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SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)

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TITLE: A Promise Is a Promise

Unbreakable - what things are unbreakable? We thought Captain America's shield was unbreakable, but it wasn't. My middle son had some glasses that we drove over with the car several times, and they appeared to be unbreakable, but we know that they can, in fact, break under certain conditions. Certainly, there's a movie called "Unbreakable", but we found out that that person was, in fact, breakable as well. But what about a promise or a contract? Could that be unbreakable? I guess that answer comes down to who is making the promise, or writing the contract. What if the contract was written by God, and only liable by God? Would that make a difference? Well, that is the question we want to wrestle with today, as we continue our series "We Are Free".

So join with me in Galatians Chapter 3, beginning in verse 15 (ESV):

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.

Context is king. This statement seems odd, so we have to know what Paul is saying before this, for it to really make sense. Remember, the whole book of Galatians was written with the theme that we are freed from our sin - not by our works, but rather by God's grace. You see this over and over again throughout Galatians. In fact, in the first few verses of Chapter 3, Paul is asking the question: are we saved by faith, or by works of the Law? Did we receive the Spirit of God by our works? Or was it by faith? In fact, he will ask rhetorical questions, so that we come to the point that we are justified by faith. We receive the Holy Spirit because of faith, and not of works. And then, in the previous five verses, Paul declares: the righteous shall live by faith. This was only made possible by the blood of Jesus Christ. Because of what Christ has done, we as Gentiles - non-Jewish people - become part of the blessing that was promised to Abraham. That leads us to verse 15. So Paul says, "Let me just illustrate this." He's a good preacher. Any preacher will bring the point to life by good illustration. So Paul says, "In other words, when a contract has been written and signed, it is done."

I recently had been talking with some friends, who were in the process of trying to get out of a contract for a property that they had leased. Well, the reality was, they came to find out that the contract could not be altered. They had agreed to what they were responsible for. That's not ideal. That's unfortunate when you need to get out of it. But that's why we have these things - to make sure that a promise is a promise. What's the point? Well, let's look at verse 16:

¹⁶ Now, the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.

Okay, this makes it much clearer. We have to go back to the covenant that God made with Abraham. What happened exactly? Well, in Genesis Chapter 15, God told Abraham, that "your reward shall be very great". God takes Abraham outside of his tent, and He says, "Look to the sky. Count the stars." He says, "This number of stars represents your offspring - your descendants". And Genesis tells us that Abraham believed. That belief "was credited to him as righteousness".

Like many of us today, we would say, "Okay, God. I believe you, but how can I really be sure? How do I know that you're really going to keep your word?" Look, we know that people default on their promises. Humans will disappoint us. We can sign on the dotted line, but maybe the business fails, so we can't pay our rent. We borrow money from a friend, but we can't pay it back. The reality is, we as humans default on our loans. We default on our promises. So Abraham says, "Look, I know you're God, but how do I know you're really going to do it?" Well, in Chapter 15, it tells us that God ratified the covenant through a ceremony. Abraham took a cow, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. He took each of them, and cut them in half, and put each half opposite of one another to create a path. At sunset, Abraham fell asleep by the hand of God. While Abraham was sleeping, God walked between the animals.

OK, that's weird to us. We don't do that kind of thing. What does that mean? At the time of Abraham, this would have been the practice of two people entering a covenant period. Two people would walk between the slain animals, and that blood that was shed would symbolically ratify the promise - the covenant. But notice what I just said: two people would normally do this - but in this instance it was only God. In other words, **the promise to Abraham and his descendants was made only by God. God alone was liable. It was an unconditional promise. With God, a promise is a promise.** That's why Paul said in his illustration, that when a promise, a contract, or a covenant has been ratified, it is done. And with God, it's sure.

Let's be honest. We live in uncertain times. We have viruses. We have elections. We have unstable jobs. Relationships can be shaky. It seems like many of us today are struggling with uncertainty, with trusting, with gaining peace. God says that the world may be crashing down around us, but My Word is sure. The thing that really matters: your soul - your eternity - is settled. The problem for many of us today is, we don't keep our focus on the promises of God. We don't keep our eyes on the Savior. So we see the Facebook posts about the election; we read the tweets about the protest, or the environment; we keep going back to our checking account to see the number go down; we keep staring at the phone, waiting for the call from the doctor. When we take our eyes off of God to look at the problems, we rob ourselves of the peace of God that we have available.

Here in Galatians 3, Paul is reminding us we can be confident in the promises of God. For the thing that really matters - our Salvation - is secured in Christ alone. That's why Paul begins by saying, a promise is a promise. And let's remember Abraham. He had an unconditional promise made From God. And notice it says, "the promises were to his *offspring*". It even makes it very pointed to say, *not* offsprings, but instead, to *one*. What is he saying?

Remember, in Genesis 3:15 (NASB), God made a promise to the serpent. He said, "I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." Who is it that will bruise the serpent on the head? It was Jesus Christ. The one and only heir of every promise of God is Christ. Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ - in Christ alone. This is why the only way a person can participate in the promised blessings to Abraham, is through Jesus Christ. "Jesus said [to him], 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.'"(John 14:6, NASB) Jesus is the seed. He is the fulfillment of the promise.

Paul is going to make it abundantly clear again, in the authority of the Abrahamic Covenant, in comparison to the covenant of the Law. Verse 17:

¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. (Gal 3:17, ESV)

Okay, again, this is kind of confusing. What is Paul trying to get at? Paul is saying that the covenant of promise—that unconditional promise - is superior to the Law. The Law came 645 years after Abraham, but 215 years later, God repeated/renewed the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob. That's where the 430 years comes from. So the unconditional promise to Abraham is not nullified by the law. Why? Because again, the promise made to Abraham and his descendants was unconditional. It all rested upon God.

Why is Paul saying this? What's the connection between Jesus and the promises to Abraham? Paul is saying that the age of fulfillment has arrived. The promises made to Abraham have become a reality in Christ. They always pointed to Jesus Christ. That's why it would be wrong to say the Mosaic Law had the power to save. It couldn't. Salvation is found alone in God's work. That's why Paul points back to the promises to Abraham.

So what? Verse 18:¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

If I could summarize verse 18 in the simplest of ways, it's this: **A promise is a promise - especially when the promise comes from God.** That's the deal.

A couple of weeks ago, my boys and I had planned on doing some mini-golfing. But like many young families, even in the world of COVID-19, life is a busy period. There are activities and responsibilities. That's just real life. But it was a Friday night, and we ran out of time to go mini-

golfing, and I told my boys, we will go tomorrow. And my youngest came up to me and asked, “Dad, is this a promise?” And I thought about it, and I said, “Yeah, sure” - I promised. Well, the next day happened - we had chores. We had running around to do. In other words, the day progressed, even with some relaxation in-between. But it was about 4:30, and my youngest son said, “Hey, we still need to go mini-golfing”. And I said, “Bud, we’ve got to leave at 5:30.” Now, we had other plans. But he reminded me, that “a promise is a promise”. So I loaded up the boys, we went to mini-golfing, and we got home about 10 minutes later than they needed to leave. We had other obligations, but a promise is a promise. Before we had agreed to the 5:30 obligation, I made a promise to my children.

I am a human father who breaks my word more than I would ever hope to admit. But yet, I strive to keep the promise of a promise. Now think about God. For those of us who are Christians, those of us who have put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, He is our Heavenly Father. **What He has promised, He will do.**

In essence, Paul said the Law and the promises are fundamentally opposed. Therefore, if the inheritance is obtained by the Law, then the promise is eliminated. The inheritance is not the reward of our obedience. The inheritance is the reality of our future with Christ forever. There are some who would want to confuse us and say, “No, no - Salvation and our inheritance are separated”, but according to the Bible, they are one and the same. Will we receive rewards in Heaven for our actions? Yes. But the truest meaning of our inheritance is: our Salvation found in Jesus Christ. It is our eternity reigning with Christ. We don't earn it. We don't buy it. It is a free gift of God that began with the promise thousands of years ago.

My question for you is, do you believe it? **People may break their promises, but God does not.** We may mess up our lives miserably because of our actions. We may break the Law of God. **But God made an unconditional promise that Salvation would come through His son, Jesus Christ. God delivered. The question is, will we receive it?**

N: Let’s go to our discussion partners, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Well, here we are. We're a month into the study of Galatians -“We Are Free.” I'm just curious. What has stood out to you so far? What have you learned? What's impacted you thus far in the book of Galatians?

C: How many times Paul has to defend the Gospel.

N: Isn’t that amazing?

A: To believers, right?

N: Yeah. Well, and you think about it, how quickly the Gospel message was distorted, how quickly that all the old tendencies creep back in. What do you think that tells us about our own nature today?

A: I think we have a tendency to want to improve on what God has given, and it's maybe even out of good intentions. But I think the message is pretty simple and pretty clear, but I think there's a tendency of one-upmanship, and we've got the right answer, and you don't. And adding to Scripture is I think a pretty big temptation by people from your field, Pastor Nat.

C: Yeah. Jesus plus or minus anything does not equal faith. [Right]. You know, [Equals trouble.] Yeah. We start getting into formulas and formulas do not free anyone.

N: Well, when you think about it - right in Galatians One - I mean, Paul just comes out of the gate swinging, saying there's only one Gospel, and anything outside of that one true Gospel is actually no gospel at all. And yet today, we are just overwhelmed with false gospels. And people - I mean, whether it's at church, or at a school, or in the neighborhood - as you gather together and you talk about, you know, the Bible and faith - it's like, you'll have 50 different opinions on these things, including the Gospel. So when you encounter someone who is holding onto a false gospel, adding to it, or taking it away, how do you handle those situations with love and gentleness, and also respect?

C: Well, you just go back on what you know about Jesus, and why He came, and that it is finished. You know, one of the questions I have for you Nat is, does Galatians 3:27 teach that baptism is necessary for Salvation?

A: Ooohhh.

N: You're supposed to give me these in advance there, Cara.

A: We interrupt this program... Yeah. It's such a good question.

N: Well, Galatians 3:27, just so people know, says, *and all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes*. What is Paul talking about here? He's not talking about physical baptism. He's talking about baptism of the Spirit. Paul has been very clear throughout Galatians One through Three, that how do people get the Spirit of God? Is it by works, or is it by grace? Are people justified by their actions, or rather by the grace of God? And Paul says, "You know the answer - it's by grace through faith". And so this baptism that we experience, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, happens when you are justified - when you come to saving faith in Christ. And that is what unites us as the people of God, just like putting on new clothes. And again, in verse 28, he says, *there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. How cool is that? And how timely is that, for you and I today, in a world of division, in a world where we're talking about reconciliation, reparations, all those things? Paul says, none of those things that divide us really matter, because Christ unifies us all. It doesn't matter what skin color, economic background, doesn't matter how much hair you have on your head, or on your face. Any of those things don't matter; if you want true reconciliation, you want to have unification, there's one way - through Jesus Christ. That is the baptism that unifies us all. And that's the solution to our problem today.

