

The Gospel of Promise

Galatians 1:6-11

New Series on Promise

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”I want you to know that the gospel I preached is not of human origin.”

- Galatians 1:11

Prayer of Preparation

O God, thank you for the promise of the Gospel: for the promise of life abundant and for the grace to receive the love of your kingdom by your Spirit. In Christ’s name we pray: Amen.

Message

Making a promise and keeping a promise go to the heart of the Christian life.

Making a promise and keeping a promise go to the heart of “life,” whether in a family, or in a community, or in a nation: how do we work together if we do not promise to treat each other as we would want to be treated?

What would our lives look like if we failed to keep our promises?

Over the next few weeks, we will be talking about the importance of promises. We will be exploring how we cannot live in any kind of relationship or fellowship without promises. For example, when we make a promise to a child, we must know how to keep it; or the child will lose trust in us; or when we make a promise to a friend, we know that if we do not keep the promise we might lose the friendship; or when we enter into a marriage covenant, we make a promise to have and to hold, and to honor and to cherish, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse. We promise our faithfulness, our commitment.¹

When purchasing a home, we also make a promise: we enter into an agreement we call a “promissory note,” or a “financial pledge,” which says that we

¹ Leonard Sweet, “Heirs of the Promise” (Galatians 3:23-29) at www.esermons.org.

promise to pay back the bank. Such a promise might even extend beyond our lifetime and can easily involve our children.²

Promises are part of life, as when we assume a new job, or when we sit on the witness stand. Most of the time we keep our promises, but at other times, we don't.

I can remember in high school playing on the basketball team where the coach would always make a promise to me to play, only to break the promise later. In time, there was no longer trust.

Have you ever had someone break a promise? It can hurt.

I sometimes think the longer we live, the more we might realize how all too common a "broken promise" is.

The Gospel Promise

At the heart of the Bible is a promise: beginning in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and ending on the cross of Christ at Calvary, there are the promises of God to be faithful: God makes a promise and God keeps his promise.

God promises to Abraham and Sarah, for example, that they will become the foundation of a great nation, and that God will give to them more descendants than the stars (Genesis 12:1-3). It is a promise, and it is absurd, given how old Abraham and Sarah are! But God promises to Abraham and Sarah that he *will provide* – and God does! Abraham and Sarah learn that God not only makes a promise, but God also keeps a promise – and then some, as there is always more that God gives (Galatians 3:6-9; see also Ephesians 3:20-21).

In many ways, this is what Paul is trying to tell the Galatians. Paul is very aware of the promises of God, and he knows all too well of the promises of God to Abraham and Sarah (Galatians 3:6-9). He knows that God is faithful and good to this particular promise and that God will be faithful and good to the Galatians (Galatians 3:15-18).

But what disturbs Paul is how the Galatians have been less than faithful to the promise (Galatians 1:6). Paul had been trying to communicate the promises of God's grace and the way God's grace had created a new family of Jews and

² Leonard Sweet, "Heirs of the Promise" (Galatians 3:23-29) at www.esermons.org.

Gentiles (Galatians 3:28). But a problem arose that made it difficult for the family to increase, as there were other preachers who were perverting the promise and making it difficult for Gentiles to enter the household of God (Ephesians 2:19).

This is not the promise Paul had shared with Galatians on earlier occasions. It was not the gospel of Jesus Christ: we do not become Jews first to become Christians. We become Christians by God's grace. We become Christians by receiving God's gift in Christ (Galatians 3:23-28).

The Gospel does not belong exclusively to different groups or to super preachers! The gospel belongs to God and is for all people, for all the nations, for the world (Matthew 28:16-20; John 3:16). It is why Paul is a missionary in the first place (Galatians 1:1).

This is the problem at the heart of the Letter to the Galatians. What Paul is sharing is how the promise of the gospel transcends our petty divisions. This is what makes the promise of the gospel so powerful. It is what drives the mission of the church in the world: that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Such a promise is not a religious philosophy or a political program, and it is not a mechanism to control God. No, it is about understanding the way God bursts old-wine skins (Mark 2:22). It is about the way God is always more than we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20-21). It is about realizing that the Gospel always belongs to God! Not to anyone person or group! Not to anyone pastor. Not to anyone church or denomination (I Corinthians 1:18-25). The gospel, the promise – belongs to God!

This is what Paul is wanting the Galatians to understand: the mission is God's mission, and they, by grace, are part of it (Galatians 2:15-21)! Just as we are! By God's grace, we are part of the mission, of the promise.

Faith Promise

Now, over the next few weeks, we want to explore what it means to live as a "people of promise," or as those who promise to live out their faith in mission to others. We want to find out what it means to make a promise and keep it, and trust God to provide for it, not just with respect to our Faith-Promise campaign, but *with our lives*

For that is what Faith-Promise is all about: it is about taking God at God's word and trusting God to provide. It is about risking God's generosity or God's abundance, and saying to God, "Okay, God, I am going to step out in faith and I am going to allow you to lead me, to see the fruit of the Spirit grow in my life. I am going to risk God's generosity, and I am going to learn and discover how there is always more to God, always love in excess."

For all the "giving" we seek to have and all the forms of ministry and mission we seek to carry out here at Grace Church – are about living out *the assumption of that abundance*: that we live in and out of God's abundant life.³ It is why we say that we cannot possibly out-give God, for we can't!

We learn this truth by trusting God, by having faith in God: that God is always good to God's promise, even during the most desperate of circumstances, even during pandemics and unrest (Genesis 22:1-19)!

What did Bishop White used to say to us? God is good! All the time. All the time, God is good! God is good to the promise, from beginning to end.

Just as God was good to Noah after the flood (Genesis 9). Just as God was good to Moses and Miriam in the exodus (Exodus 5:22ff). Just as God was good to the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed "there would come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch would grow from that root" (11:1).

Just as God will be good to you, good to us. God will be good to God's promise!

For someday, I know, we all will gather again in person. Someday we all will see each other face to face, even if in masks (I Cor. 13:12). Someday we all will become what God created us to become.

But until then, we trust in the promise! We hope in the promise! We look forward to the promise. We work and labor in the promises of God's vineyard (Isaiah 27:2). We remember what God has done for us, following the call of Christ (Galatians 1:3-5). This is the power of a promise: God moves in us by his Spirit to follow Jesus.

Closing Reflection

³ Peter Groves, *Grace* (London, UK: Canterbury Press 2012), 94.

Let me ask you: How do you see yourself sharing and trusting in God's promises? How do you understand God's promises being fulfilled in your life?

Because that's what Faith-Promise is all about: yes, it is about raising support for mission; it is about learning how to participate in ministry; but it is really about – no matter where you are in your life – trusting in God's goodness, giving your all to God. It's really about making a promise and keeping it. Amen.