

THE PROMISE OF SALVATION

Galatians 3:15-18

Our God is a covenant-making God. When He revealed Himself to Abraham, He made a covenant with him. This covenant that God made with Abraham became the basis of the faith and hope of the patriarch. Through that covenant Abraham received righteousness by faith. A part of the covenant was the Promise that God gave to Abraham on which Abraham based His faith.

What relationship does the promise that Abraham received from God have to the law which God gave through Moses? This is the question that is behind this rather difficult little paragraph in this Galatian letter. In spite of the fact that the paragraph is written in categories that were familiar to that first century recipient, but rather strange to us, it still has some insight about our God and His way of saving sinners that we need to know. He still saves sinners when they place their faith in His Promise. There are some things you need to know about the Promise of Salvation.

I. THE PROMISE OF SALVATION IS UNCHANGEABLE.

Paul understood the covenant that God gave to Abraham as including a Promise of salvation by faith for any who would come to place their trust in the Promise. The teachers who had invaded the church at Galatia were denying this. While they readily admitted the nature of the covenant that God had established with Abraham, they were making an appeal to history. They contended that while God established a beautiful covenant with Abraham, years later he had come and established a covenant with Moses. And it was their contention that the law given to Moses at Mount Sinai defined the conditions to be attached to the covenant with Abraham. The blessings promised in the covenant given to Abraham are valid only if you live up to the conditions set forth in the law. Before us we have the response of Paul.

Paul utilizes some human analogies in his response. He begins by addressing them as "Brethren". This warm word of greeting indicates a change in posture from the earlier words of censure. "I speak after the manner of men" means that he is about to appeal to things that are commonly recognized in the everyday world. "Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto."

"Covenant" is the key word in this statement. While it is a word found many times in Scripture, our understanding of the word is probably a little vague. Even the scholars debate the exact meaning of the word. Some understand the word in the sense of a will or testament. When a man makes a last will or testament, he makes a voluntary disposition of his possessions upon his death. However after writing such a will, he may come back and alter it at some later point in his

life, if he chooses. But once he has died, the will cannot be altered in any way. Since there is no reference to death of the one making the covenant in this passage, it does not seem to fit exactly. In the Old Testament the covenants that God made with man always have a basic characteristic of a will. They are always a declaration for the divine intention without any necessary agreement from the other party. God acts freely and in his own initiative.

Let me see if I can paraphrase what Paul seems to be saying here. If I freely, voluntarily come up to you and say, "Friend, I am interested in you. If you will come by my house this afternoon, I will give you a thousand dollars to help you with that little project you are involved in." And then in the afternoon you appear at my front door, and lay claim to the thousand dollars, I would not then say, "Now friend, I do want to give to you the thousand dollars, but I am going to add one little condition. My house sure does need painting very badly, so I will give you the thousand dollars when you have completed painting my house." None of us would ever enter into such an agreement, and then at a subsequent time try to add other conditions to the agreement. So the application is clear, If God promised to Abraham and to his seed salvation freely if they would receive it by faith, then he would not hundreds of years later add to the agreement toe law as another condition. No, the promise of God is unchangeable. Neither when you appeared at my door would I say to you, "Friend, I appreciate your coming by, but I have changed my mind. I do not believe that it would be wise for me to give you the thousand dollars." Now I can see a situation in which some men might act in that manner with regard to his Agreements or promises. But God encourages us that when we enter into an agreement that turns out not to be in our favor, it is important that we still honor our agreement. In doing this we will be like God.

"And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect." The Promises of God can always be depended upon for they do not change. This is especially true of the promise offering salvation to us by faith. This promise of God is unalterable, irrevocable, unchangeable. Our God stands by His word and keeps His covenant.

This is a most encouraging thing to me. Can you imagine what our predicament would be if God were not a God of truth and faithfulness? What if God changed His mind about a matter as often as some of us? What if God could not be counted on to keep His promises? None of us could have any assurance of salvation. Our assurance is based upon the Promise of God being unchangeable. God does not annul or alter that which He has established with us by promise. Blessed be His Holy Name!

II. THE PROMISE OF SALVATION IS UNCONDITIONAL.

One of the key notes of this Galatian letter is "grace". Grace is never far from the thoughts of the Apostle as he discusses salvation by faith. Grace in the Promise means that the promise is unconditional. This comes out in the paragraph in two ways.

First, Paul emphasizes the relationship of Christ to the promise. When God made the promise to Abraham, He extended the promise to the "seed" of Abraham. Your first and natural reaction when you read this in the book of Genesis is that this is a collective word for the descendants of Abraham. But Paul sees something more than this in it. That it did not just mean the physical descendants of Abraham is clear because Ishamael was a physical descendant and he was not included. Paul sees Jesus Christ as being the Seed to which the promise was extended. By this Paul is emphasizing a truth that is always in his letters --- we receive salvation through and in Christ, and in Him alone. In the second Corinthian letter Paul emphasized the relationship of Christ to the promises of God. You receive salvation by faith in Christ. On the basis of who He is you receive the benefit.

Let me remind you of an example of this in Scripture. When Joseph was able to interpret the dream of the Pharaoh, and to lead the nation of Egypt in their crash conservation program, the Pharaoh made certain promises to Joseph. Years later when the brothers of Joseph appeared in Egypt, they were received with favor and received special treatment because of the promises made to Joseph. It was their relationship with Joseph that brought them the blessing. So it is with us. We have no standing before Holy God, but because we have cast our lot with Jesus by faith, we are granted favor for His sake. Jesus is really everything --- He is the Seed!

The other word in this text that brings out this unconditional character of the promise is found in the summation of Paul. "For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise." You cannot have salvation by grace and by law at the same time. They cancel out each other. That it is by promise is emphasized by the word "gave". This is a special word. The word means to give unconditionally, -to give freely, to freely bestow as a gracious gift. An interesting thing about the word here is that Paul used a Greek perfect. He sees this giving of the promise to also be a settled matter. It has been done with the abiding results growing out of it. God did not enter into covenant with Abraham and his seed because of anything good He saw in Abraham. He did it only because of His love and grace. The covenant proves nothing about Abraham, but everything about God.

This aspect of the promise is emphasized by Paul in the Roman letter. There he wrote, "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." "Freely" is the word. The word could be translated "without a cause".

Jesus used this word in John's Gospel. He explained to His disciples, "They hated me without a cause." (John 15:25) The meaning of the word in this context is clear. The hatred the crowd had for Jesus was without any basis in the Lord Jesus. It could be explained only by what was in the heart of those so hating Him. There was nothing in Him to merit such hatred. So it is with God's great saving act, the promised salvation of the Lord. There is nothing in us that can explain it. The only explanation for it must be found in something that is in God. It was not based upon us measuring up to any conditions, or meriting any such attention.

Do you see the folly of man trying to add conditions to something that God has promised unconditionally? Oh the crime of attempting to revise the Promise of God to fit into our legalistic mind set, and to share the glory of salvation with sinful man. God's promise is freely and unconditionally given.

But what about faith --- is faith a condition? We must be careful not to make a work out of faith, or to give merit to faith. If we hang a sign out on fourth street that announces, "First Baptist Church is freely giving one hundred dollars to any one who can establish his need of money," and one of our poor wino friends reads the sign as he goes down the street, believes what the sign declares, enters the church, and rather quickly admits and establishes his need of the one hundred dollars. Does his believing the offer, and presenting himself to us make him deserving of the gift of one hundred dollars? He is still the man who has wasted his life and means? That is the way it is with the salvation of the Lord. God has hung out his sign in the Gospel declaring, "Whosoever will, let him come and take the water of life freely." Our believing the promise and responding to the promise does not make us any more deserving than the wino. It just puts us in the position to receive the blessing.

Thank God that the only condition involved is our admitting our need and reaching out empty hands to receive. The promise is unconditional and unchanging.

CONCLUSION

Are you standing on God's promise by faith? Or could you be still standing on your own promises? Some of us may still be guilty of offering to God our promises: We are ready to promise Him most everything in exchange for His favor. Our experience of keeping our promises however should warn us that this is folly. Our only hope of salvation is in taking our stand upon the Promise that God has given. That is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Will you take your stand on this promise today?