

Unconditional Promises

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Old Testament reading. **The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** Here ends our text.

“If you eat all your peas and clear the table, then you may go out and play; otherwise, you have to go to bed early. If you’re nice, then you’ll get a Christmas present, but if you’re naughty, you won’t. If you study hard in school, then you’ll get good grades, but if you don’t, you’ll fail. If you work overtime, then you’ll get a bonus; otherwise, you’ll be demoted.” These are all promises you may have heard in your lifetime. But they’re a special kind of promise. They’re conditional promises. There’s an “if/then” involved. There are strings attached. If you do something, then you can expect something in return. Or if you don’t do something, then you can expect some sort of punishment. The conditional promise depends on you. But there’s another type of promise that’s unconditional. There’s no “if/then” involved. “I’m taking you on vacation. I’ll pay for the food and lodging and all the entertainment. Just pack your bags. I’m treating you to ice cream. Any kind you want. Get your shoes on. You’ve won a new car. The keys are in the ignition. Go outside and see it.” These unconditional promises don’t require you to do anything. They’re freely given. The only thing needed to receive them is to believe the person who’s giving them. You pack your bags, put on your shoes, and go and see it. I think you’d agree that the unconditional promises are better than the conditional ones. They don’t depend on us. They’re guaranteed.

If you look at all the world religions, you can distinguish them by this simple test. Are they founded on conditional promises or unconditional? In Islam, if you follow the five pillars of confessing Allah as God, praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, giving alms to the poor, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca, then you’ll go to heaven. In Buddhism, if you follow the eightfold path of having right views, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration, then your suffering will cease, and you’ll achieve self-awakening. In Hinduism, if you live a moral life, then you’ll be reincarnated as a higher life form. All these religions involve lists of things for you to do in order to reap the reward. They’re based on conditional promises. They’re based on laws. Of course, if you don’t do the prescribed things on the list, then you’ll suffer in hell, have bad karma, or come back as an ant. But of all the world religions, Christianity is different. It’s founded on God’s unconditional promises. He freely gives them without any merit or worthiness in us. There’s no if/then. All that’s needed to receive the promise is faith, something that even God the Holy Spirit supplies when the promise is heard. God conveys his unconditional promises, not by the Law, giving us conditions, but he calls us by the Gospel, his unconditional grace. No strings attached.

In our text today, we see God calling Abraham through his unconditional Gospel promises. Now keep in mind that God doesn’t call Abraham because he’s a great guy living a righteous life. God calls Abraham out of idolatry. This is 400 years after Noah and the flood. This is after the tower of Babel incident where men tried to make a name for themselves. The earth and its human inhabitants have already returned to a corrupt and wicked state. Abraham and his whole family are worshipping other gods. In this pagan worship, the worshipper tried to appease the false god by making sacrifices and doing something to earn its favor. The false god would then supposedly respond with favorable weather or a bountiful harvest or needed fertility. If you did something, then you got something. It was really man-centered worship. It was all about the man serving the god to get something in return.

But Abraham didn’t come to the Lord to appease him. The Lord wasn’t responding to something Abraham did for him. Rather the Lord came to Abraham and told him what he would do for him. The Lord didn’t call Abraham by the Law, giving him a list of conditions to their agreement. He called him by his unconditional Gospel promises. The Lord gives Abraham three promises. First, the Lord would give Abraham many descendents. This, despite the fact that Abraham was a man of 75, who up to now was childless. But God promised to make Abraham into a great nation. Abraham wouldn’t have to make a name for himself like the men of Babel, but God would make a great name for him. Second, God would give Abraham’s descendents the land of Canaan. This, despite the fact that the Canaanites were in the land. It was already occupied. This would be like

Second Sunday in Lent - March 5, 2023 - Genesis 12:1-9

God saying to you, "I'll give your descendents the state of Indiana," when there are already Hoosiers living in the land. Third, the Lord promised Abraham that all families of the earth would be blessed through him. Abraham would be a blessing to all nations. How would this be? From Abraham's descendents would come the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. He'd be born in that land of Canaan in the small town of Bethlehem. And by Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, all the nations of the earth would be blessed with forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Three unconditional promises: descendants, land, Messiah.

Did Abraham believe God's promises? By the power of the Holy Spirit, yes he did. How do we know? The Lord said to him, "Pack up your bags, put on your shoes, and go and see the land I'm giving you." And Abraham did. Despite the fact that he was 75 years old, despite the fact that he was leaving his home and his relatives behind, Abraham traveled to the land of Canaan. He put his faith into action. He did according to what he believed. And though Abraham wasn't righteous according to his own actions, God credited righteousness to him by faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." What did Abraham believe? He believed not only God's promises of provision with family and land, but his promise of provision through a Savior. And by this faith, not by his works, God counted Abraham as righteous. By faith God gave Abraham Christ's righteousness.

When Abraham came to the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to him again and repeated his promise, "To your offspring I will give this land." How did Abraham respond to the Lord's promise? He worshipped the Lord. Abraham built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord. Now calling upon the name of the Lord can mean two things. It can mean Abraham called upon the name of the Lord in prayer. But calling upon the name of the Lord may also mean proclaiming in the name of the Lord. Abraham prayed to the Lord on behalf of his household, but he also preached the promises of the Lord to his household. In our worship today we call this God's service of the Word, prayer and preaching. But there was also God's service of the Sacrament. An animal was sacrificed on the altar, not to appease God, but to act as a substitute for sinful Abraham and his household. Through this Old Testament Sacrament, their sins were atoned for by faith in the coming Messiah Jesus Christ, who would sacrifice himself and serve as their substitute. So already in the twelfth chapter of the Bible we see the beginnings of the same pattern of worship we have today. The preaching of the promises of God, the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. This was also God-centered worship. It was all about God serving man by giving him his gifts and keeping his promises, his unconditional promises.

Now there might be some who would try to turn Christianity into the other religions of the world with their conditional promises. Instead of the five pillars of Islam or the eightfold path of Buddhism, Christianity has the Ten Commandments. If you keep the Ten Commandments, then the Lord will be your God and you will be his people. But we all know how long that worked out on Mt. Sinai with the golden calf. The religion of the Law with its conditional promises doesn't work with sinful human beings who can't live up to their end of the bargain. When it depends on us, we fail.

Instead, God must do it all. And he does. God called Abraham by his promises, and he kept all his promises. Abraham did have many descendents, the whole nation of Israel. They did inherit the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. And Jesus Christ was born of the Jews, crucified, and risen in that Promised Land to bless all nations, among whom are you and me.

And just like God called Abraham through his Gospel promise, so he called you. God didn't call you with his Law. "Here's all the things that you need to do to serve me and appease me. If you do for me, then I'll do for you." Instead, God promises you, "I'm giving you the Promised Land of heaven. I'm giving you a new family who are sons of Abraham by faith. And I'm giving forgiveness of all your sins through faith in Christ." God the Holy Spirit even gives us that faith. We confess in our catechism. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me (how?) by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

And just like Abraham, we respond to God's promises in worship. We put on our shoes, get in the car, and come here. We put our faith into action. We do according to what we believe. We hear God's promises proclaimed and preached in the Gospel. We call upon his name in prayer. And we come to the altar to receive Christ's body and blood, sacrificed for us for the forgiveness of our sins. We participate in God-centered worship which is all about God serving us. It's all about God keeping his unconditional promises. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.