THE GOD WHO KEEPS HIS PROMISE

Acts 13:13-41

By

Steven J. Cole

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Acts Lesson 33

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In October, 1940, Presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt promised, “I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.” In October, 1964, candidate Lyndon Johnson promised, “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves” (both quotes in No Matter How Thin You Slice It, It’s Still Bologna [Quill], ed. by Jean Arbeiter, p. 85). We’re so used to politicians not keeping their campaign promises that those outrageous quotes hardly bother us.

But it does bother us greatly when someone we love and trust fails to keep an important promise. “I promise to love you in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and to keep myself ever and only for you, till death do us part.” When those kinds of promises are broken, it leaves a trail of grief and pain. If I were leaving on a long trip and I entrusted to you a rare family treasure, which you promised to keep safe for my return, I’d be a bit stunned to return and find that you had sold it at a yard sale (even if it was for missions!). We’re hurt when people fail to keep important promises.

If you’re going to entrust your soul for eternity to God, it is important to know that He keeps His promises. Most of us have had the experience of being disappointed with God. We trusted Him for something that we thought He had promised, but it did not work out as we had hoped. Whenever that happens, it is we, not God, who were mistaken. We somehow failed to understand or properly apply His promises. But on the matter of our eternal destiny, it is crucial that we properly understand and apply God’s promise of salvation. To be mistaken here would be eternally fatal!

The apostle Paul’s first and longest recorded sermon deals with the theme of God’s promise of salvation: “From the offspring of this man [David], according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus” (13:23). “To us the word of this salvation is
sent out” (13:26). “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children [or, to us, their children] in that He raised up Jesus, as it also is written ... ” (13:32-33). The sermon falls into three parts, each beginning with Paul’s direct address to the congregation: The promise given (13:16-25); the promise kept (13:26-37); and, your response (13:38-41). We have here only a synopsis of what undoubtedly was a much longer message. His main idea is:

*God’s promise to send a Savior and His fulfillment of that promise in sending Jesus demands a response.*

The sermon was delivered at the synagogue in what is called Pisidian Antioch, in modern Turkey. It was about 100 miles inland, at 3,600 feet elevation. To get there, Paul and Barnabas had to go through some dangerous mountain passes, infested with robbers. Some think that the danger was one factor in Mark’s deserting the team and returning to Jerusalem. Since Paul was a disciple of the renowned rabbi, Gamaliel, the synagogue officials gave him the opportunity to bring the sermon. They had to be surprised at what he said!

1. **The promise given: By His grace, God promised His chosen people to send a Savior (13:16-25).**

Paul begins by addressing both the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles in the congregation. He starts with facts that every Jew would have known and agreed with: God chose the patriarchs; He delivered their descendants from Egypt; He gave them the land of Canaan; and, He chose David as their king (13:17-22). In all of this rehearsal of Israel’s history, Paul’s very words are almost taken directly from the Old Testament (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans], p. 272). Up through verse 22, every head in the synagogue was nodding in agreement with Paul.

Then Paul skips the rest of Israel’s history and jumps from David to David’s descendant, Jesus, proclaiming Him to be the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Savior (13:23). Perhaps observing a ripple of shock sweep through the room, Paul quickly goes back to John the Baptist, the forerunner of whom Malachi prophesied. Since John was highly regarded in most Jewish circles, Paul shows that John did not regard himself as Messiah, but rather affirmed
that he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the one coming after him. Paul weaves three themes into this brief sketch of history:

A. God is sovereignly moving all of history according to His purpose to fulfill His promise of salvation.

Paul’s sermon centers on God and His sovereignty over all of history, especially the history of salvation. God began the process by choosing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was not their choice of God, but God’s choice of them, that is significant. Then, God made the people great during their stay in Egypt. God led them out of Egypt with an uplifted arm (emphasizing God’s power). God put up with them in the wilderness for 40 years. There is a textual variant of one Greek letter that changes the meaning to, “God carried them in His arms as a nurse in the wilderness.” It is difficult to determine which reading is original, but both were true: God put up with Israel’s sin and He bore them gently in His strong and loving arms in spite of their sin.

Continuing, Paul mentions that God destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1). Israel didn’t conquer the land by her own strength. God distributed their land as an inheritance. The 450 years refers to the 400 years of captivity in Egypt, the 40 years in the wilderness, and ten years of conquering most of Canaan. Then God gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. In response to their request to be like the other nations, God gave them Saul as king. This is the only biblical reference to the length of Saul’s kingship, agreeing with the Jewish writer Josephus. The Old Testament text is obviously corrupt when it reports on the chronology (1 Sam. 13:1). It was God who removed Saul and God who raised up David. It was God who brought to Israel from David’s offspring, according to His promise, a Savior in the person of Jesus.

Paul continues the same theme throughout the rest of the sermon. In verse 26, it is clearly God who sent out the word of this salvation. In verse 27, the wicked rulers in Jerusalem, who did not recognize Jesus or the words of the prophets, nonetheless fulfilled those very words of God by condemning Jesus. The point is that even wicked men who are bent on carrying out their own will actually fulfilled God’s sovereign will. History is God’s story, and no one can do anything to thwart His plan. Verse 29 makes the same point: Jesus’ death, their taking Him from the cross and laying Him
in a tomb all simply fulfilled all that was written concerning Him. The specific events of the crucifixion and burial, such as the soldiers gambling for His robe, their offering Him gall to drink, and His being buried in a rich man’s tomb, all fulfilled specific prophecies. Paul continues with God’s sovereign working: God raised Him from the dead (13:30). God has fulfilled this promise (13:33). He hammers the theme home: God is in control of history.

All of this should give us great comfort, especially when things in our world seem to be running out of control. Nothing thwarts God’s sovereign purpose in history! He promised to send the Savior, and He did it in spite of the many failings of His people and the strong opposition of His enemies. That leads to the second theme that Paul weaves through his sermon:

B. God’s grace permeates His working in history.

God’s grace is seen in His sovereign choice of the patriarchs. Why did He choose Abraham? Scripture is clear that it was not because Abraham first decided to choose God. No, Abraham was a pagan idolater, living in a pagan nation, when God in sovereign grace revealed Himself to Abraham and called him to move to Canaan (Josh. 24:2-3). There was nothing of merit in Abraham to make him the recipient of such grace. The same is true of Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons, the twelve patriarchs of the nation. As Paul makes clear in Romans 9, God’s choice of Jacob and His rejection of Esau had nothing to do with anything in either man. Rather, it was “so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls” (Rom. 9:11). If grace is contingent on anything in us, including our choice of God, it is no longer grace (Rom. 11:6).

God’s grace is further illustrated in the exodus and the time in the wilderness. Israel didn’t even want to be delivered from Egypt, and more than once after they were delivered, they wanted to go back. But God graciously brought them into the land and destroyed the nations that were living there. In spite of the wickedness of His people, God graciously gave them judges and then sent His word through Samuel the prophet. While they were wrong to ask for a king, God graciously both granted their request and chastened them by giving them Saul. Then He graciously raised up David. Although over the course of his life, David was a man after
God’s heart, we all know of his terrible failure in murdering Uriah and committing adultery with his wife, Bathsheba. But in spite of these failures, God graciously sent the Savior through the offspring of this man, according to His gracious promise. This extended emphasis on grace is why Luke sums up Paul and Barnabas’ exhortation to those who responded in faith, that they should “continue in the grace of God” (13:43).

If you think that your standing before God is because of anything in you—your choice of God, your basic goodness, your religious practices—you do not understand the gospel of God’s grace. God’s sovereign grace means that we are saved in spite of, not because of, anything in ourselves. God initiated the process with His promise, He moved all history to accomplish it, and He brings it to individuals who are rebels deserving of His judgment. It is all from His grace, to the praise of the glory of His grace!

C. God is moving all of history to culminate in Jesus the Savior.

This should be obvious by all that I’ve said so far. Paul is showing that Jesus Christ is the goal and culmination of history. God purposed to sum up all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Eph. 1:11). “All things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:16b-18). Paul sums this up in his great doxology in Romans 11:36: “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Anyone or anything that diminishes the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ is not from God. All of the Old Testament was written to point forward to Jesus Christ. He fulfilled hundreds of prophecies, some of which Paul cites in the next section of his sermon. All of the New Testament centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. As the Book of Revelation makes clear, God is moving history toward the grand climax of Christ’s defeat of Satan and His eternal reign.

Thus Paul’s first point is that God graciously promised His chosen people to send a Savior, and that Jesus, the son of David, is
that promised Savior. He elaborates on the fulfillment of God’s promise in Jesus in his second point:

2. **The promise kept: God’s salvation comes to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (13:26-37).**

Paul here anticipates and answers two questions that he knew his audience would be thinking. The first is, If Jesus is God’s Savior and Messiah, why did the Jewish leaders reject Him? Second, When the Jewish leaders rejected and killed Jesus, did they somehow thwart or nullify God’s purpose?

In answer to the first question, Paul shows that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus because they did not recognize Him when He came (13:27). They were looking for a political Messiah who would deliver them from Rome’s domination. Surely, he would be a great soldier or statesman. He would be trained in the rabbinic schools. He would come from a prominent family and have prestige and influence in society. Jesus had none of these and so they did not recognize Him.

The reason they didn’t recognize Him is that they did not hear the voices of the prophets who spoke to them every Sabbath as God’s Word was read aloud (13:27). They heard the words and they even memorized great portions of Scripture. But they did not understand it. As Jesus charged, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Or, as Jesus quoted Isaiah with reference to the people, “You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them” (Matt. 13:14-15).

In answer to the second question, Paul shows that the Jews’ rejection and killing of Jesus did not in any way thwart God’s plan, but rather fulfilled it in exact accordance with Scripture. Here he echoes both Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23), and the prayer of the early church (Acts 4:27-28), which show that the crucifixion of Jesus only fulfilled what God’s hand and God’s
purpose predestined to occur. This is not to absolve the wicked men who killed Him of their responsibility. But it is to exalt God, who is able to use the most wicked deeds of the most wicked men to accomplish His sovereign purpose, and yet hold them guilty for all the terrible things that they do.

Paul also emphasizes that God overruled their wicked killing of Jesus by raising Him from the dead. As with all apostolic witness in Acts, the resurrection of Jesus is central. Paul mentions the many witnesses who saw the risen Jesus over many days (13:31). In 13:33, the word “raised up” probably refers not only to the resurrection, but also to Jesus’ exaltation on high. The quote from Psalm 2, “You are My Son; today I have begotten You,” predicts the enthronement of God’s Messiah over all His enemies. Some take the word “today” to speak of the “day” of God’s eternal decree, when Christ was declared to be the Son of God and begotten (John Walvoord, Jesus Christ Our Lord [Moody Press], p. 41). Since the decree is eternal, Christ’s Sonship is eternal. Others, such as John Calvin (Calvin’s Commentaries [Baker], Acts, pp. 535-536), think that “today” refers to the resurrection, when Christ was exalted by His eternal identity as God’s Son being most clearly manifested. Support for this view is Romans 1:4, which states that He was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul (13:34-37) further underscores Jesus’ resurrection by quoting two Old Testament prophecies. First he cites Isaiah 55:3, “I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.” The “you” is plural, pointing to God’s people, but the holy and sure promises were mediated to them through David’s promised descendant, the Messiah. A dead Messiah could not fulfill the promised blessing to David, to have one of his descendants sit on his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:16). Only a perpetually living Messiah could do that. Then, as Peter did at Pentecost, Paul cites Psalm 16:10, showing that it could not have applied to David, who died and did undergo decay, but rather applied to David’s descendant, the Messiah.

Thus Paul’s argument so far is that God had given His promise to send a Savior to His chosen people, Israel. He had kept that promise by sending Jesus, the son of David, in fulfillment of the prophecies given hundreds of years before. The fact that the Jewish leaders rejected and killed Jesus did not thwart, but actually ful-
filled, God’s promises. God raised Jesus from the dead, also in accordance with several prophecies. Then comes the bottom line:

3. **Your response: Will you believe in Jesus and be saved or will you scoff at God’s promise and be judged (13:38-41)?**

   Again Paul addresses them as brethren, meaning, “fellow Jews.” First, he proclaims two great promises to them (13:38-39); then, he ends with a solemn warning from the prophet Habakkuk (13:40-41).

   A. The two promises: God offers forgiveness of sins and justification to everyone who believes in Jesus (13:38-39).

   Both promises are “through Him.” Paul’s audience was trying to gain God’s acceptance through keeping of the Law of Moses. But Paul boldly states what he develops at length in his epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans, that right standing with God can never come through the law. The law brings condemnation to all, because all have sinned and violated God’s holy law. If anyone had tried to keep it, it was Paul (Phil. 3:4-6), but it had not brought him into right standing before God.

   Then Paul uses twice the word that became the center of his gospel, “justified” (I don’t understand why the NASB translates it “freed”). It refers to more than our sins being taken away through forgiveness. It refers to God declaring us righteous in His sight through the merits of Jesus Christ. We stand before Him just as if we had never sinned, because the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us through faith. What a wonderful promise, that our standing before God can change instantly from guilty sinner to justified saint at the moment we put our trust in Jesus as the one who paid our penalty on the cross!

   B. The solemn warning: Be careful not to scoff at God’s promise, because scoffers will incur God’s judgment (13:40-41).

   Paul quotes Habakkuk 1:5, which warned Judah of the impending judgment that God would bring on them through the Babylonians because of their unrepentant hearts. The implication is, just as God surely carried out that judgment, so He will bring destruction on you if you scoff at His gracious promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
Conclusion

We live in a day that scoffs at the thought of God’s judgment. Even many who profess to know Christ say, “My God is a God of love, not a God of judgment.” But what matters is not how you speculate God to be, but rather, how He has in fact revealed Himself in His Word. Some who claim to be evangelical theologians argue that hell will not be eternal punishment. Rather, they say that God will annihilate the wicked after they have served an appropriate sentence. While appealing to the flesh, that view contradicts the very words of Jesus, who quoted Isaiah, that hell will be a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (see Mark 9:42-48). Just as eternal life is forever, so eternal punishment is forever (Matt. 25:46).

The God who keeps His promises is also the God who carries through with His warnings! Paul’s sermon gives abundant evidence that God faithfully kept His gracious promise to send Jesus as the Savior of all who will believe in Him. The word of this salvation is sent to you (13:26). Through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you (13:38). Through Him everyone who believes is justified in God’s sight (13:39). But also, all who scoff at Him or ignore Him “will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:9). Remember, Paul was speaking here to a religious audience. Everyone present believed in God. But they needed personally to put their trust in His promise of salvation through Jesus Christ so that the words of His warning did not come upon them.

Discussion Questions

1. Why must God’s election be the cause, not the result, of our faith in Christ?
2. Why is it important to affirm that God is sovereign even over evil?
3. Why must a person believe in the deity of Jesus Christ in order to be saved?
4. What lessons can we learn about witnessing from Paul’s presentation of the gospel here?

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