

THEISM

God's Great Promise

Just as the quality of a man's character may be assessed by the kind of promises he makes and the way he keeps them, so also God may be better understood by examining his promises. One of God's promises stands out above all others, and indeed encompasses many others. What was this great promise and what does it tell us about God?

Peter referred to this great promise when, after his sermon on the day of Pentecost, he said "the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). Paul talked about the promise when he told King Agrippa, "I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers." He also said, "To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain." He claimed that the Jews brought their accusation against him because of this promise (Acts 26:6-7). What was this great promise that the apostles mentioned in these and other scriptures?

The promise is first stated in Genesis 12:1-3, "*Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:1-3). When Abraham lived in Ur of Chaldees, the God of glory promised several things to Abraham if he'd leave his country and his family and go to a land he had not yet seen. The most significant thing promised was that through Abraham God would bless all the families of the earth. God's promises were based upon Abraham's faith and obedience. Abraham believed and obeyed (Hebrews 11:8). The promise that "in you and your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" was repeated several times (Genesis 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). The promise may be analyzed by looking at its three parts. First, it was to come through Abraham and his seed; second, it was to extend to all families of the earth; and third, a blessing would be given.

Regarding the first portion of the promise, the heirs of Abraham are described in scripture as neither those who were descendents of Abraham according to the flesh nor those who lived by the law of Moses, but those who live by faith in Christ. *Paul wrote that the fleshly descendents of Abraham were not the intended recipients of the promise.* He said that "those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Romans 9:8). Neither Abraham nor his immediate fleshly heirs received the fulfillment of the promise. "By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. . . . And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise" (Hebrews 11:9, 39). Moreover, *Paul declared that the promise did not come through the law.* "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, . . . Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all . . . He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God" (Romans 4:13-14, 16, 20). *Paul argued that Christ is the seed of the promise, and that through faith in Christ, Gentiles are heirs of Abraham.* "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed" (Galatians 3:8). When in the synagogue

at Antioch of Pisidia, Paul declared that from Abraham's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior; Jesus; . . . And we declare to you glad tidings; that promise which was made to the fathers" (Acts 13:23, 32). Paul wrote that Christ died on the cross "that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. . . . Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:14, 16, 29). Therefore, "we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise" (Galatians 4:28). To the Ephesians, Paul observed "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel" (Ephesians 3:6).

The second part of the promise indicates that it was intended to be for "all nations" or "all the families of the earth." *It is for all people.* "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus . . . and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). *It extended backwards to include those who lived before Christ died on the cross.* "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" (Hebrews 9:15). *However, if you want to receive the blessings of the promise, you must be an obedient believer.* "But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Galatians 3:22). *Moreover, you must remain faithful.* "Since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it" (Hebrews 4:1). "For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36).

The third part of the promise relates to the blessing to be received. That blessing is eternal salvation. It comes through the Jesus, the savior whom God raised up (Acts 13:33). To the Gentiles at Ephesus Paul wrote, "In Him (i.e., in Christ) you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). Hence, "We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

This promise and its execution indicates many things about God but only three things will be mentioned. *It says that God cares about sinful humanity.* He cared enough that he planned for mankind's redemption from sin, and executed his plan through the centuries. He wants everyone to be saved. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). *It says that God keeps his promises.* "For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself . . . determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:13, 17-18). When people believe and obey the gospel, God guarantees their salvation by giving to them "the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). *It says that God has the power, through Christ, to redeem believers from their sins.* Jesus spoke of the ability of God when talking with the Jews. He said, "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (Matthew 3:9, see also Luke 3:8).

God cares, God is faithful, and God is able.