

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Galatians 3:15-22: "God's Promise Stands."  
September 5/6, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Almighty and everlasting God, whose faithfulness reaches unto the clouds and whose mercy endures forever we humbly ask You, be pleased to confirm and fulfill in us the covenant of Your grace, made sure from the beginning of the world in Christ Jesus, our Lord, that we may be found in Him, not having our own righteousness [by the Law, but that righteousness given through promise] ...by faith in Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe, to whom, with You and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen. (adapted from *The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 156)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

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. 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. 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. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. / Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the Offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. / Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, in whom "*all the promises of God find their Yes*" (2Co. 1:20), dear fellow redeemed:

It is election season in our country, which means it is a time when politicians make a lot of promises. Some of those promises are within their power to carry out if they are elected. Other promises they only hope they can keep. Still other promises are made to score political points, but there is really no follow through to fulfill them. A politician makes these promises to secure votes. In other words, he is willing to give something in order to get something in return.

That doesn't sound very impressive, but a lot of our promises are like that. We promise to give our best on the field or court or in the classroom, and we expect our good effort to be recognized. We promise to work hard for an employer, and we expect to be treated well in return. We promise to be faithful to our spouse, and we expect their faithfulness to us. When we know our promises will be rewarded, it is easier for us to keep them.

It is much harder to keep our promises when the person we have made a promise to proves unworthy of it. Then we might try to go back and adjust our promise. "What I really meant was that I promise to do this or that if you meet my conditions, or as long as I am happy with you." Experiencing betrayals and hurts might also cause us to adjust our promises on the front end. This has happened with marriage vows in certain places where "as long as we both shall live" has been changed to "as long as we still love each other." But a conditional promise is really no promise at all.

A true promise is difficult business. A true promise puts us in another person's debt. It commits us to serve them in some way, and service always requires sacrifice. Making a promise conditional or making no promises at all is much "safer," so to speak. But that is not the way we have been taught by God. That is the way of selfishness, not the way of love.

Our gracious and merciful Lord does not make conditional promises. He does exactly what He says He will do. The promise that Paul writes about in today's Epistle is the promise God made to Abraham after Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:15-18). But although it included a formal covenant, it wasn't really a new promise. At its core, it pointed to an old promise, the promise of salvation for sinners. God first made this promise to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin.

When you read the account of the fall in Genesis chapter 3, you might expect to find Adam and Eve asking God what they could do to get right with Him again. Or you might expect God to give them some incentive to be better and prove themselves to Him. Neither of those things happens. First He makes the promise that the Seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head (3:15). Then He outlines the consequences that man and woman will face because of their sins (vv. 16-19). No impression is given that the fulfillment of God's promise to save is dependent on how well Adam and Eve carried out their callings in a sinful world.

The same goes for Abraham. The LORD called Abraham away from the idol worship of his father's house. Abraham in no way deserved God's favor, but the LORD chose him as an ancestor of the promised Messiah and gave him faith to believe the promise (Gen. 15:6). Even Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son at God's command did not cause God to keep His promise.

If God's promise to send a Savior depended on the world's worthiness to receive this gift, no Savior would have ever come. The LORD did not negotiate terms for sending a Savior like Abraham did for saving Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asked God to spare those wicked cities if only fifty righteous people were found there and then forty-five righteous ones and then thirty and then twenty and then ten (Gen. 18:22-33).

If the LORD had said He would save the world as long as fifty percent were righteous or even ten percent of the population, we would have no Savior. By nature, "*None [of us] is righteous, no, not one*" (Rom. 3:10). The LORD's promise was not conditional like this. His promise did not depend on our character and our actions. It depended entirely on His holy will and His immeasurable love for us sinners.

This is why He kept His promise even though so many had despised His promise and so few were looking for its fulfillment. “[W]hen the fullness of time had come – when the time had come to fulfill the promise –, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). God the Father sent His Son to be born into the world of men, to be subject to the holy Law, to endure terrible injustice, suffering, and pain, and to die at the hands of sinners.

If anyone had the right to change a promise because the recipients of the promise were obviously unworthy, it is God. But God did not change His promise. He kept it. He sent His only-begotten Son to die alone for the sins of the whole world. Jesus died for everyone, even for those who hate Him and His Word, for those who bow down at the altars of worldly power and pleasure and riches, for the murderers, abusers, thieves, liars, and cheats. He died for all people past, present, and future who sin. That means He died for you and me.

Besides rejecting the salvation He won, the worst thing we can do is act like we contribute toward our salvation. Many people fall into this error, including many Christians. They say things like this: “Jesus did His part, and now I have to do mine.” Or, “Jesus died for my sins, and now I have to prove I am worthy of His sacrifice.” Or comfortless statements like these, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Jesus did not fulfill the Law and die for your sins just to have the Law placed on your shoulders again. Keeping the Law does not complete your salvation or give you another way to obtain salvation. This is St. Paul’s emphasis in today’s text. He said that God gave the promise of salvation to Abraham 430 years before He gave the Law through Moses. The giving of the Law did not annul God’s covenant of grace. It did not make the promise of salvation through faith void. Paul wrote that “*if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*”

You know this. You know you are saved by grace and not by works. You know that your inheritance of heaven comes by God’s promise alone. But the devil and your own flesh want to tempt you away from this certainty and get you to focus on the things you do or don’t do. So you might watch the news and think you are better than the rioters and looters. You would never behave like that! You follow the rules. You lend a helping hand. You prove every day how much more kind and loving you are than others.

Do you see the problem? Thinking so much about your own good deeds plants you in the ground of the Law. The only fruit you can bear there is self-righteousness and pride or else despair. But looking to your Savior in humility and faith plants you firmly in His promise. God did not give the Law so you could compare your righteousness with others. He gave the Law “*because of transgressions,*” as Paul writes. He gave the Law to humble you, to show you how far you have fallen short.

And He gave His promise to save you, to show you how deep His love is for you. No matter how often you have messed up, no matter what terrible words you have said or thoughts you have imagined toward others, God’s promise of your forgiveness has not changed. He does not say that the shed blood of Jesus takes away only minor infractions, or only benefits the people who show they are worthy. He says that “*the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1Jo. 1:7).

You may feel like the most wretched sinner the world has ever known. You might hardly hope for peace with God because of your many sins. You may carry the burden of a million failures. But God says, "As surely as My holy Son died on the cross and rose again, your sins are forgiven. Your record is completely clean. Salvation is yours."

God kept His promise to send a Savior, which means there is nothing you have to do to be saved. But what about the example of the Good Samaritan? Isn't Jesus teaching us that we have to be kind and merciful toward those around us? He is. He is teaching us about love, which is the summary of His Law. But He is not teaching that salvation is earned by our love toward others.

Salvation was earned by His love. He is our Good Samaritan who saved us from our sin and death. Our love for Him and others comes as a response to His love, as a living sacrifice of thankfulness for what He has done. *"We love because he first loved us" (1Jo. 4:19)*. As soon as we try to add our love to the equation of our salvation, then salvation becomes uncertain, because we do not love as God commands us to do. Paul writes: *"For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."*

God has not changed His mind about you or the rest of the sinners of the world. He has not voided the work His Son did to save you. He gives no conditions to meet if you would enter into His favor. **God's Promise Stands** on His faithfulness alone. That means your forgiveness, your life, and your salvation are completely secure in Him.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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