

God, our promise keeper

Galatians 3:15-18

Pastor Tim Melton

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French Mathematician, Philosopher, Physicist and Theologian. In his book *Pensees* he wrote this about his observations of mankind:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him . . . though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

Pascal is describing the condition of mankind. In the beginning of the book of Genesis, mankind lives in perfect communion with God. In Genesis 3, we see mankind’s first rebellion against God. Through Adam and Eve sin enters the world and communion with God is lost. This separation from God produced a “God-shaped void” that each person seeks to fill.

Some believe that a perfect marriage or well-behaved children will fill this void in their hearts. Others try to fill it with money, sex, alcohol, success, pleasure or whatever else they have access to. But nothing can fill the “God-shaped void” in our hearts except for God. King Solomon echoes this sentiment in Ecclesiastes 1:14, *“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”* It is only as we turn to God that this void in our hearts can be filled.

Some sense this need and turn to spirituality for answers, but yet still miss what God intended. They turn to world religions that prescribe certain rituals or behaviors that promise to help you reach God by your own merit. That is what sets Christianity apart from many world religions. The Bible teaches that, because of our sin, we are all hopelessly separated from a holy God. We cannot reach Him. That is why He sent Jesus Christ. When we could not reach Him, He reached down to us.

This is the core of the gospel. We each have sinned and are alienated from God. The wages of our sin is death. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth in the form of a man. Though tempted like us, Jesus lived a sinless life. He willingly gave His life on a Roman cross to pay the price for our sins. We must first understand the “bad news,” the gravity of our sin. Only then are we ready to receive and appreciate the “good news,” the vastness of His grace. That is what the apostle Paul was so adamant about in his letter to the Galatians.

If you recall the story, the apostle Paul and others had been sent out on a missionary journey. In the process they had traveled through the province of Galatia, which would today be in modern day Turkey. They preached the gospel and people believed and followed Christ. They disciplined these new believers and started multiple new congregations. The problem came when they moved on to the next city. In most cases, Jewish false teachers who professed to follow Jesus would infiltrate the churches and lead the people away from the true gospel. Their false teaching went something like this:

“Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. The prophecies about Him were given to the Jews. God’s laws were given to the Jews. If you want to be a true Christian, you first must become a Jew. You must obey all of the laws and rituals that would be included in being Jewish. This would even include circumcision.”

We may wonder why this theological disagreement should matter to us, but Paul understood why it was worth fighting for. First of all it was based on the heretical idea that we can actually be righteous enough in our own power to be made right with God. That grossly exaggerates our ability to be holy and it makes the death of Christ pointless (Galatians 2:21). If we can “save” ourselves, then Christ did not have to come. It also belittled the glorious salvation offered by God, who demonstrated His love for us by sending His only Son to save us from our sin. Our eternal destiny hung in the balance and Paul was not going to stand idly by and let the false teachers have their way.

In Galatians 3:10-14, Paul commented on the fact that all who trust that they can perfectly obey God’s law in their own power are utterly mistaken and are under a curse. Yes, they are trying to live the right way and obey God’s law, but they are trusting in themselves and are not trusting in Christ for salvation. This “self-righteousness” will keep them out of the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is only for those who realize the wickedness of their hearts and trust in Christ alone for deliverance. No one is innocent. In Paul’s own words, *“Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them.”* No one can save themselves. Whether we have sinned 10 times or 10 million times, all have sinned and are in need of a Savior.

It might be similar to someone who decides to swim from Lisbon, Portugal, to New York City. They train for two years. They eat right, sleep right, train right and give it their best, but in the end it does not matter. No one can swim across the Atlantic Ocean without stopping. Those who gave their lives to the goal may swim farther than those who didn't train, but no one will even come close to New York City.

It does not matter how "good" one tries to be, we will all fail. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Our only hope is by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, who already gave His life for us, taking our sin upon His shoulders.

Paul ends this portion of scripture with what must have been an explosive statement, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles."* The Jews believed that because they were the descendants of Abraham and they had received God's law, they were the only ones eligible to receive the blessing of Abraham. Now Paul proclaims that Gentiles, people from all nations, may be blessed as well. To some it surely sounded like blatant heresy, but Paul was prepared to support His claim with scripture.

In Galatians 3:15-18, we read Paul's arguments and are left to imagine what false teachings he must have been refuting. It is somewhat like listening to one side of a phone conversation. While you cannot hear the person on the other end, if you listen closely, you can likely understand what is being said on the other end. Through Paul's words, biblical context, and what we know of the church in Galatia, we can begin to gather an accurate understanding of to what Paul is responding.

Paul presents a human argument of how even in earthly covenants, once they are finalized by both parties, nothing can be added or taken away. The same is true with the promises that God made to Abraham and His "offspring", Christ. Even though a later covenant was made with Moses and the nation of Israel that focuses on obeying God's law, it does not and cannot negate this first covenant of faith that was given to Abraham. He had believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. This covenant of faith would continue to be the way to righteousness for all who would believe. Whether Jew or Gentile, those of faith would be the true sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).

We get an even fuller understanding of this covenant that God made with Abraham if we look back to Genesis 15. Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. A few verses later, God reassures Abraham of His covenant by participating in a covenantal ceremony.

"Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. . .

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram."

While this type of ceremony seems odd to us, it was the sign of a serious commitment. Its symbolism stated that if I break the covenant may the same thing be done to me as has been done to these animals. It is important to note that Abram does not walk between the animals. Only the smoking fire and flaming torch, which symbolized the presence of God, passed through the divided animals. It was a one-sided, unilateral agreement. God was making a commitment that did not depend on us, it only depended on Him. Many would call a one-sided, unconditional agreement risky or even foolish, but this is the love that God has committed to give to all who will place their faith in Him.

This type of love is displayed in the book of Hosea. God instructs the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute. He obeys and marries a woman named Gomer. Together they have several children, and then she chooses to turn her back on her marriage vows and returns to her life of prostitution. In Hosea 2:5 Gomer says, *"I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink."* Finally, God brings Gomer to a point of desperation where she ends up being sold, as property. How does God instruct Hosea to respond? *"Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods."* Hosea buys back Gomer, who was rightfully his, and continues to love her as his wife. This is the picture of the unilateral love that God had for the children of Israel and that He has for those who place their faith in Him.

Paul continues in Galatians 3:16. The Jews read about the promises that were made to Abraham and his offspring and thought it must surely be talking about all of Abraham's descendants, but Paul clarifies that "offspring" is singular and only refers to Christ. He is the one from Abraham who will bless the nations. Christ is the only other recipient of the promises that God extended to Abraham. Some may question, "Are we not all given promises by God?" Yes, but as we see in 2 Corinthians 1:20, all promises are "yes" in Christ. The only reason that we are recipients of any of God's promises is because through faith Christ is in us and we are in Him.

In 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul declares that the Good news of Jesus Christ is foolishness to the world. Why is it foolishness? One reason is that all our lives we have been taught to earn, work, deserve, to receive anything that is worthwhile. That is not God's way. God has come to offer us a free gift. It is completely unearned and undeserved. It is a one-sided, unconditional love that we have been given. People respond in different ways to this truth.

Some see their sins as too big for God to ever forgive, so they watch God from a distance but dare not draw near. They fear that the promise of total forgiveness and acceptance is surely too good to be true. If that is you today, pray for God to grant you the faith to believe that He is truly as gracious as He claims.

Some long for salvation, so they continue to bear the burden of constantly trying to be good enough. They try everything humanly possible to obey God, but time and again fall short. Their form of Christianity is not Christianity at all. It is slavery. They choose not to believe in the grace of God. They cling to pride, will power and self-sufficiency. Their freedom is only a step away, but they will not accept the truth that their sin is too big and that God's grace is the only way to

forgiveness. If this is you, confess today your spiritual pride and self-sufficiency. Confess your sin of unbelief and pray that God will give you faith to surrender the struggle to Him and find in Him the salvation and victorious life that He has for you.

Others see themselves as a good person in no need of a savior. They continue doing their religious deeds, but it only bolsters their belief of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. Their spiritual pride will keep them out of heaven. They contrast themselves with adulterers and murderers, instead of comparing themselves with Christ, where their sin would become very clear. They trust in their own good deeds and not in Christ. If this is you, pray for conviction of sin, the courage to accept it, and the faith to believe in God's grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says this, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Are you a person of the law or a person of faith? Here is a brief exercise that may help you begin to discern your spiritual condition.

In Matthew 14, we read the story of Jesus walking on the water. It is in the middle of the night. The waters are rough. Jesus' disciples are in a boat battling the wind and the waves. They see Jesus and at first think that he must be a ghost. Once they realize that it is Jesus, Peter calls out to Him, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come out to you on the water."* Jesus does and Peter steps out of the boat and starts walking on the water. As long as Peter's focus is on Jesus he is fine, but then Peter begins to notice the wind and the waves and he turns His attention away from Jesus. He begins to sink. He cries out to Jesus to save him. . .

Now here is the question. Imagine you are Peter. You are falling into the water. Your faith has failed. As you look to Jesus for help . . . what is the facial expression on Jesus' face? Is it the compassionate face of a loving Savior who left heaven to rescue those who were slaves to sin, or is it the face of an angry, disappointed Judge, who once again is not satisfied with your performance? If you see the Savior, there is a good chance you are trusting in faith. If you see the angry Judge, there is a good chance you are trusting in the law and your ability to be good enough.

Pray that God will give you discernment to know if you are truly in the faith. If you are not in the faith, may He grant you faith. If you are in the faith, may He guide you into a life of freedom and victory that is only found in Christ.