

STUDY 6

The Promised Gospel

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THE GOD OF PROMISE

God's promises are one with his covenant with creation which means he has created all things to bring them to a goal. God is 'a faithful creator'.

- God will not be diverted from his purpose by human sin or demonic attack upon his sovereign grace.
- The context for the Gospel we preach is the creation, which God has promised to redeem, unify and regenerate in Christ Jesus.

People who join classes on evangelism are often put out by hearing this, especially if they are looking for the latest 'how to' that they can use to produce commitments for Christ.

The Gospel flows as a stream of life from the Triune community of grace.

- It is God's very nature to give himself to us and his creation in the Word of the Gospel.
- It is God's to implement. Not ours.
- Our calling is in being saved into co-partners under Christ as head.

The first promise of the Gospel is implicit in the open-endedness of the Sabbath, pointing to the future Sabbath rest of the whole creation (Gen. 2:1-3; Heb. 4:9f.; Rev. 14:13).

The second comes after the bond between God and man and woman is individualised and we are turned into ourselves (Gen. 3:15).

- Humankind now lives in a state of great tension and is out of gear with God, self, others and creation.
- Babel is an attempt by humanity to unify all things, but this results in further disintegration (Gen. 11).
- Humankind is unable to re-socialise itself, or to heal its rupture and to bring peace between itself and God.

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THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL IS GIVEN TO ABRAHAM

The call and blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 is the answer to the calamities in Genesis 1–11.

1. Abraham must leave his homeland.
2. He is promised a new land (a new Eden).
3. He will have many descendants.
4. He is promised divine protection.
5. He will be a source of blessing to many nations.

What was the Gospel in this for Abraham and the nations? Romans 4:13 says that he and his descendants would inherit the world.

This is amplified in Galatians 3:8–9, 15–18, 21. The promise of the Gospel includes:

1. The justification of the nations just as Abraham was justified by grace.
2. The nations will be heirs together with Abraham.
3. The promise of a son to Abraham is realised in Isaac but fulfilled in Christ.
4. The blessing of Abraham is the giving of the Holy Spirit to his heirs.

Abraham believed the Word of promise and was justified by God's pure grace (Gen. 15:6). The heirs of promise inherit the world by being put in the right by God. The history of the world is one that comes to its goal by grace alone. Grace subdues us in mercy making us to live by faith in Christ alone (Matt. 5:5; Gal. 3:18; Rom. 4:1–3, 16; 1 Pet. 1:3–5; 2 Pet. 3:13).

- The Gospel of God cannot be reduced to 'me and my salvation', nor can it be measured by church growth. God justifies his people so that they can continue his purposes in the creation when heaven and earth will be joined and regenerated by the Spirit (Isa. 44:1–5; **51:2–3**; 55:10–13; Joel 2; Ezek. 47:1–12; Acts 2:1ff.; Rom. 8:9–11, 18–24).
- Abraham and Isaac were men of the Spirit. In receiving God's Word of promise by faith we receive the 'promised Spirit'. By the Spirit believers live in the life and action of the risen Christ in the here and now. We participate in the life of this man who has given us the Spirit as a pledge of our future inheritance and the coming perfection of the world. By the Spirit Christ directs us to the goal.

THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL IS BOUND UP WITH THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

Thomas F. Torrance beautifully assists our understanding by calling Israel the 'actual matrix' (or womb) 'of relationships from which he (Christ) sprang as Son of David and Son of Mary, that is, in terms of his intimate bond with Israel in its covenant relationship with God throughout history'.¹

¹ T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, Paternoster, Exeter, 1983, p. 13.

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By elaborate religious ritual and carefully framed laws, by rivers of blood from millions of animal sacrifices, by the broken hearts of the psalmists and the profoundest agony of the prophets, by the tragic story of Israelite politics and the shattering of this people again and again, God taught the Jews, through centuries and centuries of existence yoked to his word and covenant, until the truth was imprinted upon their conscience and there was burned into their souls the meaning of holiness and righteousness, of sin and uncleanness, of love and mercy and grace, of faithfulness and forgiveness, of justification, atonement and salvation; the meaning of creation, the kingdom of God, of judgement, death and at last resurrection; the concept of the Messiah, the suffering servant, and yet prophet, priest and king, and so to the very brink of the gospel.²

Israel was the vehicle of the Gospel promises of God. In the fullness of time Jesus was born from the womb of Mary so that when at last God came into the world he came as a Jew (Gal. 4:4ff.; Luke 4:16–21).

- However, when the Son of God breaks into our time and space by his incarnation he critically re-orientates his pre-history.
- He turns upside down the expectation of the time, meeting with the wrong people, saving those who were outside the pale, in demonstrating the scandalous generosity of the Father, refusing political power, saving the world by the folly of his cross and directing his followers to bring the Gospel to the whole Gentile world.

PROMISE OR FREE WILL?

The promise of the Gospel is the Word of our covenant God that there is a future for humanity and for humanity's home. The promise is one of sovereign grace. Grace is our having been created, but created for God. Grace is God's free act and deed. It is never a quality inborn in us. The Gospel is God giving himself to us in his Word, redeeming those who are beyond it, and his bringing history to its ultimate perfection.

- In hostility to God's grace, Western humanity (like all humankind) has taken responsibility for itself.
- Theologically, we become Unitarian by saying grace helps us reach the goal.
- The future then has to do with our decision. God then becomes an accomplice to our decisions. Belief in human free will replaces belief in God, making God superfluous and the future of the world hopeless and frightening.

The Enlightenment has been described by some historians as 'Absolutism'. In general it means a system of life based upon the omnipotence of human powers.

- As this philosophy developed in the 17th and 18th centuries God was regarded as a projection of human self-knowledge.
- The French revolution in 1786 soon became the terror, as repeated in the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler.
- Our advances, good as many have been, continue to result in even greater disasters, e.g. the confusion and possibility of making even greater havoc in our saving the world from global warming.

² T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, Paternoster, Exeter, 2008, p. 42

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Many have lost hope. People may not be interested in a new religion or ideology but they may be looking for a new world.

- The promise of God for the future of humankind is the hope of grace that enables us to anticipate the future in doing the commands of God.
- In Christ every one of the promises of God is a 'Yes' (2 Cor. 1:20).
- This is the horizon and light of God's future.
- And the 'No' to every other way.
- The power of the future determines the present in anticipations and is the hope that enables us to stand with Paul in his ministry of the Gospel (Rom. 1:1–6).