

How seriously do you treat promises? Children trust the promises that their parents make and are heartbroken when they are not kept. One's word is a sign of one's integrity as a person. We know what it's like when someone tells us one thing and does another or promises us something and doesn't come through. It hurts. It doesn't take long in life before we learn who is trustworthy and who isn't, who we can rely upon and who we can't. And we daren't even mention political promises which are a whole different beast. That the Lord is faithful to His promises is a foundational understanding of the Christian faith. God is consistent and unchangeable. His Word is trustworthy and reliable. Psalm 145:13 tells us, "**The Lord is trustworthy in all He promises and faithful in all He does**". This provides a solid foundation for belief. God has proven to be true and faithful throughout history, this is His character, and this should give us both confidence and a hopeful future expectation.

Last week we began considering the Covenantal promises that God made to Abraham and the Hebrew people. We saw how Jesus understood His mission was primarily to the Jewish people, to be the Promised Messiah who would redeem Israel. God was faithful to His Word in sending Jesus. Jesus was faithful to His Father's will by living His life according to God's plan and dying for us all. We have also observed that God's primary Covenantal promises were specific to the Jewish people and are irrevocable. Because it is a covenant rather than a contract, even if one party is unfaithful the covenant is not broken. God is always faithful, so the covenants endure through human history.

We ended last week by noting, as Romans 9 does, that God laid a stumbling block in Zion that caused many Hebrew people to stumble. The nature of this stumbling block is important. God does not want ritualistic religion; such a thing is abhorrent. God did not create robots He created living, thinking, feeling people in His own likeness. The person who claims God's forgiveness and then deliberately goes out and repeats their sin, or worse, is living and acting in a manner diametrically opposed to the will and intent of God. It is no wonder the theological reformers of the 15th and 16th Centuries were so vehemently opposed to the corruption of the traditional Roman church ... in the selling of indulgences the church had become the exact opposite of what it was supposed to be. In essence, "indulgences" were effective 'get out of jail free' cards that the Roman Catholic church sold to people so that their sins would be forgiven, even in advance. With these credits they, or their loved ones, would get out of Purgatory or Hell. The system was widely abused. The wealth bought up credit, as it were so, they could go out and commit whatever sin they wanted with impunity. The money raised was used to fund cathedrals and papal initiatives and luxury. One can only imagine how Jesus would have responded. God does not want works, ritual or corruption. God is about building faithful loving relationships with us so that we grow characters that model Jesus and bring glory to God.

From Jesus' day we can see the stumbling of Jewish leadership all too clearly. The religious leaders, so tied to ritual, tradition and their own lengthy academic interpretations, failed to recognise God Incarnate in their midst. Rite and ritual, Law and obedience, institutional thinking, had all driven a true relationship with God from the hearts of many. Fortunately, this was not true of all Israel. The disciples, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea demonstrate that there was always a faithful remnant within Jewish society still looking, still awaiting the Messiah.

At the end of Romans 9 Paul puts things in a new perspective revealing what is going on in three key points. Firstly, God has been patient with humanity, bearing with those who have chosen to reject Him, that He knows are now doomed to destruction, for the sake of those to be saved. Secondly, God was patient because He wants those who will be saved to recognise the riches of His glory and come to salvation freely. Thirdly, God has called not only Jews but also Gentiles.

Quoting Hosea, Paul reminds us that God had said, **“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one.”** Who are these people? Paul recognised that he and the receivers of his epistle were some of the vessels of mercy sovereignly chosen by God. God chose and called them, Jews and Gentiles alike. God’s sovereign choice was both Jewish (Isaac and Jacob, vv. 6–13) and Gentile. In Hosea’s time (2:23; 1:10) God had directed Hosea to give his children symbolic names, his son Lo-Ammi (lit. *not my people*) and his daughter Lo-Ruhamah (lit. *not ... loved*) as symbolic of God’s abandonment of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrian captivity and exile (Hosea 1:2–9). That punishment for the people’s sin executed, the restoration occurs in Romans 9:26, **“In the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God.’”** Paul also quotes Isaiah with the sad realization that (Rom 9:27-29) ... **“Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out His sentence on earth with speed and finality.”** As Isaiah had said previously: **“Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.”** Paul then observes (verse 31) **“... the people of Israel, who pursued the Law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”**” The stumbling stone, also the key to salvation, is Jesus. God calls everyone into relationship with and faith in Jesus.

What then of the Gentiles? Paul had observed (v30) that **“the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith”**. He summarises what he has argued more extensively in his epistle to the Galatians. There is a critical difference between living under the law and being made right with God through faith in Christ; a difference between slavery and freedom. Paul uses an analogy from Jewish history arguing that those born into slavery, like Ishmael, the son of Abraham’s slave-wife Hagar (Genesis 16:1–3) are inherently slaves. Whereas those born to a free woman like Abraham’s wife Sarah (Genesis 21:1–3) are born into freedom. Similarly, Paul argues, those who have faith in Christ are like Isaac, born into freedom. By faith they are children of the promise of God, as Isaac was. Emphatically, Paul states, **“those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham”** (Galatians 3:9) and that **“if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise”** (Galatians 3:29). In that sense, Christians are truly Isaac’s siblings. The parallel then is that those who are under the Law are in slavery, as was Ishmael, and cast out when the child of promise arrived. Living under the Law, a curse in itself, became pointless when Christ arrived. Those who trust in Jesus become children of promise by God’s power.

Does this negate the Covenants of God with the Jewish people? No. It cannot because of the nature of God. It does however make us all equals along the lines of Galatians 3:28, **“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** And in Romans 10:12, **“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** Salvation is first and last through faith. But God’s Covenants will still be fulfilled. We are heirs and brothers/sisters with Christ ... but do we expect to be equal with Him? No way. Rather we model and take the attitude of Jesus who, as Philippians 2:6 notes, **“... being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”**. There is equality in the Kingdom but also difference, just as in the Garden of Eden, prior to the Fall, there was equality but difference with Adam and Eve. In Revelation 7, for example, the 144,000 missionaries to the world are chosen from the 12 Tribes of Israel not from the Gentiles. This should not be a problem for anyone unless you want to try and claim that the church is the new Israel, which it isn’t.

How then do we become Children of Promise, a people, a family of faith? We start by recognising that in God's heart of hearts the bigger picture, for all of His Created Order, has always been in mind. Abraham's blessing was not just for Israel but would spread to all of the world who honoured and blessed God's people. Jesus shows us faith is to be exercised.

In Matthew 14 we have the account of Jesus calling Peter to step out of the boat. While for Peter it was a literal instruction, for us it is a metaphor of incredible power. Jesus calls us to step out of the boat of our ordinary, drab, restricted and frustrated lives to walk with Him in the exhilarating excitement of the wider world. As Peter stepped out of the boat the waves, the squall, the darkness, the wildness was all about him. But as he only had eyes for Jesus, he was able to do as Jesus asked with a sense of joy and excitement. He stepped out confidently and boldly on to the waves to stride towards Jesus, but it didn't take long before the world intruded on his fun. The wind and the waves, the splashes, the depths below him intruded on his consciousness and he took his eyes off Jesus. As he did so his own fears began to overcome him, the unreal reality of what he was doing took over and he began to sink down into the dark depths. We know this experience. It is all too easy to let our fears, our concerns, our version of reality overtake us, swamp us, drag us down. Peter, to his credit, did the one sensible thing here: in faith and desperation Peter cried out to Jesus, "**Save, me!**" And Jesus reached out His hand and helped Peter up.

This is how we become Children of Promise today. We put our faith in Jesus, we commit our lives to Him, we keep our eyes on Jesus looking for His direction, we don't let the storms of life or this world overcome us because Jesus is at the centre of our being and our faith in Him grows daily. From time to time we too need to call out "save, me!" and feel His special presence with us because we too can be weak and overcome. Furthermore, we live our lives responsive to His Word and the voice of the Holy Spirit. Not out of a sense of legal obligation or a ritualised obedience but because we are growing daily in our relationship with Jesus. We who are not God's People have become God's people. We love our brothers and sisters in faith, and we love and pray for the Jewish people because we know that God is working out an awesome plan in our lives and theirs and one day we will see the fullness of how that works out. For now, though we walk, we listen, we respond, and we have fun growing because we are truly free and Children of Promise as we walk with our eyes on Jesus. So, God has true Children of the Covenants and the true Children of Promise, all who will call on Jesus, ... the same but different, brothers and sisters together, rejoicing in the fact that God keeps His promises.

Amen