



The Promise, Faith, and the Law

Romans 4:13-17

- 1. The Promise Comes by Faith (verse 13)**
- 2. The Promise is Nullified by Law (verses 14-15)**
- 3. The Promise Rests on Grace (verses 16-17)**

In recent weeks, there has been much controversy surrounding our new president, Donald Trump. There is controversy with all of his executive orders. From transgender bathrooms to immigration to deregulation to building a wall on our southern border. There is controversy with his battles with the media, claiming that many of them are "fake news." There is controversy with his tweets. There is controversy with his cabinet picks and with his communications staff. There is controversy with his supreme court nomination.

But for all of the controversy, one thing is clear. It seems as if Donald Trump is doing everything in his power to keep his campaign promises.

This past week, at the Conservative Political Action Conference, there was an interesting joint interview with two of Donald Trump's closest advisors, Steve Bannon, White House Chief Strategist, and Reince Priebus, White House Chief of Staff. Throughout this half-hour interview, there was one theme: none of these things should be controversial, because Donald Trump is simply keeping his campaign promises.

Here's what Steve Bannon, said: "[President Trump] laid out an agenda with those [campaign] speeches for the promises he made. And our job every day is just to execute on that.

...

And he's maniacally focused on that. And he's like, "No, I promised the American people this, and this is the plan we're going to execute on."

...

We have a team that's just grinding it through on [what] President Donald Trump promised the American people. And the mainstream media better understand something, all of those promises are going to be implemented.

...

Every day in the Oval Office, [President Trump] tells Reince and I, "I committed this to the American people; I promised this when I ran; and I'm going to deliver on this."

And after a long applause, Bannon simply said this: "How novel." [\[1\]](#)

And it certainly is novel, that a politician would be so focused upon keeping his campaign promises. Often, the promises made on the campaign trail are a means to be elected. And once in office, the promises often fall by the wayside. But not so with Donald Trump. He's doing all that he can to keep those promises.

Well, this morning as we turn our attention to the Bible, we are going to hear about God's promises. And here's the good news: God will keep all of his promises. Donald Trump, as much as he tries, cannot possibly keep all of his campaign promises. The balance of powers in our government will stifle some of his efforts. And the bureaucracy of our day will grind some of his initiatives to a halt.

But not so with God. As it says in Psalm 115:3, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."

Well, if you haven't done so, I invite you to open your Bibles to Romans, chapter 4. Our text this morning will cover verses 13 through 17. Over the past few weeks we have been looking at Romans, chapter 4. It's a chapter in which Paul is seeking to show how the salvation that God has given us in Christ is really nothing new at all. In fact, both Abraham and David were saved in the same way that we are: "by grace through faith."

Two weeks ago, we looked at verses 1-8. And we saw that Abraham was "counted righteous by faith" (verses 1-3). That is, he believed God. And God, in turn, credited righteousness to Abraham's account. David experienced the same thing (verses 6-8).

Last week we looked at verses 9-12. And we saw that Paul made the point that Abraham was counted righteous before his circumcision. Abraham was called in Genesis 12. Genesis 12:1-3 says, "Go ... to the land I will show you. ... In you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Abraham believed in Genesis 15. In Genesis 15:6 we read, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (See Romans 4:3). But the sign of circumcision wasn't given until two chapters later, in Genesis, chapter 17. Genesis 17:10: "This is my covenant: ... Every male among you shall be circumcised."

And when you do the math, you find out that circumcision came at least 14 years later. And Paul made the point that Abraham is the father of

faith for those who believe without being circumcised, as well as the father of faith for those who are circumcised. The importance of this point is this: It's not your religious works that will make you righteous before God! It's not your circumcision (Genesis 17). It's not your baptism. It's not your participation in the Lord's Supper. It's not any religious ritual. It's not any religious effort. It's not your church attendance or your giving or your dedication. It's your faith! (Genesis 15). It is your faith that God counts as righteousness.

In our text this morning, Paul is going to be saying the same thing. It's not your works that make you righteous before God, it's your faith.

Rather than using the same words, he comes at it with a slightly different angle. Paul comes at it from the point of God's promise to Abraham. He develops the relationship that faith has with the promise. And he addresses the relationship that the law has with faith.

Let me read the text. And as I do, I want for you to listen for three words: "Promise, Faith, and Law."

Romans 4:13-17

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

My message this morning is entitled, "The Promise, Faith, and the Law." Because, that's what Paul is talking about here. He's talking about the inter-relationship of these three things. Here's my first point, ...

1. The Promise Came by Faith (verse 13)

It did not come by the law. Again, let's look at verse 13, ...

Romans 4:13

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

Now, one of the things that we looked at last week was the history of the life of Abraham. And one of the things the Paul points out is that Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised.

But, with verse 13, Paul expands the scope a bit. He expands it beyond the life of Abraham to the life of Moses. And in so doing, he raises the point: the promise came first, and then the law. Just consider the following diagram:

Abraham lived about 2,000 years before Christ came to the earth. His story is told in the book of Genesis.

His son was Isaac. (His story is told in Genesis 21-27).

His grandson was Jacob (His story is told in Genesis 25-36).

His great-grandson was Joseph (His story is told in Genesis 37-50).

After Joseph was forgotten by the Pharaoh in Egypt, he enslaved the Jews. This went on for generations, until Moses came on the scene. And God gave Israel the law.

And the simple observation that Paul makes is this:

Romans 4:13

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

That cannot be more obvious. God made the promise to Abraham in 2,000 B. C. The law was given to Moses, hundreds of years later in 1,400 B. C. So, when God made the promise to Abraham, the law was nowhere in sight

Abraham knew nothing of the Mosaic law. And for that matter, neither did Isaac, Jacob or Joseph. The closest thing that Abraham knew of any law was circumcision, as God later would include that in the law. You can read about that in Leviticus 12:3, when God commands that a baby boy be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. But, the command to circumcise wasn't initially given as a law. It was given as a sign. It was given as a sign of the covenant. It was given as a sign that Abraham would be "the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:4).

This is a portion of what Paul is referring to here when he says (in verse 13) that Abraham would be "heir of the world." It's the scope of the promise of the covenant that goes far beyond merely the life of Israel. The promise that God gave to Abraham was a global promise.

When Abraham was initially called, God told him that, "... in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). And when Jesus spoke of the kingdom, he described it as a feast in heaven, with Abraham at the head of the table. Jesus said, "Many will come from

east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11).

One of the reasons why Abraham is at front and center at the table in the kingdom, is because he is the one who received the promise by faith. Abraham is the father of faith to all who believe.

And, the promise did not come through the law.

Romans 4:13

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

And for us here this morning, it is the same way. The promise of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ comes by God's promise. Have you ever thought about this? That your eternal destiny is dependent upon promises made to you by God.

Promises like: "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Promises like: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Promises like: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Promises like: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

One prominent Old Testament scholar of this past generation, Walt Kaiser, was so convinced of this that when he sought to summarize the plan of the Bible, "PROMISE" was the word he used. His Biblical theology came to be called, "Promise Theology." Listen to what he says: "If the text [of Scripture] is to be allowed to first speak for itself before our assessments are made, then we would vigorously like to propose that the element of the 'promise' is that center which may be demonstrated from every era of the canon" [\[2\]](#)

In other words, whether you talk about the time from Adam to Abraham, or from Abraham to Moses, or from Moses to David, or from David to the time of Exile of the Jews, or from the Exile to the days of Jesus, or from Jesus to today, God has acted in one way toward us: He has made promises to us. We are called to believe in those promises.

There is much truth to this thought. In fact, when Mark Dever sought to write a book summarizing the message of the Old Testament, he entitled the book "Promises Made." And when he summarized the message of the New Testament, he entitled his book, "Promises Kept." And the promises that Jesus kept for us hold promises for a future day with him in paradise if we but believe his promises.

Oh, church family, I encourage you to sing with the hymn-writer (R. Kelso Carter), ...

Standing on the promises of Christ, my King!
Thro' eternal ages let His praises ring;
"Glory in the highest!" I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises, I now can see
Perfect, present cleansing in the blood for me;
Standing in the liberty where Christ makes free,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises of Christ, the Lord,
Bound to Him eternally by love's strong cord,
Overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
Standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises, I cannot fall,
List'ning every moment o the Spirit's call,
Resting in my Savior as my All in All,
Standing on the promises of God.

1. The Promise Comes by Faith (verse 13)

Let's turn to my second point this morning:

2. The Promise is Nullified by Law (verses 14-15)

This is found in verses 14 and 15, where we read, ...

Romans 4:14-15

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but

where there is no law there is no transgression.

In other words, if God worked in such a way that it was those who obeyed the law who would be the heirs of the kingdom, then faith toward God, and his promises toward us, are meaningless. In other words, you can only approach God from one way. You either approach him from the way of faith in his promises. Or, you approach him from the way of law and reward.

They are opposed to each other. You can't come both ways. You can't come by faith and by law. You come either by faith or by law.

For instance, as you came to church this morning, you could have come to the building one of two ways. You could have come by way of Alpine, onto Croyden and into our parking lot. Or, you could have come by way of Forest Hills, and weaved your way through the neighborhood. But, you couldn't come from both ways. You either approached from the east, or you approached from the west. You cannot approach from both the east and the west.

So it is with God. You come either by law or by faith. And what Paul says here in verse 14 is this: if you come by the law, then there is no place for faith or for the promises of God.

Romans 4:14

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Or, as I have worded it in my second point, ...

2. The Promise is Nullified by Law (verses 14-15)

Now, that's not to say that the existence of the law nullifies the promise. Paul makes this very point in Galatians 3:17.

Remember the timeline? Abraham was around 2,000 B. C. Then came Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Slavery in Egypt, and then Moses in 1,400 B. C. In Galatians 3:17, Paul makes the point about the existence of the law. He says, ... "The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void" (Galatians 3:17). In other words, the mere existence of the law doesn't do away with the promise. In fact, it cannot do away with the promise.

The promise comes first and has priority over anything else that comes afterwards. So, the promise in no way changes with anything else that comes later. Paul mentions this in Galatians 3:15: "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." (Galatians 3:15).

Or, to use our terms today, once you make a contract and sign on the bottom line. It is legally binding. You can't ignore it. You can't change it. So, the mere existence of the law doesn't do away with the promise. What does away with the promise is when you trust in law to obtain your inheritance.

And this is exactly what Paul says in Galatians 3:18, "For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise." (Galatians 3:18). Or, as I have said this morning, The Promise is Nullified by Law (verses 14-15).

If you are seeking to obtain your eternal inheritance by works of the law, then you no longer can trust in the promise, that God made to you through Abraham. You will have to work your way. And that's not a pleasant experience.

Look at verse 15, ...

Romans 4:15

For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Even the coming of the law teaches this. When the law came to Israel, it came upon Mount Saini with smoke and fire and noise that grew louder and louder and louder (Exodus 19:18-19). And when the people heard it, they were afraid. Listen to Exodus 20:18-19

Exodus 20:18-29

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

And how it came is a picture of how it works in our lives. The law isn't always so pleasant. It comes with its demands! It comes with its consequences for failure. It is a task-master! It is hard! And we will never be able to fulfill it.

If you have read John Bunyan's classic, Pilgrim's progress, perhaps you remember how he described the law when Christian turned away from the counsel of Evangelist. Christian listened to the advice of Mr. Worldly Wiseman rather than keeping on the straight and narrow way. He said, ...

"CHRISTIAN turned out of his way to go to Mr. LEGALITY'S house for help. But, behold, when he was got now hard by the hill, it seemed so high, and also the side of it that was next the wayside did hang so much over, that CHRISTIAN was afraid

to venture farther, lest the hill should fall on his head; wherefore there he stood still, and knew not what to do. Also his burden now seemed heavier to him than while he was in his way. There came also flashes of fire out of the hill, that made CHRISTIAN afraid that he should be burned:

Here, therefore, he sweat and did quake for fear."

This is because, "... the law brings wrath, ..." (Romans 4:15). With the law comes an understanding of transgression. That's Paul's point, ...

Romans 4:15
... where there is no law there is no transgression.

But, with the presence of the law, there is knowledge of transgression. Indeed, as Romans 3:20 says, "... through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20).

Much has to do with the purpose of the law. The law was not given to sanctify us. The law was given to instruct us. And as we failed to live according to the law, we have discovered our sin. Indeed, this is a big purpose of the law. It teaches us our sin. You try to live according to a set of rules, and all you will experience is condemnation. You will not know and experience the blessings of the promises of God!

Church family, don't try to live by the rules of the law! You will nullify the promise. Parents, don't try to regulate the behavior of your children by a long list of rules. You will miss the power of the gospel to induce change.

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,

Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings

Let's move on to our last point this morning.

3. The Promise Rests on Grace (verses 16-17)

Let's read verses 16 and 17, ...

Romans 4:16-17
That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

I love it when the Scriptures give us purpose statements. It has a way of clarifying the truth. Paul says that God has intentionally established our salvation in such a way that it depends upon faith, not upon works. So that, "the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all of his offspring."

In other words, God has determined to save us by his sheer, sovereign grace. And in order to do that, our salvation is not based upon our law-keeping. It is based upon our trust in God. It is based upon faith so that it might rest on grace. That's why Romans 3:24-25 says it this way, ...

Romans 3:24-25
and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. ...

Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." You are saved by grace through faith. You don't earn it by your faith. It comes by grace. Our response is faith.

Romans 4:16 talks about the promise being guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring. This is for both Jews and Gentiles. The only way that it can be guaranteed is if it all depends on the LORD. That's the definition of grace—it is all of God, unmerited, unearned, coming sovereignly from God's kindness.

. And in verse 17, ...

Romans 4:17
as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Paul talks about the power of God. God is all powerful! He can raise the dead; He created all things from nothing. He is the One upon whom

our salvation is guaranteed. Let's live in and lavish in and enjoy His grace.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 26, 2017 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <http://time.com/4681094/reince-priebus-steve-bannon-cpac-interview-transcript/>

[2] Walter Kaiser, *Toward and Old Testament Theology*, p. ix