

Text: Gal. 3:15-18

Title: "Abraham's example: Justification by faith is covenantal"

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Introduction: I bought a book this past week titled, *A Promise Kept: The Story of an Unforgettable Love*. The book is about a Christian couple who served the Lord together as missionaries in Japan for twelve years, before the husband became the president of a Bible college for another twenty-two years.

While serving the Lord at that school, the wife developed symptoms of Alzheimer's disease while only in her late fifties. The book was written by her husband who cared for her faithfully during those years of sickness. His marriage to her was certainly *A Promise Kept: The Story of an Unforgettable Love*. I have had two very powerful examples of this very kind of love in my life personally, which I cherish with great thanksgiving.

The chapter titles reminded me of my own marriage vows and the true nature of the love-covenant of marriage: (1) "In Sickness and in Health"; (2) "To Love and to Cherish"; (3) "For Better, for Worse"; (4) "From This Day Forward"; (5) "For Richer, For Poorer"; (6) "Till Death Do Us Part." These are the promises we keep in the covenant of marriage, and the Bible is clear that as we do so we illustrate the covenantal nature of God's dealings with his people.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah is the faithful husband of an unfaithful wife in Israel. In the New Testament, local churches are the chaste virgin presented to Christ as His bride. God's love for His people is a covenantal love. It is a

promise kept in the lives of sinners who could not earn it or ever deserve it.

As the apostle Paul tries to help Galatian churches understand that their justification cannot depend on their works, he turns in these verses to the truth that justification by faith is not only Scriptural as we saw last week, but also covenantal.

A covenant is simply a promise. God's offer of salvation is a promise we accept by faith, and it is a promise He keeps.

How can we know that God will keep his promise to save us apart from our works? Paul gives four answers to that question in this passage.

I. God will keep His promise to justify apart from works because He is not inferior to man (v. 15).

Illustration: We admire the author of the book I bought for his unfailing devotion to a wife who could not return his love and care. Marriage for him became a one-way street. We would feel differently about this man if we learned from reading his book that he actually had a list of ten requirements that he demanded his wife follow perfectly every day in order to earn the right to continue to be his wife. She would have failed, the marriage would have ended, and the vows of their wedding day would not have been a promise kept, but rather a promise broken.

Application: Paul's point in this first verse of our passage is that even the ways of men understand that this is how a covenantal promise is supposed to work.

In theology, we recognize that the Abrahamic Covenant was one of God's great unearned (one-way-street) promises. Sometimes that is called a *grant covenant* or an *unconditional covenant*.

The blessings of the covenant of Sinai were blessings to be earned. Israel had to obey God's law to earn its blessing. But the Abrahamic Covenant was unearned, as were the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant, which expanded and confirmed God's original promise to Abraham.

The unearned nature of God's promise to Abraham is illustrated by Israel's disobedient history and perhaps best explained by a passage in Jeremiah that contrasts the Sinaitic Covenant with the New Covenant: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord" (Jer. 31:31-32).

So if a man can refuse to nullify or amend his marriage vows in the face of his spouse's sickness, how much more can God keep His promise to save those who trust in Him? God will keep His promise to save apart from works because He is not inferior to man. In fact, His promise is far more secure than ours are because of what Paul says next about this promise kept.

II. God will keep His promise to justify apart from works because it is a promise He made to Christ (v. 16).

Illustration: You may remember that the Lord Jesus spoke of the importance of the jots and tittles of Scripture in the

Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:18). A jot is the smallest Hebrew letter (the yod), and it looks a bit like an apostrophe ("). A tittle is the small stroke which is the part of the letter that distinguishes one letter from another that is similar (like the slash in our Q which makes it different from an O; Heb: ך vs. ך). What Jesus believed about His Bible is that every word and every part of a word is spoken by God as His own Word.

Application: Paul clearly felt the same way about his Bible, because he builds his argument on the difference between *seed* (singular) and *seeds* (plural). He explains that the promise to Abraham was for Abraham and for Abraham's seed, not seeds. He then interprets that singular as a reference to the Messiah (Christ) rather than to the many other natural descendants of Abraham.

Now just as we experience in English, Paul's Hebrew would have included singular nouns that were collectives. We can say that the farmer spent the day planting seed and mean that he planted more than one seed. We do not have to say seeds. That was true for Paul as well.

But Paul is showing us that we must take the context into consideration whenever we interpret a passage of Scripture. He is telling us that in the Abrahamic Covenant, we have to interpret *seed* as a true singular rather than a collective.

The context that Paul relied on for this conclusion was the usage of *seed* in the Book of Genesis. For example, in Genesis 3:15, the seed of the woman is a true singular referring to an individual, and this is plain from the following phrase which says "He [singular - i.e., the seed] shall bruise your head." That Eve understood it this way is plain from Gen.

4:25, where she refers to Seth as another seed instead of Abel.

In Genesis 9:9 the collective sense of *seed* is used as God promises to Noah, his sons, their seed, and all other living things never to destroy the earth with a global flood again. But the Noahic Covenant is providential and universal, not salvific and messianic. Paul understood that when God made the promise of salvation through a seed, He was speaking of a singular Seed or Descendant, not seeds. Promises about salvation are always promises about the Savior, the Messiah. There is no salvation without Him.

So why is it important to Paul that seed refers to Christ in the Abrahamic Covenant? The answer is that Paul understands that the Abrahamic Covenant is a promise not only made to Abraham, but also to Christ. This is a promise from God to Christ that in Him all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 22:18).

We might have good reason to worry about whether fulfilling this promise is truly just when we think of it as a promise to sinful Abraham or worse-yet the sinful descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people; but we have no such worry about its fulfillment when we see it as a promise made to righteous Christ.

It is perfectly just that in Him all the families of the earth would find salvation, for He is the propitiation for our sins. He is the Lamb of God without blemish and without spot, who sacrificed Himself in our place, taking our penalty that we might be saved.

God will keep His promise to justify apart from works because it is a promise He made to Christ, who made keeping this promise a just work on the cross of Calvary.

III. God will keep His promise to justify apart from works because God does not contradict Himself (vv. 17-18a).

Illustration: During the middle ages, as late as the 13th century, a document called “The Donation of Constantine” was used by the Roman Catholic Church to prove the papal superiority of the bishopric of Rome over other bishops. The document contained an imperial decree believed to be the Emperor Constantine’s authorization of the Roman bishop as the new head of the Christian Church.

The Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla demonstrated that the document was a forgery, because its language came from the 8th century, some four hundred years or more too late to be from the pen of Constantine.

Application: Paul would have never viewed the Mosaic law as a forgery, but he does point out that it came over four hundred years too late to give us the key to our justification as sinners before God’s holy law. God had already established that the key to our justification is to believe the promise made to Abraham. To say now that the key is to do the works of the law is to make God contradict Himself. This He never does.

So using the law to gain justification by works is a deceptive forgery of God’s plan for our justification. It is to get justification wrong, and tragically it makes void to us the promise that really and truly can save us if we only accept it by faith. How many will be forever lost because of the deceptive forgery of justification by faith plus works?

IV. God will keep His promise to justify apart from works because salvation is by grace (v. 18b).

Illustration: A husband who cares for a sick wife who trusted him to do so gives to that wife every day something that she cannot earn or repay. The husband gives this selfless care every day through keeping a promise – his marriage vows.

Application: That component of covenantal-love is grace. Grace is always a one-way street. It is a gift that cannot be earned; it is the way God justified Abraham when he was saved; and it is the way you and I must be justified today.

In Christ, God has shown us grace through a promise – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Will you believe? Will you accept this gracious gift?

Conclusion: One trouble with trying to care for Alzheimer patients is their tendency to wander away and become lost. Researches at one university developed a plan for what they called a “Silver Alert” system to help families locate patients who become hard to find.

Paul’s instruction in this chapter functions like a “Silver Alert” system. God has promised to save sinners in Christ. It is all of grace and accepted by faith.

Have you wandered away? Have you wandered into a religion that tells you that you also need to work to be justified? Perhaps today the Holy Spirit will bring your wandering to an end as you believe God’s promise to justify you by faith in Christ this morning.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*