

Great and Precious Promises

2 Peter 1:4

When my girls were very young, they began to learn and understand the nature of a promise. And they also learned to interpret my words to them. When they asked me for something, they would interpret my response according to how likely they were to get a positive answer. On the one extreme, was the answer “no.” And I insisted they learn the meaning of that word. No means no.

But then sometimes my answer was, “Probably not,” which meant the answer was likely going to be “no” but they could hold out a glimmer of hope for the time being. And sometimes they would hang on to that glimmer of hope just as long as they could, until it would finally become a more definitive, no.

Yet if I answered, “Possibly,” they would have even greater hope. The balance had tipped slightly in favor of the positive. And then my answer of “We’ll see...” They learned that those words would give them much encouragement, that when it was all said and done, I would say “yes.” After a while it became a bit of a joke, because if I said “we’ll see”, they usually left me alone quite confident the answer would eventually be “yes.”

And then there were the promises. If they were unsure of what I meant, they might even ask, “Do you promise?” And despite my own human sinfulness, if made them a promise, I always wanted to give them the security of knowing with certainty it would happen. They understood the difference. A promise meant “yes.” Unquestionably and unchangeably.

So it is with God, for the the very essence of the gospel is a promise. And so we read,

2 Cor. 1:20 “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.”

The gospel is the good news, it is the a promise of good news. As a noun, that promise is the subject of preaching. We preach the gospel. As a verb, the one single Greek word means to proclaim that good news. That word comes into English as “evangelism.” To preach the good news. Sometimes it is simply translated “to preach.”

Thus on his first missionary journey, in Pisidian Antioch, the Apostle Paul has this to say of his own preaching,

Acts 13:32 “And we declare to you glad tidings--that promise which was made to the fathers.”

“We declare to you glad tidings.” We preach the gospel! And this is the gospel—the promise which was made to the fathers. That is, of course, the promise of Jesus.

Acts 13:33 “God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus.”

So that is what the gospel is all about. A promise that God makes, and fulfills. And that is what I am to preach to you. I proclaim to you a promise. A promise which God made, and a promise which God has kept. A promise which will completely and perfectly fulfill. “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen.”

That’s where Peter begins in this second letter. We studied last week of our calling as Christians, our effectual calling, the changing and transforming of our lives. And verse 3 from last week is directly connected with our text this morning, verse 4.

2 Peter 1:3 "...as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, 4 by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust"

The gospel consists of exceedingly great and precious promises. What a marvelous way to describe it.

I. THE GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES OF THE GOSPEL.

Let me briefly define and explain those promises, for they are the promises of the new covenant. There are a lot of ways that I could summarize those promises, but let me build upon the imagery and types of the Old Covenant people of Israel. In the context of the Old Covenant, the great and precious promise of the gospel might well be best summarized as the promise of an inheritance. In the Old Testament, that promised inheritance was land. The promised land. And what about the reality only foreshadowed by that promised land of Canaan?

Heb. 9:15 "And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance."

An eternal inheritance, in the kingdom of God. Land, to be inherited by true believers, in heaven! That's the gospel. That's the promise! Peter expressed it so clearly in,

1 Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

An inheritance reserved in heaven! What a glorious promise. What a great and precious promise. And the foundation of that promise, the certain assurance of its fulfillment, lies in,

A. The pledge of God's glory.

That's how verse 4 is connected with verse 3.

v.4 "...by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises."

By which what? By these attributes of God. By his own glory, we have a promised inheritance in heaven. By his own virtue or excellence we have that inheritance reserved in heaven. He called us, by his own glory. By the pledge of his own glory. God put his own name on our reservation. That's what the gospel is all about.

So you don't pay for your home in heaven. There is no mortgage. No downpayment is required of you. No earnest money. No rent. No obligations you have to fulfill. No, God pledges to you a glorious promise, and he guarantees it himself with a pledge of his own glory and honor.

Indeed, this promise, all the great and precious promises of the gospel are,

B. The expression of God's grace.

Notice carefully in verse 4, how it is that we obtain these promises, this inheritance. It has been given to us. The inheritance is given to us. The promise of the gospel is given to us, as a gift.

As Paul puts it in,

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

There is no clearer exposition of this promise of the gospel in all the Bible than we what we read in,

Titus 3:4 “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared He saved us, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

He saved us. Not by what we have done, but by His grace. We become heirs. We have an inheritance, promised to us on the basis of God’s own perfect goodness. That’s the gospel.

But more about that promise. It is,

II. THE PROMISE OF ESCAPE.

v.4b “...having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

Wouldn’t it be nice to escape? Peter is obviously interacting with Greek philosophy, especially Plato, in which the goal was to escape from this life. Actually, the goal was to escape from the prison of our own physical existence, our physical bodies, which were a prison for the soul. So the soul had to escape from the body, set free from the physical nature was that which was evil.

Thus the problem of man, according to the Greek philosopher Plato, was his physical existence. The body. The flesh. And

salvation meant to escape that flesh. But Peter says something very different here. What we seek to escape is not our physical bodies, but the lust of the heart. “...having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

You see, the problem with mankind is not that our physical bodies are sinful, but that our heart is! The problem with mankind is not simply the actions of our bodies, but the lusts of our heart. Jesus puts it this way,

Mat. 15:17 “Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 "These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

The universal problem of mankind is the sinfulness of our fallen hearts. And in Christ, we gain an escape. It is,

A. Freedom from the corruption of the world.

But again, the emphasis is not merely upon the physical corruption, or our mortality. You see, our physical corruption is but the consequence, the curse, of our moral corruption. We die because we are sinners, we are cursed by God with a mortal existence because of the corruption of our heart.

The curse of corruption is obvious, isn’t it?

Gen. 3:17 “Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust

you shall return.”

In other words, “In Adam, all die.”

Rom. 5:12 “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

But that death was not merely physical death. It was the condemnation of God pronounced upon guilty sinners.

Rom. 5:18 “Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. 19 For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous. 20 Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, 21 so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

So the promise of the gospel is the promise of an escape. Escape from corruption. In other words, life. But, again, it is not just an escape from physical death. The gospel does not simply promise physical life. As Christians, what we gain is the escape, or freedom, from the corruption of our sinful nature, “the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

But then notice something at the end of verse 4. This escape has already taken place. This promise has already been fulfilled in the lives of Christians.

v.4 “...that through these [promises] you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

Having escaped. The Greek verb tense is very specific. It’s already happened, once and for all. If you are in Christ, you have escaped this corruption. You have been rescued. You have been set free. Thus Paul writes in,

2 Cor. 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

And this is the meaning, not that you are freed from the very presence of sin and made instantly perfect, but that you are freed from its dominion. You are no longer a slave to sin. You are no longer under the bondage of the old man. You have been raised with Christ!

Rom. 6:3 “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.”

Our old man was crucified. The old heart, that heart of stone. So this is what happens when a person is saved,

Ezek. 36:25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

We get a new heart, “having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” That’s the promise. And it is,

B. Freedom from the sin of the old man.

Now maybe you are confused. Because you know, in your own heart, that sin is still present. If a Christian is freed from sin, you must not be a Christian, because you still struggle with sin. Has Satan ever tempted you with that thought?

Well, that cannot be what Paul means in Romans 6, because he goes on to exhort Christians, recipients of these promises, to not sin. You see, the promise is the basis upon which you are enabled not to sin. The promise of the gospel is the basis upon which you are enabled to put sin to death, more and more. The power of sin is broken. The dominion of sin is destroyed. That’s the promise. Therefore, going back to Romans 6,

Rom. 6:12 “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

The promise of freedom from the sin of the old man is the encouragement God gives you in your ongoing battle with actual sins that continue to tempt you and beset you. The promise is the foundation upon which the exhortation is based, as it clearly is here in 2 Peter, which will be next week’s sermon,

v.5 “But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, 6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, 7 to

godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. 8 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So please make sure you understand me, and if you don’t, please talk to me further. This is crucial. The promise of Scripture is that we have been freed from the power of those sinful desires. That is, as new creatures in Christ, we have the ability to resist the temptations brought by the corruption of this world.

BUT, throughout this age, the presence of those temptations is still not removed. In fact, those temptations wage war with our souls, according to Romans 7:23. We are freed from slavery to sin, but not from the presence of temptation to sin. Therefore, on that basis, Scripture exhorts us to flee from sin. Scripture exhorts us to stop sinning. On the basis of God’s promises.

I hope you get that connection, because it is essential for understanding the Bible. You are freed from sin. You have died with Christ. You are a new creation. All because of God’s great and precious promises given to us with the pledge of God’s of glory.

THEREFORE, stop sinning! Make every effort to grow in godliness and holiness. Make every effort to put to death the very presence of sin, as you look forward to the completion of your salvation, when you are made perfect in glory, living for all eternity completely and entirely sinless in the presence of God.

Let this promise of escape be your encouragement. And your motivation. Let it be your strength, as you understand what it means to be a new creation in Jesus Christ, and what it means to have a new heart, a heart of flesh that is alive. Let this promise

stir your heart to pursue holiness, so that when you understand the reality of the promised inheritance that is reserved in heaven for you, you are ready and eager to hear the application,

1 Peter 1:13 “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 14 as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Or,

Eph. 4:20 “But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Finally, one more aspect of these exceedingly great and precious promises of the gospel.

III. THE PROMISE OF FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD.

Look at the middle of,
v.4

“Partakers of the divine nature.” Now, there is a phrase that can lead you into all sorts of theological and doctrinal errors if you are not careful. Peter uses some very dramatic language there, and we need to be careful not to misunderstand what he says. So what does he mean when he says that we “partakers of the divine nature”?

Does that mean that we become little gods, that we somehow attain the status or level or deity? In a word, no. Though that is a common heresy that has plagued the church, and to some degree still does. It is one of the more dangerous heresies involved in the Mormon religion.

But what does it mean to become “partakers of the divine nature?” Calvin answers that so clearly. “The word nature does not denote essence but kind.” In other words, we do not obtain anything of the essence of God. We don’t become partakers of his divinity or his deity. We remain creatures, and he remains the creator-God.

In Peter’s words, we do participate in his divine nature. We partake. We become like him in the way that we live and in the way that we think. There is growth and development in our spiritual lives, so much so that Paul would say that,

2 Cor.3:18 “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

We are transformed into his likeness. We have ever-increasing glory. More and more, we begin to be like God in our moral and spiritual character. In other words, we are becoming godlike in character.

Again, the idea from Greek philosophy was that the material world was itself evil, and salvation or deliverance was to be freed from the physical existence which we all have in this world. In that thinking, physical, material things are seen to be sinful in themselves, and the more you can abstain from physical things, the more god-like you are. And for the Greeks, participating in the divine nature meant being freed from the physical body.

Salvation meant being freed from the physical body.

But that's wrong. Entirely wrong. The truth is that God redeems our body and soul. Our bodies will be resurrected unto an eternal life which will be physical and material. And the divine nature which we share in is not a denial of what is physical, but instead a denial of what is sinful and immoral. Such that we enjoy real, genuine spiritual fellowship and communion with God. We enjoy being united with God through faith in Christ.

And we become like God, more and more, in the moral experiences of our lives. Transformed, more and more, into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It is,

A. The fellowship of a God-like character.

Rom. 8:29 "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

That's what it means to become a partaker of the divine nature. With one last point to make, with great emphasis. This promise of fellowship is,

B. The fellowship of a reconciled relationship.

Reconciliation is the only way in which we could become partakers of the divine nature.

2 Cor. 5:18 "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

Therefore, be reconciled to God! Through faith in Jesus

Christ. That is the gospel I will preach as this new year begins, and as every year begins until Jesus returns at the end of the age. Be reconciled to God.

Receive and accept this exceedingly great and precious promise, the promise of forgiveness of your sins. And by that promise, escape the corruption that is in this world through the sinfulness of your own heart. In other words, you exchange the identity of a convicted criminal for that of a beloved child. Exchange enmity for fellowship, communion, with God as partakers of the divine nature.

And how is all that possible? By the promises of the gospel which are given to in Jesus Christ, promises I proclaim to you this morning, "Exceedingly great and precious promises."