

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

GALATIANS 3:15-18

God has always promised that those who place their faith in Him will be in a right relationship with Him.

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Standing On The Promises

Galatians 3:15-18

Paul has been arguing that the only way to be in a right relationship with God is through placing our faith in Jesus Christ. He has argued from experience, from philosophy, and from theology. This morning, we will watch him take a very common practice that we all understand and carry over by analogy the truth of salvation by faith.

He is going to talk about the promises of God. He will make it clear that the only way human beings have ever received these promises and will ever receive these promises is by receiving them by faith.

Paul is going to use the common practice of writing last will and testaments. The Romans, Greeks, and Jews used wills to pass on their possessions to their children, family, and friends.

I know you all think my wife is this kind, passive woman that puts up with all my craziness. But let me tell you a story about when we were making our living wills.

We were in the process of putting together our wills. One Sunday, when I was watching the Bears' football game, she came in and started talking about what we wanted. I made my answer short and sweet, "I never want to exist in a vegetative state, dependent on some machine and taking fluids from a bottle."

Immediately she got up, unplugged the TV, and threw out all my beer.

Obviously, God took much more care in putting our inheritance together. God has promised us eternal life and a right relationship with Him if we will simply receive it by faith.

Again, I think it is necessary to remind us that Paul is primarily addressing and arguing against Jewish-Christians. However, he expects Gentile-Christians to follow along and understand what he is trying to prove. His theme throughout Galatians is that no one can ever be in a right relationship with God by being good or religious. The only way to be in a right relationship with God is by placing our faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. Some of the early Jewish-Christians were trying to insist that not only did people need to place their faith in Jesus to be saved, they also had to embrace the Jewish religious, ceremonial, and social laws as well as spelled out in the Old Testament.

In view of today's text, I am even uncomfortable talking about the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament. I think I would prefer to refer to them as the Older Testament. Walter Kaiser has done a lot of work on what he calls "Promise Theology." He builds on Willis Judson Beecher's book *The Prophets and The Promise*. Both Kaiser and Judson interpret the Bible in terms of God's promise of redemption to human beings.

I try to approach my study in three ways. First, I try to understand the text from the point of view of the original hearers. For example, when I read and study the Hebrew Scriptures, I try to understand them from a pre-Christ perspective. In other words, I try and understand them the way the Jews heard them. Secondly, I try to read the Scriptures from a Christo-centric point of view. In other words, now knowing that Jesus was the Promised Messiah of the Jews, I go back and read the entire Bible from the perspective that Jesus is the One promised way back in Genesis 3:15 when God promised that One would come and reverse the effects of sin and death. Further, I try to understand what promises Jesus has already fulfilled and what promises He will fulfill in the future. And lastly I try to understand how God is approaching human beings. In other words, what is He trying to communicate to us about our relationship with Him? To be sure, all three approaches overlap to some extent.

In today's text, it seems as if Paul is approaching Old Testament Scripture from all three of these perspectives. The main idea that Paul is arguing here is this. **GOD HAS ALWAYS PROMISED THAT THOSE WHO PLACE THEIR FAITH IN HIM WILL BE IN A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.** In other words, for Paul, from the moment human beings fell into sin, and separated themselves from God, God promised to make a way in which the relationship could be repaired. That promise was given to Adam and Eve, to Noah, and articulated most clearly to Abraham.

I. THE NATURE OF GOD'S PROMISES (VS 15)

We Can Trust That God Will Keep His Promises.

In verse 15, Paul describes the nature of God's promises. What he wants us to know is this. **WE CAN TRUST THAT GOD WILL KEEP HIS PROMISES.** Trust is a synonym for faith. What God wants from us is to trust Him. God says that we put ourselves in a place to receive His blessings when we place our faith in Jesus. What God is asking us to believe is that He loves us. We say that and in some sense we believe that. However, there is a part of us that thinks we have to obey rules, be good, or do something to earn His love. But that attitude demonstrates a lack of faith in God's promise to love us.

A. THE PROMISE GIVER

First of all, Paul describes the Promise Giver. Keeping in mind that Paul is addressing Jewish-Christians, there can be no doubt about Who has the inheritance to give. For the Hebrews, God was the One Who was the primary party in making covenants with His people. There is no doubt that Paul is talking about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had approached the nation of Israel with a variety of proposals and covenants throughout history. But Paul will focus particularly on the promises God made to Abraham, since that was the start of the Hebrew nation.

B. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE PROMISE

And that brings us to the next point. Who are the recipients of this promise? The main promise Paul is focusing on is that God promised to make a way in which we can be in a right relationship with Him. The recipient of the original promise was Abraham. But through Abraham, his children, grandchildren, and the nation of Israel we all be included. Paul's point is going to be that to receive God's promise of a restored relationship, people receive that promise through faith. For Paul, it has always been faith, it is currently faith, and it will always be faith, that we enter this right and restored relationship with God. And so Paul starts out this section by addressing his audience as brothers and sisters. That means first of all, he is primarily addressing fellow Jews who had embraced Jesus as the Promised Messiah, he is also addressing the Gentile believers, and he is addressing all of us who have confessed Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The promise of salvation comes to those who accept it in faith, trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God to keep His promises.

C. THE PERMANENCE OF THE PROMISE

Paul goes on to emphasize the permanence of this promise. First of all, look at the word covenant; the NLT uses the word irrevocable agreement. In Greek and Hebrew the word describes an official agreement between two parties. However, the parties are not equals. The agreement takes place between a greater party and a lesser party. God is the greater: Abraham and all of us who receive these promises are the lesser. The point is that God has everything to offer: we have nothing. Since God is perfect, holy, and just, He cannot lie. What He promises, He will do.

Paul uses an example that we all understand. Once we make a legal will, no one else can come along and alter our will. Let's say that I make a legal will leaving all my money to my wife and children. None of you can come along and alter that will. Further, my wife or children cannot choose to exclude one of the other recipients. I'm aware of how twisted and perverted our judicial system today. But in general, you understand the concept. Once we execute a legally binding document, no one can change it.

Paul's point is this. If God makes a promise, no one can come along later and change the conditions of the promise. As we have said before, when Abraham believed God, God declared him to be righteous. In other words, when Abraham trusted and followed God, God declared him to be in a right relationship with the One True and Living God. Abraham was promised that if he simply believed in and trusted God, he would be in a permanent and right relationship with God. Jesus promised us that if we place our faith and trust in Him, we too would be in a right relationship with God. If we have placed our faith in Jesus, we can be sure that God loves us. If you have not yet placed your faith in Jesus, be sure that if you do, you will be in a right relationship with God. God has promised it. **WE CAN TRUST THAT GOD WILL KEEP HIS PROMISES.**

II. THE PEOPLE OF PROMISE (VS 16)

We Can Trust In God's Promises Because Jesus Guarantees Them.

In verse 16 Paul describes the people of the promise. Paul's interpretation may seem a little strange to us but it was a common way to interpret and argue Scripture among the rabbis of his time. The upshot of Paul's argument is that **WE CAN TRUST IN GOD'S PROMISES BECAUSE JESUS GUARANTEES THEM.** If we go back and read through chapters 12, 15, and 17, of Genesis, we can list several promises.

A. THE PROMISES

In his commentary, Scot McKnight lists 8 promises. I am going to use his list, but I'm going to add 2 more and try to break them down into categories. Some of these promises apply directly to Abraham, some to his descendants that become the nation of Israel, some to Christ, and some to Christians. I realize this breakdown is not perfect because some promises overlap.

First, let me list the ones that I think apply solely to Abraham:

1. God will greatly bless him
2. He will become famous (A great name)

Next, there are promises that apply to Abraham and the Jewish nation:

1. Great Kings will come from their lineage

There will also be promises that only apply to the Jewish nation:

1. They will become a great nation
2. They will occupy the land

Then there will be promises that apply to Abraham and Jesus:

1. Father of many nations
2. All nations on earth will be blessed
3. Many offspring/descendants

Then there will be promises that apply to all Abraham's descendants, Israel, and Christ's descendants, The Church:

1. God will be God to His people
2. God will bless those that do good to them and curse those who try to harm them

Let me just take us back to the original promise. It is in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned, after God had confronted them and meted out their punishment of death and separation. In cursing the serpent, God said:

"From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"

(Genesis 3:15 / NLT).

God promised to send someone to destroy the work of the serpent and the serpent Himself. Before the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, people were saved by trusting that God would make good on His promise. When Jesus died on the cross, He made it clear that the effects of sin and disobedience were now taken care of when from the cross He said, "... 'It is finished!' Then He bowed his head and gave up His spirit" (John 19:30 / NLT).

And as Christians, we believe that when Christ returns, He will make good on the rest of the promise to destroy Satan once and for all.

B. THE ONE AND THE MANY

You will notice that the promises seem to get a little confused as we try to see who they apply to. It is an age-old problem of the one and the many. The concept of the one and the many has occupied philosophers throughout the centuries.

To be sure, this is a little bit different, but we can see how confusing it gets as we try and follow Paul's interpretation and explanation. He says that the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Then he goes on to say that Scripture records the word seed in the singular, not in the plural. He then goes on to argue that seed singular refers to Jesus Christ. As I said before, this was a common way rabbis of Paul's day interpreted and argued Scripture.

However, let's just take a few moments to follow this through. Abraham, the one, was given many promises that not only applied to him, but to the generations that followed him. For example, Abraham only saw his son Isaac, and perhaps Esau and Jacob. However, God promised him descendants that outnumber the stars in the sky and the sands on the beach. The nation of Israel, and all her kings inherited God's promises to Abraham. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we see God fulfill these promises. Ultimately, the Hebrew nation produced "The One" Jesus Christ. And Christ completes the promises made to Abraham and in turn gives birth to the church and produces many spiritual descendants that again inherit many blessings. So God started with the one, Abraham, who in turn produced the many, the nation of Israel. The many ultimately produced the One, Jesus, Who in turn produced the many, the church. And finally, Jesus will return as The One Who will come to finish the job, destroying evil once and for all.

C. THE INTERPRETATION

I mentioned this before, but I think we need to look at the interpretation of the Bible. It seems to me that the mega-story of the Bible is the redemption story of God. So for example, it is easy to see why the Jews of Jesus' day were confused as to Jesus' claims about being the Messiah. They didn't see Jesus destroy the Roman Empire and establish Israel as the world leader. Instead of there being global peace, Rome continued to conquer and oppress the world. Suffering didn't end. In fact, Jesus was publicly humiliated, tortured and killed in the most horrific way.

It is only when we receive Jesus in faith, that we can go back and read the Hebrew Scriptures from a Christo-centric perspective along with the rest of the New Testament writings that all the promises and prophecies make sense.

I still want to read the Hebrew Scriptures from the Jewish perspective first. Then I want to read the Scriptures from the perspective of pointing to Jesus. And with all Scripture from Genesis through Revelation tracing God's promise of redemption and His destruction of evil. That provides for some rich Bible study. The point of this section has been this. **WE CAN TRUST IN GOD'S PROMISES BECAUSE JESUS GUARANTEES THEM.**

III. THE PRIORITY OF PROMISE (VS 17)

The Only Way To Receive God's Promises Is To Approach Him In Faith.

In verse 17, Paul will demonstrate the priority of Promise over Law. In other words **THE ONLY WAY TO RECEIVE GOD'S PROMISES IS TO APPROACH HIM IN FAITH.**

Paul is trying to demonstrate that the Promise of God is superior to the Law of Moses. He will continue to argue this through the end of chapter 4. But in this verse he is going to argue the superiority of Promise based on chronology and priority.

A. THE CHRONOLOGY

Let's start with Chronology. It is difficult to understand how Paul comes up with the exact number of years being 430. It doesn't present an accuracy problem because it is very reasonable. Roughly speaking Abraham and Moses come 500 years apart. We roughly date Abraham at 2,000 B.C. and Moses 1500 B.C. For scholars, the challenge is trying to decide what is Paul's starting point and which event is he pointing to. Nevertheless, Paul's point is clear. God declared Abraham to be righteous before any religious laws were given. God declared Abraham to be in a right relationship with Him even before God commanded Abraham to be circumcised. And to further make his point, Paul points out that Abraham and all his descendants were made right with God by faith in God's promises. The Law of Moses only came 430 years later. Paul is arguing that all the Hebrew Patriarchs were saved by grace through faith. They didn't have the law. And further, God made all these promises to the nation of Israel, even before The Law of Moses existed.

B. THE PRIORITY

Paul then goes on to connect the priority of the promise not only because it is prior in time, but because of the priority of it's nature and message. God made several important promises to Abraham. The nature of the covenant was this. From God's perspective, He would fulfill all the promises He made to Abraham and his descendants, which included the nation of Israel all the way to the appearance of Jesus, 2,000 years later. For Abraham and his descendants to be in a position to receive these promises, they needed to continue to respond to God in faith, believing that He would continue to receive them on the basis of faith.

Paul goes on to argue that even though God gave Moses the Law, that didn't mean that the promises or the way to access them changed. The Law did not nullify the promises nor did the law change the way in which God accepted people. Later on in the book, Paul will describe the purpose and the nature of the Mosaic Law. But for now, he is simply saying that God made promises to Abraham and made it clear how Abraham and all who followed could access them. That did not end with Christ. Instead it was carried forward to today, and forwarded on to the end of time. We access God's promises through faith. Let me just make an aside here because Paul will address this topic later on in the book as well. Faith for Paul is defined on lifestyle actions we take based on what we believe. From the beginning, God received people into a right relationship with Him based on their faith in Him and all that He promised. People today are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. People tomorrow and to the end of this age will be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. **THE ONLY WAY TO RECEIVE GOD'S PROMISES IS TO APPROACH HIM IN FAITH.**

IV. THE LASTING PROMISE (VS 18)

As God's Children We Stand To Inherit All The Promises Of God.

In verse 18, Paul describes the promise as a lasting promise. I want us to think about this and let it sink in. **AS GOD'S CHILDREN WE STAND TO INHERIT ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD.** One of the things I constantly argue against is a type of "name it and claim it" theology. This type of theology goes through the Bible, tries to take what appears to be unconditional promises, and then demand that God fulfill His promises. There are a lot of false theologians, Bible teachers, and preachers going around promising things that God never promised. They promise their followers health and wealth.

A. THE HEIRS OF THE INHERITANCE

First of all, let's take a look at who the heirs of the inheritance are. All people throughout history who have given their lives to God in faith are heirs to the promises. We receive the inheritance He promised to make us His people. Here is how the Apostle Peter put it:

"As you come to Him, the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him — you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

*'See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in Him
will never be put to shame'" (I Peter 2:4-6 / NIV).*

Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we have become His new spiritual nation. But let me finish my argument against the health and wealth teachers. In his two New Testament letters, Peter talks a great deal about Christians suffering. Even Jesus promises that we will suffer. Did you catch that? Jesus promises that we will suffer. Listen to what He promises:

"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 / NIV).

Jesus promises that we will have trouble, but that we will be able to overcome it in the end. As God's children we are promised that He will be with us always. Let me just read you this promise from Paul's letter to the Romans:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39 / NIV).

That is the promise of God; that when we come to Him in faith we become His chosen and nothing can ever separate us from His love.

If you are a believer, then know this. You are a child of God. Nothing can ever separate you from His love. You may struggle with health, with sufferings of all kinds, and even with sin. Yet, keep on moving forward because God loves you and will one day make you perfect when you see Him face to face.

If you are not yet a believer, please do not waste any time because we never know when we will die or when Christ may return. Jesus has promised everyone eternal life if we will just receive Him and His finished work on the cross. We can be saved the same way Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, all the Hebrew saints, all the New Testament saints, and all believers throughout history were saved; by grace through faith.

B. THE VALUE OF THE INHERITANCE

The value of the inheritance is this. Paul says that if we try to receive eternal life based on keeping all the rules, we are doomed to failure. That is totally dependent on our strength, our goodness, and our intellect. There is no one good enough, smart enough, or holy enough to match God's holiness.

However, if we try to receive eternal life by depending on the holiness and goodness of Jesus, we cannot fail. We will definitely be saved because Jesus is God. He lived a perfect life. And He offered up His life on the cross to make us holy. Jesus promises that if we place our faith and trust in Him alone, He guarantees our salvation. Listen to what Jesus promises to all who come to Him in faith:

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37 / NIV).

The point is this. If we want to inherit eternal life, then we must place our faith in Christ alone. If we try to somehow try to get to heaven on our own merit, we will fail. The greatest of God's promises is eternal life. We become God's children by grace through faith. **AS GOD'S CHILDREN WE STAND TO INHERIT ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD.**

I know that we chase after all sorts of things in life. We want good jobs, we want to make a lot of money, be successful at our careers, to get a boyfriend a girlfriend a husband or a wife. We want all sorts of things. But there is really only one important promise that we should seek to inherit; and that is to be in a right relationship with God. That is available to all who are willing to act on God's promise. **GOD HAS ALWAYS PROMISED THAT THOSE WHO PLACE THEIR FAITH IN HIM WILL BE IN A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.**

How magnificent is God's promises that He will love us, call us His children, make sure that nothing in this world ever separates us from His love, and bring us back to live with Him in heaven for an eternity?

Listen to one of Jesus' last promises:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4 / NIV).

Yes, we know the way to a right relationship with God and we know the way to heaven. It is by placing our faith and trust in Jesus and His finished work on the cross. Never forget that we are saved by grace through faith.