

THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE IS A PERMANENT PROMISE Galatians 3:15-18

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Describe a time that your present experience was made, if not more pleasant, at least endurable by the promise of a good or better future.

Our present security and happiness depends in large measure on the certainty of the promise we have of a good future. We are much more peaceful, happy people in the present if we are certain to receive a great good in the future. Our present state of contentment then depends in part upon two things: First, is the future promised to me good? Second, is it guaranteed? God has promised us, in Christ, enormous benefits, some of which we begin to experience now but most of which will be fully experienced when Christ returns and we receive our glorified bodies and go to live with him in the new heavens and the new earth. The good that God promises is infinitely superior to any good that you can possibly imagine. The point Paul seeks to make in these four verses is that this enormous good, God's salvation, is a certainty because it is based upon God's promise and upon nothing else.

STUDY

1. In light of the tone of Paul's letter (1:6-9, 3:1-5) up to this point, what does the use of the term, "brothers" communicate? What should we learn from this?

There have not been many hopeful words in this letter to this point. However, v. 15 begins with a word of hope. Paul calls the members of the churches in Galatia "brothers." He would not call the false teachers "brothers." He calls them false brothers, agents of the devil and destined for hell. However, he treats the recipients of this

letter as Christians even though they are in many ways behaving and believing as non-Christians. He shows by this how we are to be slow to condemn those who suffer from ignorance of Christian truth or appear to embrace false teaching while professing to be Christians. We are to patiently and gently but firmly instruct and correct those who do not understand or embrace true doctrine so that they may be secure in Christ. We are out to help one another hold fast to the true Christ so that our faith is not vain or useless.

2. What is the point of v. 15?

The argument Paul makes in v. 15 is this. You all know that legal human contracts, once they are put in force by a signature or some other form of agreement cannot be invalidated or added to. When you and the landlord sign the year lease with a rent of \$400/month you can't unilaterally decide to pay \$300 per month. The landlord cannot come into your apartment while you are at work and remove all your furniture and put it in another apartment. Once the lease is in force as a contract you both must act in accord with it. We, as human beings keep the contracts we make and do not try to change them because we know you can't change contracts once they are in force.

3. Why does Paul bring up how human contracts are treated at this point? What is the implied criticism/comparison he is making?

The implied question here is this: if you know that human contracts can't be changed then how is it you think you can change God's contract? God made a unilateral covenant with Abraham, a guaranteed contract. Just like human contracts, God's contract cannot be altered. Therefore, Paul wants to know how it is that they respect human contracts but refuse to honor the contract that God made with Abraham and his seed. As John Calvin says, "It is highly disgraceful and base that the testimony of God should have less weight with us than that of a mortal man." How is it that you respect human contracts but ignore the covenant of God?

4. What are some other ways that we show a preference for human beings, which we don't show to God?

What Paul does here is show how much we are without excuse. We know how to respect human contracts and yet we can't respect the contract made by the king of the universe who gives us every breath we take and who gave Christ for our sins and raised him from the dead. Our problem isn't that we don't know how to trust or love or submit. Our problem is that we are more eager to trust what is untrustworthy rather than the only faithful God. We are more willing to love infinitely inferior persons and things than the most beautiful and gracious of all beings. We are more secure in submitting to foolish people than we are to the wisest being in the universe. If you respect and live in accord with human contracts then why won't you respect God's contract? If you know how to trust your insurance company, then why won't you trust Christ? If you know how to respect police officers and employers and parents then why won't you respect the king of the universe?

God's salvation is given as a permanent promise therefore it is wrong to alter it.

5. What does Paul say is true about every promise God made to Abraham and to his offspring as recorded in the book of Genesis?

Every promise God made to Abraham and his offspring is actually made to Christ, who is the "Seed" of Abraham. In short, Christ is the executor of the unilateral contract that God made with Abraham. He is the fulfillment of and the one who fulfills all the promises God made to Abraham.

6. Review these promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the book of Genesis. Based on what Paul says in v. 16, how are we to understand these promises?

- Gen. 12:7 *When God says, "to your seed I will give this land," he is talking about giving not merely the land of Canaan but the whole earth to Christ. Note the references in Gen. 13:16 and*

others to God telling the patriarchs to look north, south, east and west and all the land in each direction will belong to them.

- Gen. 13:16 *When God promises to make Abraham's seed as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore and the dust of the earth he is talking about the millions of Christians who will come from Christ's death and resurrection.*
- Gen. 17:6-8 *When God says that kings and nations will come from Abraham's body he is talking about Christ the king and that new "nation", the church, made up of people from all nations of the world.*
- Gen. 22:17 *When he promises that his seed will possess the gates of his enemies he is talking about Christ's coming again and putting all of his enemies under his feet.*
- Gen. 22:18 *When God tells Abraham "in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed," that seed to whom God is referring is Christ. God was telling Abraham prophetically that all the nations of the world would be blessed in Christ; that is, that some people from all the nations of the world will be saved by Christ*

7. What is the basis of Paul's claim that all the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ultimately promises made to and about Christ?

The logic Paul uses is this. Every single time in Genesis when the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are mentioned the word that is used is the singular noun "seed." Paul says God doesn't refer to "seeds, as to many people, but to seed, as to one person, who is Christ."

8. On the surface, what appears to be the problem with Paul's logic?

The problem with Paul's logic is that it completely ignores what the word "seed" means in the contexts within Genesis. The word "seed" is a collective, singular noun. When the farmer tells his son, "Go get the seed and put it into the corn planter so I can plant the back forty," he isn't telling his son to get one seed. He is telling him to get the bushels of seed corn in the truck. It is clear in the original context that "seed" does refer to many, not to just one. So is Paul just making the OT say whatever he wants it to say? Is he ignoring all the rules of interpretation and acting like the text means whatever he wants it to mean?

9. John Calvin in his commentary gives the most reasonable explanation to what Paul is actually doing. Compare the promise given in Genesis 12:7 with Genesis 21:8-12 & 25:1-6. Do all of Abraham's "seed" inherit the promise of the land? (See also Genesis 3:15 where "the seed of the woman" is the one who will crush Satan's head and also Romans 9:6-13.)

In Genesis 12:7 God says to Abram, "to your seed I will give this land." However, in Genesis 17 and 21 God makes clear that Ishmael, one of Abram's "seeds" is not going to inherit any portion of the land. And in Genesis 25, his 12 sons by his second wife, Keturah, are given no portion of the land of Canaan. In other words, the promise does not apply to every descendant of Abram, but only to the chosen seed, the elect son. Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Are both of them recipients of the promise made to Abraham? No, only Jacob receives the blessing and only Jacob's sons inherit the land. The point is that not all the 'seeds' of Abraham inherit the promise but only, in every case, the chosen 'seed'. What Paul is arguing is that there is no way that the seed of Abraham can ultimately refer to multiple people because all of his descendants are in need of salvation, not the source of salvation, except for that one Seed who perfectly fulfills all the requirements and bore the curse and is able to save all who come to God through him. I think there is a further connection between Abraham's seed and the "seed of the woman" in Genesis 3:15 whom God says will crush the head of Satan. It is the expectation throughout the entire OT that there is going to be one descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David

who will be the Messiah and who will be the one to fulfill and complete all the promises God made to Abraham. There is no place in the OT where the promise is given on the basis of human descent or performance but always on the basis of divine choice or election.

10. If the divine promise is made to Christ, then what is the only way for us to be recipients of that promise?

If the unilateral promises God made to Abraham and his seed are only fulfilled in and with Christ, then the only question that you must answer is, am I in Christ? Am I a party to the contract God made with Abraham by being united to the descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ, to whom all the promises are made?

God's salvation is given as a permanent promise therefore Christ is the only one who can execute the contract and its promises.

11. According to vv. 17-18, what is the relationship of the law of Moses, given at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19ff.) to the covenant God made with Abraham and his Seed? Why is this the relationship?

What Paul says next is show that whatever might be the purpose of God in giving all the laws and decrees to Moses, it does not affect the promise made to Abraham. He says the law was given 430 years after the promise was given to Abraham. (NOTE: Paul gets that number from Exodus 12:40-41, "Now the length of time the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt." By using that number he is telling us that when he says the promise made to Abraham, he is actually thinking about all the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons as they are contained in the book of Genesis (The total time from the first promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 until the law of Moses is approximately 650 years). He is doing what the OT does all the time when it refers to an entire family by referring to the head of that family.) So all the promises made to Abraham and his seed, as recorded in Genesis, were made 430 years prior to God giving the 10 commandments and the ceremonial laws and the civil laws to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Because God made a

covenant with Abraham by a promise then whatever purpose God had for giving the law to Moses it cannot alter the promise God freely gave to Abraham and his seed by his grace. Just like you cannot change a human contract once it is in force, so you cannot alter God's covenant, made by promise, by grace to Abraham. Don't miss this point. God has a purpose in giving the 10 commandments and the temple regulations and the civil law code to Israel. Paul is going to tell us what that purpose is in vv. 19-25. However, whatever the reason for the law, it cannot be given so that people obey it in order to get the blessing promised to Abraham because the blessing is based on a gracious promise without any reference to human obedience.

He says in v. 18 that if the inheritance depends upon law, then it cannot depend upon a promise. Promise making and law keeping are mutually exclusive. You can read the entire book of Genesis and you will not find one condition upon any promise that God makes to Abraham and his seed. God merely, out of his own good pleasure and without requiring anything of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or his sons, promises to give them the land, make them into a great nation, be with them, guard them, curse their enemies, multiply them and bless all the nations of the world through them without their doing anything. On the other hand the Law of Moses promises things to the Israelites if they will obey the commands of God. Paul is saying in vv. 17-18 that whatever the reason for the Law of Moses, it cannot be for the purpose of eliminating the promise God made to Abraham and his Seed. The promise made is based entirely upon God's graciousness, his free and sovereign decision, out of his good pleasure, not based upon anything in any human being. God gave the promises to Abraham and his seed without requiring any compensation from him. The contract he made did not depend upon Abraham fulfilling any duties or obligations. He merely believed God would do what he promised to do.

12. What does this fact mean to us? What difference ought it to make to us that salvation is based upon unconditional, gracious promises God made to Christ and not upon our obedience to any laws?

We do not work to earn the promise but we believe that God is going to give us all that he promises to Christ by our believing that promise, not by our doing anything. This is to be our security and our peace. If the inheritance depends upon our law keeping, our obedience, then we can have no peace and no security because we can never know if we've done enough. We are always confronted by the fact we have not done enough. However, the inheritance is ours by God's permanent promise. He made a promise and he cannot go back on his word and so our future is guaranteed. God's promise to justify you, give you his Spirit, resurrect you on the last day, give you an eternal home in heaven is not a conditional promise to you in Christ. It is permanent, secure and cannot be altered by your obedience or disobedience to God's Law because God's law was given 430 years after he made a covenant with Abraham and therefore that law cannot have any impact on that promise. This is not some abstract, theological doctrine, which can offer no practical help. I don't think I could tell you anything more practical than this.

13. What are some ways this promise affects your joy, your motivation to love others and your hope in the midst of trouble?

God's salvation is given as a permanent promise therefore the contract to give salvation to Abraham and his seed is by grace and not by the law