've always known I'm going home Where I belong
Yes I've always known This place ain't home And I don't belong

That's the way Abraham felt. It's the way Jesus felt. And if you belong to him, it's the way you feel. You feel like you are not home in this world, because you're not. But there is home. God gave it as a promise. And he has let us know enough of what it is like that we wouldn't want to be anywhere else!

But now for our final point ...

IV. The Supremacy of the Promises.

This is where Paul started and it really is his main point. Even in the human realm, when a covenant is ratified, it is established. It is set in motion. At that point there is no turning back. You cannot modify it. You cannot overturn it. "No one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified."

Now, God made promises to Abraham and to Christ. They constitute a covenant. And God himself ratified that covenant. And Paul says, This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years later cannot replace, modify, or annul that covenant. The promise cannot be made void. It is no different in that way than things are in the human realm. Once ratified it stands. Now some of us will not keep our promises, but God keeps every single one. He would not have given the law to annul the promise. So get it out of your mind altogether any thought that the law is an extension or an adjustment or an amendment or an addition to the promise.

Probably the Judaizers were arguing God's covenant was preparatory for the law and that the inheritance of the land came by the law. That would be an entirely mistaken notion according to the

scripture. It is either law or promise never law and promise. And it is clear the inheritance was given by promise.

The lesson is this: you want to go home? You want to share in God's inheritance, not the type but the fulfillment—the new heaven and the new earth? You can't do it. You can't get there. You cannot get there on your own, and not with a little help ... not even with a LOT of help. You need more than help to get to heaven. The law is seen by people as a help to get there. But it can't help you. Try all day long to keep the law, but you never un-break the law you have broken.

What you and I need is a Savior, a Redeemer—someone who will come and get us and bring us home. We can only be along for the ride. The good news is, what we can't do Christ has done. He satisfied the law's demand and God will count as righteous those who cast themselves on him and who believe God's inviolable promise.

Conclusion

Today, do not harden your heart. Do you know yourself to be a sinner? Do you accept that eternal punishment is what you deserve? Yet do you desire right standing with God, to belong to his family and to go to his heaven? Then are you willing to admit that you are incapable of pleasing God sufficiently to somehow merit right standing with him? Then turn to him now, and believe his promise. Trust in Jesus Christ.

For all who do, here is Christ's word to you:

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also. ... I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."