

## THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S PROMISES

Text: Selected Scriptures

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### INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

At almost every turn of Abraham's life, it seemed as if God's promises were going to be derailed, through both his personal sin and seemingly impossible circumstances. All of the apparent obstacles point us to one simple yet critical truth: *Everything rests on what God has promised.*

From Galatians 3, specifically v. 8, we have learned that whatever God graciously promises, He also faithfully performs. God is faithful and will fulfill His promises. Our great hope and consolation lies in the fact that we have a Promise-keeping God!

Herein lies great consolation to a soul overwhelmed with sin and weary in the battle: The promising God will in due time also be a performing God! (see Ralph Erskine, *The Works of Ralph Erskine, "The Promising God, A Performing God,"* vol. 2, 339)

God will do what He has promised. The ground of your faith is God's promises!

It is impossible to trust and love God unless you first see Him as a promising God. In fact, Herman Witsius in his great work, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, goes so far as to say, "...to doubt of the faithfulness of God, promising and bequeathing (i.e., granting-J.F.) by testament, is blasphemous," (vol. 2, p. 62).

When it comes to battling with our daily sin, what we need most is Good News (i.e., that God will do what He has promised to do). Grace inspires gratitude and compels us to obey.

We need consolation in those trying moments when the joyful, lively fellowship we enjoyed with our Heavenly Father is turned into bitterness and anxiety.

However, Robert Traill wrote, "It is impossible that there can be true and strong love fixed on that person from whom we do dread the greatest evil..." If you have expectations of dread from God, you will not trust or love Him.

For, we are naturally enemies of God by nature. We are born with a heart that is against God. So even after our conversion, there remains something of a legal spirit in all of us, that is in our flesh.

In Ephesians 6, Paul characterizes this conflict between the grace of the sanctifying Spirit and the remains of natural corruption as a war.

The reality and nature of this spiritual warfare (i.e., sanctification) is at times very difficult for us to apprehend and thus easy to lose sight of God's promises and favor toward us. So, until we can get somewhat of the absolving knowledge of God, as revealed to us in Christ, consolation and assurance will elude us.

This is where the importance of the Lord's Supper (i.e., grace) comes in and why it must be central in our lives. The Lord's Supper is a visible sign and seal (a guarantee) given by God, which guarantees that all of His promises are presently true for all who believe.

The Lord's Supper assures us that God is a promise keeping God. It is a visible testimony of God's grace and good will that He feels toward us. It is this confirmation/guarantee of His good will towards us that sustains, nourishes, confirms, and increases our faith.

Understanding the Lord's Supper in this way has huge implications for how we understand the nature of the church as well as the way we live our daily lives as believers.

To begin with, many of us have grown up understanding the sacraments as basically human rather than divine acts. Our focus in observing Baptism or the Lord's Supper was obedience. We participate in the "ordinances" because we are to be obedient to Christ who ordained these "memorial" acts for the church. Baptism then is reduced to our pledge of obedience, our testimony of faith. The dominant emphasis is on our action.

The Lord's Supper is turned into an act of "self-justification" through self-absorbed introspection and personal penance whereby we seek to "clean up" our act and offer our sincerity and devotion to God.

Thus, the sacraments are viewed as nothing more than empty symbols of remembrance that we bring to God as our offering in order to testify of our faith and love.

The church however, Michael Horton writes, is to be a "theater of grace where God has the lead role," (Horton, *People and Place*, p. 249). Yet, when we view the Lord's Supper (and Baptism) more as our own acts of obedience rather than as God's means of grace we take on the lead role and God is subordinated to a supporting actor.

The Lord's Supper becomes nothing more than an introspective exercise in which we bring an offering to God to testify or renew our faith and love rather than first viewing the Lord's Supper as a gift of God that guarantees His promises to us (see Horton, *People and Place*, p. 112).

We must first understand the Lord's Supper as God having the lead role. We must view it as God's sign and seal to us that graciously guarantees His promises.

Only as we are assured of God's faithfulness to us is our response appropriate. Simply put, obedience and repentance are always the response to the gospel and never the ground or cause. Obedience and repentance are the effects of a justified heart not the cause.

God's action always precedes our actions. God's faithfulness always creates and sustains our faithfulness. God's promises always elicit our response of gratitude.

When we begin to understand the Lord's Supper as God having the lead role, our fears and doubts of God's goodwill toward us begin to subside. Our nagging sense of God's displeasure begins to dissipate.

And in place, assurance of our adoption into God's family and being brought into our Heavenly Father's eternal favor slowly begins to become the controlling influence of our lives.

Viewing the Lord's Supper first as God's activity rather than ours revolutionizes our understanding of the church and the importance of corporate worship for our daily sanctification.

We begin to view the corporate worship of the church as God who is the server. It is God who first comes to us and puts on a towel and washes our feet. Thus, the corporate worship "service" is first God's service. It is the place where God's people gather together in order to first receive. It is the theater of grace where God works.

Michael Horton writes,

"God who comes to us in the Word (preached, read, sung, prayed) and in the sacraments to convict and comfort, to kill and make alive, to judge and to justify, to bring about the effects of Christ's completed work: not only justification, but also sanctification; not only faith, but also hope and love. There is a gathering- an ekklesia- because there is a work of God through preaching and sacrament called the gospel, which does its work before we can get around to ours," (*People and Place*, p. 252).

So, in the Lord's Supper, we have God in grace condescending to us and coming to us guaranteeing that all of His promises to us are true.

In Luke 22:19, Christ speaks these words of grace, "This is my body, which is given for you..." This is Christ's gracious action toward sinners. There was no action on the part of Christ's disciples other than their sinful desertion and denial of Christ later on. At Christ's table, they were merely recipients of grace.

Thus, the emphasis of The Lord's Supper is to fall not on our activity but rather God's, which in turn elicits our response of faith in God and love to our neighbor.

Listen to John Calvin explain how the sacraments bring assurance and delight to us when the emphasis is on God's activity rather than ours.

"Godly souls can gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is His may be called ours. As a consequence, we may dare assure ourselves that eternal life, of which He is the heir, is ours; and that the Kingdom of Heaven, into which He has already entered, can no more be cut off from us than from Him; again, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from whose guilt He has absolved us, since He willed to take them upon himself as if they were His own. This is the wonderful exchange which, out of His measureless benevolence, He has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, He has made us sons of God with Him; that, by His descent to earth, He has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, He has conferred His immortality upon us; that, receiving our poverty unto Himself, He has transferred His wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon Himself (which oppressed us), He has clothed us with His righteousness," (*Institutes*, 4.17.2).

By means of the Lord's Supper we are put into continual remembrance of God's promises such as the ones Calvin mentions. Christ wants you to receive and enjoy all the promises of the gospel.

The Lord's Supper is an invitation to believers to "Taste and see that the LORD is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him," (cf. Ps. 34:8).

To help us "get it", Calvin says He graciously adapted to our small capacity and gave us visible and tangible signs of His favor toward us "in Christ." Thus, despite our ongoing battle with sin, by keeping the Lord's Supper central in our lives we may assure ourselves:

- that we do possess eternal life,
- that we do have entrance into the Kingdom of God,
- that we can no more be cut off from God than Christ,
- that we cannot be condemned for our sin because Christ has been condemned in our place (Gal. 3:13).
- that we have confident access to God that will never be closed (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18; 3:12).
- that Christ has taken our sin, our unrighteousness upon Himself and clothed us with his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

As we consider these gracious acts of God for us, we must not conclude that they are a license or excuse for our sin (cf. Gal. 2:17; Rom. 6:1ff; Titus 2:11-14).

The gospel doesn't lead us to excuse, rationalize, ignore, tolerate or persist in our sin. Rather, the grace of God given to us in the gospel is <sup>12</sup> training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, <sup>13</sup> waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ..."

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, Paul gives a word of warning to all who would partake of the Supper. This warning is not designed to discourage believers from partaking or to bring them back under expectations of condemnation from God. We never come to the Lord's Supper righteous in ourselves and free from sin.

But, it is nonetheless a solemn warning given to remind us to come with faith and reverence, to eat in a worthy manner (i.e., to never view the gospel as giving license or excuse for our sin).

God's warnings serve to stir us up to carefully keep ourselves under His protection; to awaken dull and drowsy souls; to remind us of our duty toward God and neighbor and to prevent us from becoming slothful in our pursuit of holiness.

God's warnings serve to keep us conscious of our weaknesses and shortcomings so that we may live in humble dependence upon God's promises and divine grace.

This is how we eat in a worthy manner. We come repenting of our sinful affections, confessing our grudges, unloving attitudes, bitterness, bad attitudes, lack of forgiveness, jealousy, gossip, ungratefulness, complaining, selfishness, etc...

We come not as givers but as receivers. We come in faith as recipients receiving Christ's cleansing and forgiveness, confessing that He alone is sufficient to present us justified before God.

What if we have fallen and failed, what do we do?

Listen to Robert Bruce,

"Since even the just man, the holiest man, falls as often as seven times a day, indeed, seventy times seven, what are you to do in these slips and falls? If you fall, and you cannot avoid it, do not lie still, do not sleep there where you have fallen. It would be a shame to sleep, therefore rise again. And how are you to rise? By lifting your soul and running to the fountain of grace and mercy, by repairing to Christ Jesus, to obtain mercy for your soul, and to ask Him to send from Himself the needed peace to put your conscience to rest, and to restore your soul to health," (*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, p. 160).

Let us then come to the Lord's Supper this morning with great faith and thanksgiving, looking away from ourselves, confessing our sins and trusting

only in the perfect merits and finished work of Christ alone for our acceptance before God. Let us hold fast to our promise-keeping God!

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