

# Precious and Magnificent Promise

by Steve Zeisler

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Anyone who has had experience as a parent will recognize later that there are two choices, two covenants you can choose between in raising your children: there are deals and there are promises. A deal made with children is a two--party agreement; responsibility and consequences are agreed on ahead of time. Deals can be both positive and negative. Here is an example of a positive deal: 'If you do your homework I will read you a story.' An example of a negative deal could be: 'If you don't eat your peas you can't have dessert.' But in either case each side has a responsibility. An agreement is made ahead of time, with certain consequences to follow.

'Promises' are also a way by which life is transmitted to children. But a promise operates differently. A promise is based on one person: the parent expresses love from his or her heart to the child. I grew up in Southern California, and I have always liked Disneyland. I remember saying to my children when they were barely old enough to understand what I was talking about that I intended to take them to Disneyland at the earliest opportunity. I made that promise to them because I loved them. No conditions were involved: they did not have to do anything; they did not have to contribute anything to help me keep my promise. Based on my love for them and my desire that they experience Disneyland as I had as a child, I promised them that I would take them there.

Children can tell the difference between deals and promises. Even preschoolers can tell the difference between deals and promises! They react with a sense of outrage if you try to change a promise into a deal. Having once promised to take your children to Disneyland, you cannot later add conditions to that promise, conditions such as, 'We are not going to go to Disneyland unless you pass the second grade,' for instance. They will very quickly remind you, 'No, you promised we could go. You promised. "

The difference between a deal and a promise is the issue we are going to look at today in the book of Galatians. We are in chapter 3 in our study of this book, where the apostle Paul presents a series of arguments, a series of persuasions, that we ought to choose to live life based on the Spirit; to have our identity in the cross, to trust Jesus Christ for our life, and to reject religion that is based on human performance, on our appearance, on the feedback we get from others, our standing in the organization, etc. We ought to embrace the one and reject the other for good reasons, Paul declares. Two of those reasons, as we have already seen, are, first, our own experience of the Holy Spirit, and secondly, what the Bible itself teaches.

In the section we will look at today, Paul begins with the words, 'Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations.' He is speaking of human experience--common sense, in effect, the kind of common sense that even a child who can tell the difference between a promise and a deal can understand. Here the apostle will say that the promise made to Abraham is one thing, while the Law, which came .., is quite another.

Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

The main focus of our study this morning will be the promises which God made to Abraham in the Book of Genesis. First, however, let us examine the logic of this argument a little more closely. Promises, as we have seen, whether they are made from parent to child, or God to his people, come from a heart of love. Promises

are made as a result of an outpouring of concern on the part of one for another. Those are the kind of promises which God made to Abraham: they were based solely on God himself.

Further, these promises, Paul declares, were spoken not only to Abraham but to his 'seed.' The 'seed,' the one child to whom the promise was also made, according to Paul, is Jesus Christ. Paul's argument is not based on the meaning of the word 'seed' (which in Hebrew as well as in English is a collective noun). I believe what he is saying is, 'If we read the Bible and realize the way this promise was received in Old Testament history, we ought to have known all along that God intended one Person to be the recipient of the promise. Abraham received the promise, one of his children received the promise, and, gloriously for us, that one child is Jesus Christ. And we are among a multitude in that one Individual because he opened up his arms to embrace anyone who would come to him.' Thus the promise was made to Abraham and to the Individual God saw downstream from Abraham, his seed. By verse 29 this argument is fully developed: 'And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.'

Let us look for a moment at some Old Testament history. Abraham had an illegitimate son, Ishmael, and he had a legitimate son, Isaac, by his wife Sarah. After Sarah died he married again and had six other sons. While Abraham's children all founded nations, only one of them was in the stream by which life would be passed on. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, but only one of them was the chosen one through whom the stream of life would be passed on. Jacob had twelve sons, but only one of them, Judah, was to be the forefather of the Messiah. Jesse had eight sons, but only one of them, David, was chosen to be the King of Israel. All throughout Old Testament history the process was that generation after generation one person, one follower, was chosen. The 'seed' who was to come would receive and fulfill that promise. That is what Paul is saying here. Abraham received a promise, and Old Testament history helps us to see that there was coming that one Person, the 'seed' to whom the promise was also made. The Scriptures, the prophets, the apostles, Paul himself here announces, 'Jesus Christ was that long-awaited individual.'

So the promise was made to Abraham and to his seed. The glorious part for us is that we are included in that 'seed,' who is Christ. He is big enough to invite any who will come to him to come and join him, so that what is true for him becomes true for us as well.

Then, 430 years later, an additional arrangement was instituted by God. This time God made a deal, not a promise, with Israel. This deal demanded certain responsibilities of each party to the deal. There were consequences involved, and each side had to uphold its part. But that deal was made at a much later time than the promise was given to Abraham, thus it could have no effect on that promise. The promise and the deal cannot be mixed together with one another because they accomplish different results. Thus the fact that the Law came later cannot invalidate the great, life-giving promise that was given originally. That is the argument of these verses.

Now let us trace the promises made to Abraham in the Book of Genesis. Abraham was raised in an idolatrous culture. There was no particular reason to commend him as he grew up in Ur of the Chaldees, except that at a certain moment in his life the Lord God who made everything spoke to him, and began a process that went on all through Abraham's life. God made extraordinary promises to him, based on nothing except his own love. The first of these promises is found in chapter 12 of Genesis, in these words:

**I will make you a great nation,  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;  
And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse,  
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.** (Gen. 12:2-3)

The Lord God promised Abraham to make his name great; that by God's own actions he would bless him and make him a blessing to everyone. Realize that in that promise Abraham was given self-worth, an identity, a name. Abraham was given from God's own hand what all people born into this race long for: an identity, the ability to know who they are, to receive the value, standing and security that comes from knowing who they

are. In our day people are suffering terribly from the consequences of not knowing who they are. All around us we see evidence of a desperate longing for self--worth. People go to ridiculous lengths--from the clothes they wear to the groups they join--in a futile effort to gain for themselves an identity, a name, a sense of self--worth. But God's promise to Abraham was, "I will make your name great." In that promise he was giving Abraham something that every human being who has ever been born longs for.

Many of you have seen the modern musical 'Annie.' It is a story, based on a Depression-era comic strip, that is universally understood: the tale of an orphan girl who longs to discover her heritage. Annie has an opportunity to be adopted by Daddy Warbucks, an incredibly wealthy figure, and given all the advantages which wealth has to offer, but she rejects it. She grew up with a little piece of paper that she held next to her heart, with half of a locket: a note left to her by her parents. She refuses adoption because she wants to know who her parents are. All the advantages of great wealth are less valuable than the discovery of her parents and her name, her identity.

That kind of reasoning makes sense to children. Within every one of us there is a desire to know who we are. That is a choice that a child would make: 'Give me self--worth. Give me a name. Give me standing of some kind.' God's first promise to Abraham was that he would know who he was in the eyes of God; that the Lord God himself would make a great name for Abraham; and that everyone would be blessed by him. What a magnificent promise!

Later in Abraham's life, God took him to the land of Canaan and said to him, 'Walk about this land. I am going to give it to you.' (Gen. 13:17) When he made that promise, God was placing Abraham back in a right relationship with the created world. Since the time of Adam, men and women have lived in a broken relationship with the creation. We are constantly reminded of this fact in this election year. Candidates ask for votes while they are standing atop toxic waste sites; demands are made for land reform in El Salvador. As a matter of fact, the issue of land reform in that tiny country may very well affect who is elected President of the United States. An article in this morning's paper questions whether it is safe to drink the local water.

The environment is deteriorating; there is evidence on every side that we are not in a right relationship with the creation. Yet, when he gave him the land of Canaan, what God was doing for Abraham was saying to him, 'You belong here. This is your home. I am putting back together the human master of creation with the created world.' Here again was a magnificent promise. How it meets the longing of the human heart: that man is a steward of the earth and all of the beauty of creation, and as such he should preserve, not destroy it.

Later, God invaded Abraham's life again and made him another promise: 'Do not fear, Abram, I will be a shield to you. Your reward will be very great.' (Gen. 15:1) 'Don't be afraid, Abram. It is no longer necessary for you to live out your life in fear because I will be a shield for you.' What a promise! God himself was undertaking to enter into the dangerous world in which Abraham lived and become his shield, his protector.

And we do live in a dangerous world. We fear for the safety of our children. In recent years there has been an increased awareness of the sexual abuse and physical abuse of children. Thousands upon thousands of them live in terror in their own homes. They are terrified of their parents, their step-parents, or their day--care center teachers. Abused children grow up surrounded by a wall of fear and they withdraw as a result. There may be some people listening to me who have lived in fear all their lives because of the way they were raised as children. And there are so many other things that cause fear and uncertainty--physical ill-health, the loss of important relationships, failure at work. We live in a very threatening world. But here the promise made to Abraham is, 'I will be your shield. You do not need to be afraid any longer.'

What a magnificent word from God! And it is a promise, not a deal, but a promise made to Abraham, a promise which came from the heart of a God who loved him. And that promise was made to the seed of Abraham, too, to Abraham and his seed, who is Christ, in whom we live. Thus we too inherit that promise.

Later, God took Abraham outside his tent at night and showed him the starlit sky. This was not the same sky that we see at night, which is adulterated with all the diffused light of a modern society. No, this was a Sierra sky, a brilliant, magnificent sky. God told Abraham to count the stars in that sky, and said to him, in effect, 'If you can count the stars of the heavens, then you will have some idea of what your eternal influence will be.'

There will be children born to you as innumerable as the stars in the heavens.' What God was promising Abraham at this point, I believe, was an influence on eternity that would be immeasurable and would never end.

Do you ever wish that your life would count for something? Do you worry that your 70 or 80 years will finally amount to nothing, that it won't have mattered whether you had lived or not? We all desire significance. We all want to have some lasting quality to our lives. Abraham too longed for that, and it was promised him by God.

Some of you can name the six or eight people from this community who have been most influential in the world wide computer revolution. These men, the founders of what has become Silicon Valley, have in some sense altered the direction of history. Their ideas, their choices, their companies have revolutionized human living and will continue to. It must give them a great deal of satisfaction to say, 'My life has counted for something.' But--infinitely beyond the sense of self--worth that comes from having advanced technology is the sense of worth that was promised to Abraham by God that 'your seed, those who follow you, will be beyond numbering'; that your influence will be unending. What a magnificent promise was made to Abraham! But realize, too, that we in Christ inherit the promise of God, offering a life of eternal significance.

Later on God again appeared to Abraham and made him a promise. He told him, 'I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your seed after you. I will give to you and your seed after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.' (Gen. 17:7-8) God made a promise to Abraham and to the seed of Abraham that he would be their God personally, intimately, knowing and being known by them. What a magnificent promise: a right relationship with God himself; being known by him and having intimate knowledge of him.

Throughout Abraham's life, God appeared to him and made certain promises to him. He promised him a name, self--worth, and an identity; he promised him a right relationship with the created world again; he promised him freedom from fear; he promised him influence that was immeasurable and unending; he promised him a life of intimacy with himself; and he promised all these things to the seed of Abraham.

The One who was coming as Abraham's 'seed' was the Messiah Jesus Christ. And if we are in Christ then we all inherit the promises of Abraham. These are not deals, they are promises. Based solely on God's ability to keep his promises, life, an inheritance, righteousness (as Paul will say later in this passage), are promised to us because we belong to Jesus Christ. Paul is arguing here that those magnificent certainties that are ours because of who God is cannot in any sense be diluted by a second program that God introduced later for a different purpose. Do not ever let anyone take away from you the freedom to believe God and live life based on his promises. Do not allow anyone to tell you that you have not performed well enough. Performance is not an issue. This is a promise, not a deal, and the promise has priority: it came first. It's impossible to mix the promise and the deal together. They operate differently from each other. They cannot in any sense be joined.

Two questions naturally arise from this. The first is asked in verse 19: 'Why the Law then?' If the deal which came later does not give life, what purpose does it have? Why the Law?' The second question is in verse 21: 'Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God?' Is it antithetical to the promise? Are they in opposition to each other? Verse 19:

**Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.**

Paul says that the Law was given 'because of transgressions' (verse 19); while the promise was given because of sin (verse 22). 'Transgressions' is a plural word. It describes the stepping over of a boundary, the crossing of a line that ought not be crossed. I believe what the apostle is teaching here is that the Law was given to help

us with those activities and temptations and choices that face us every day by which sin might express itself. I am given an opportunity to react in anger and self-righteousness when I am confronted by a certain person; under such and such circumstances I am tempted to lust and give way to love of self; in another circumstance I am tempted to be greedy and hoard my money. The Law is given to restrict and buffet us in situations where sin might express itself by a particular action. It is given for transgressions, plural, all the activities of sin. The promise is given for the disease of sin itself, not the symptoms of the disease. The promise was given to deal with sin, to deal with the awful condition of our hearts, but the Law was given because of the actions that proceed from them.

The Glen Canyon Dam above the Grand Canyon in Arizona blocks the water from the Colorado River. Due to the record snowfall in the past two years in the mountains of Colorado, Utah and Wyoming, the watershed of the Colorado, the Glen Canyon Dam, has been in serious trouble. Millions of dollars of damage has been done to the spillways of the dam. Below the dam parts of the Grand Canyon itself--perhaps the most physically beautiful place in the world--have been threatened by the water coursing forth from the spillways of the dam. People have drowned, property has been ruined, wildlife has suffered because of the millions of tons of water backed up in the lake behind this dam.

Men can make laws, good laws, that help deal with the problem of broken spillways. Those laws tell you when you can and cannot go rafting on the river; they tell you who to sue when your property is damaged; how to help endangered wildlife, etc. But what no man can do, what no law can do, is make the water go away. Millions upon millions of tons of snow melt in the spring. Every day, the danger grows greater, but only God can deal with the source of the problem. I think that is exactly the argument that Paul is making here. The Law is for the transgressions. It tells you who to sue when your property is damaged, but only the promise can deal with the water; only the promise can deal with the pressure. Only God, acting alone, can deal with the source of sin that exhibits itself in transgressions.

We are told in this argument in verses 19 and 20 that 'deals,' the system of Law--the kind of deal that says 'Eat your peas or you can't have dessert'--that that whole process is a two--way agreement. Mediated by Moses, the people agree. God proposes, the people agree on the consequences. Thus it is a two-way agreement, in which both sides have a role to play. But Paul declares in verse 20 that a mediator is not for an agreement that is based only on one party. The promise was made by God from his own heart based only on himself. It is not a two-way agreement. We do not add anything to it: all we do is hear him and believe him. It is based on God. Thus the deal and the promise are different; the Law and the promise are different in that sense. The Law was never given to impart life. It cannot do it. It exists to help us steer our way, to inhibit us and in some way make sense of the awful transgressions that sin produces, but it can not take away the disease.

What we have been talking about in this section--and indeed in the whole book of Galatians--is, essentially, weighty theology. Uncounted--almost as the stars of heaven--are the thousand-page long books in Latin and German that have set out men's dissertations attempting to explain the very issues that Paul raises here. This is theologically heavy stuff. It is beyond any of us to plumb its depths. So, having sat here and had a theology lesson by the pen of the apostle Paul, I think we also need to recognize the practical implication, the point that has to do with where we are, with who we are, the world of daily experience in which we live.

God promised to Abraham, based only on himself, that Abraham the wanderer, Abraham the nobody, would have a great name, value and self--worth; that Abraham would be put in right relation with the created world again; that Abraham could live life without fear; that Abraham would have immeasurable influence; that Abraham could be the intimate of God. All of the things that humanity was made to long for were promised to Abraham from the loving heart of Yahweh himself. Further, these things were promised to the seed of Abraham; and the seed of Abraham is Christ; and if we are Christ's, then those promises belong to us as well.

This is a great announcement, the best possible good news: God loves each of us so much that he gives us life by his promise, based only on his ability to keep his promise. Peter in his second letter says this, 'His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence, for by these he has granted to us his precious and magnificent promises in order that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature.'

Adam was the first human being created by God. But, given the opportunity, Adam made a tragic choice. While he began life in a right relationship with the creation, because of his sin he was banished from the garden and placed in a relationship of antagonism to the created world. His first legitimate son was a killer who murdered his own brother. Adam began life in the most holy and satisfying intimacy with God and he ended life in a broken and uncertain relationship, a fear-filled relationship with his Creator.

But in Abraham, God began the magnificent reversal of the tragedy of Adam. Abraham began life with no place of his own, and God promised to put him back in a right relationship with the creation. Abraham's first legitimate son was a life-giver, whereas Adam's son was a murderer. Abraham began as an idolator who found intimacy with God, whereas Adam began life in an intimate relationship with God and found fear and rejection. In Abraham God began by promises, by his choice to give himself, to reverse the process of sin and destruction that had started in Adam, and those promises apply to us. That is the gospel. That is the good news, that God himself will reverse the tragedy in us; that he will be a Life--giver to us. Abraham risked everything on God's promise and his is the only sensible response. If the promises are true, and we believe them, we cannot think or act as we once did. Our day--to--day lives must, if we believe, exhibit 'life imparted,' no longer desperate for approval or given over to sin.

I urge all of us to reject anything that would take from us the promises of God, anything that would devalue, anything that would insinuate itself between us and the life--giving promises of God. I have promised my children, and I have kept my promise, to take them to Disneyland, not based on anything they would do or their ability to earn the trip, but only because I love them. We have received from God the promises to be given life only because he loves us. They are precious and magnificent promises. We need to beware of anything that would keep us from embracing those promises with our whole hearts.

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