

Promises Fulfilled

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[0 : 0 0] So this evening I'd like us to actually turn to Acts chapter 13 which is the passage that we read this morning and I'd like to read again verses 32 to 33. Here Paul is preaching to the crowd at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia and he's narrating to them the gospel message and as part of that he says these words, we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus. Oh excuse me. We're in a short series just now called The Good News of the Kingdom and that title comes from a phrase that you see very often in the New Testament and we saw it a couple of weeks ago in Matthew 9:35 you see it in lots of other places. The word gospel means good news and the message that Jesus proclaimed is the good news of the kingdom of God and so we're unpacking that phrase over three or four sermons and we're going to look at the three things that this phrase highlights the fact that the gospel is good, the gospel is news and the gospel is about the kingdom. This week was supposed to be part two of a three part series but it took too long this morning talking about how the gospel is news so we need to finish tonight what we started this morning. We are looking at the fact that the gospel is news and under that heading we are looking at three things.

We're thinking about our need for information and our thirst for truth which we unpacked this morning and tonight we are going to think about our dependence on promises.

In this verse that you can see on the screen this version is 32 to 33 you see a combination of words that's incredibly important in scripture you see it here promised fulfilled that pattern of promise and fulfillment is incredibly important in the Bible it's actually incredibly important in any area of life you see it in politics if a party makes promises and then doesn't fulfill them then they're judged very negatively or if they do something that they didn't say that they were going to do as we can see this week they get criticized same in work you get offered a new job you get promised that you're going to have a good salary that you'll have opportunities to progress that you'll be given responsibilities and authority if that doesn't happen if those promises aren't kept then you get frustrated and you feel demoralized and often you'll maybe go and find a different job the same applies in parenting so you promise your children good things if they behave well and you promise them consequences if they behave badly and if you don't fulfill those promises then your relationship with your child is damaged ships you that may be most significantly in our own lives and you think of relationships you promise to love and protect and cherish and to be totally faithful to the man or the woman that you are in love with and if you fulfill those promises then you will have a beautiful relationship and if you break them then their heart is going to be badly broken so in a hundred different ways whether it's the promise of a discount if you use your club card at Tesco's and or whether it's the promise that the referee makes to a defender where he says one more foul and you're going to get sent off and all of life involves this combination of promise and fulfillment the functioning of a democratic society the structure of the workplace the dynamics of parenting the health of a marriage it all depends on promises and fulfillment and what's true of the world around us is definitely true of the gospel the gospel is rooted in this concept of promise and fulfillment in fact the gospel is the news of the most magnificent promise and fulfillment that you will ever see now that language of promise and fulfillment that runs right through the Bible and is giving us the opportunity to talk about and a very very important category of theology this whole language of of promise and fulfillment is pointing us towards what theologians call covenant theology and that's an immensely important concept because it's really what the Bible is all about when we talk about the Old Testament and the New Testament that word Testament is actually referring to this concept of covenant and so it would probably be more helpful if we called it

Old Covenant and New Covenant rather than Old Testament and New Testament Covenant is what runs right through the whole Bible and what holds together so Old Testament New Testament it's

really Old Covenant New Covenant now we have to be careful when we understand the distinction between old and new we mustn't think of it like a car when you have a car your car gets old and rubbish you get rid of it and you get a new one that's not what we mean when we talk about old and new and the old and new distinction between the two parts of the Bible we mean more an old way and a new way of doing things and particularly with the idea of developing so if I think back to when I was a child I wobbled when I walked and I would get words wrong when I spoke by the time I grew up I can walk fully and I can talk coherently and it's not that the old me was thrown away and replaced with a new one I'm still the same person but the old has been fulfilled and completed in the new or maybe if you think of like a seed and a small plant growing in the old and then it matures into a tree in the new lots of comparisons that we can make it's the idea of a shadow becoming a realist stretch all of that sums up how the Bible works the theme of covenant stretches across the whole thing the Bible is grounded on the principle of promise and fulfillment the whole gospel is rooted in covenant theology but what exactly do we mean by that why is it so important and why should we think about it well I want us to unpack those questions a wee bit tonight we need to start by asking the question what is a covenant when we talk about this covenant theology what are we talking about well I want to just and give you three things that we can say as a basic understanding of a covenant a compact formed relationship that's grounded on the deepest commitment a packed formed on the most trustworthy terms a bond sealed with the strongest ties so if you entered into a covenant then you are entering into it totally committed and you continue in it by sticking to your word and you stay in it no matter what deepest commitment trustworthy terms strongest of ties and that's why in our lives and our experience the best example of a covenant that we come across is marriage it contains all of these things and yes for many people it doesn't work out the way that it that it was intended to but this is what it should be like this is the aim of what a marriage is meant to be you entered it with the deepest commitment it's grounded on being trustworthy towards one another you're joined with the strongest of ties once you're in there's no getting out of it if you ask you should say yeah tell me about it it's the closest bond that we can have so that language of covenant theology is just getting us to think of a relationship but a relationship that's more than a relationship to put it another way when you're making a covenant you're making a promise that you'll die for why is that so important well in terms of the gospel covenant theology actually it's really important because it actually captures two key aspects of the gospel that's phrase covenant theology describes the systematic framework within which God's saving purposes are worked out so it's like a big category of systematic theology it's all kind of the whole thing comes within this category of covenant and it also describes the biblical theological outworking of God's plan so it's like the big category that the Bible sits within and it's the thread that runs through the whole Bible and that sounds a bit complicated and another way to say it is to think is to maybe say that covenant theology describes the chemistry and the geography of the gospel now what do I mean by that well imagine a river right in your head you can think of a river and that river exists because of the chemistry of the water cycle so you have evaporation condensation precipitation flow and so it goes on that chemistry is what makes a river's existence possible but then that river flows through the geography of a particular landscape downhill into valleys getting bigger and bigger till it forms an estuary and reaches the ocean so the chemistry sets out the overall structure of how a river works the geography describes the path that it flows through and what I want us to try and see tonight is that in the gospel both the chemistry and the geography in other words the chemistry of the big theology categories and the geography of how the Bible's story unfolds it's all captured by this word covenant the gospel exists because God is a covenant making and a covenant keeping God and the gospel unfolds through God's covenantal dealings with his people so I hope that next to high school or maybe you kind of like nasty flashbacks to high school or maybe not even flashbacks maybe at school right now you don't like chemistry and geography I hope that these terms are actually very helpful as we try to think through more about this great category of covenant theology so thinking first of all about the chemistry of the gospel we said a moment ago that a covenant is this relationship grounded on the deepest commitment it's a packed form to the most trustworthy terms it's a bond sealed with the strongest of ties I want us to think about those three statements a little bit more and ask the question what is the most committed relationship in all existence and who speaks the most trustworthy words of all and who is it that's bound together by the strongest of ties now the words who's the ultimate example of all these things and you know the answer it's God himself father son and Holy Spirit and instantly what we're seeing here is that this whole concept of covenant is actually intimately bound up with the doctrine of the Trinity the fact

that the one simple indivisible God exists forever in three persons God the father God the son and God the

[12 : 24] Holy Spirit that relationship is the most committed relationship in all existence the commitment among the Trinity among father son and Holy Spirit is indescribably and unbreakably strong now one of the one of the things that's really important in our theology of God is we say that he is simple and what we mean when we say that God is simple we don't mean that he's kind of like like sort of how do I describe that like not profound you know I'm not saying we don't mean that what we mean when we say that God is simple we mean that he is indivisible unbreakable there's no in other words there's no sub parts from which God is made so you come to God you don't go one step further back there is no step further back God is simple nothing lies behind him beneath him beyond him God is the absolute of all reality and as part of that beautiful simplicity God exists forever in this relationship of three in one the triune simple

God what that means is that you can only break the commitment between father son and spirit by breaking God and that's not going to happen this is the most committed relationship in all existence and within that relationship every word that is spoken is utterly trustworthy so when the father speaks or the son speaks or the Holy Spirit speaks every word is pure every word is true accurate and eternally reliable every utterance in the Godhead is utterly trustworthy and from forever until forever the father the son and the Holy Spirit are bound together in the strongest of ties in fact there's a magnificent and a beautiful intra dependence within the Trinity because the son is a son because he has a father the father is a father because he has a son the spirits proceeds because the father and the son sent him and the love between the father and the son this beautiful bond of relays that love from one to another and there's this just beautiful bond of relationship connection unity in the Godhead and it's teaching us that all the components of a covenant are actually rooted in the nature and character of God that's why the chemistry of the gospel is covenant theology these are the dynamics that you find in God himself and so it makes sense that that then shapes the framework for everything that God does so how does that chemistry shape the gospel well and I'm going to just give you a summary of a kind of short and summary of the what we call the classic reformed framework for covenant theology covenant theology is a massive topic amongst theologians and there are some differences of opinion among theologians about exactly how to classify it all I'm giving you the version that

I think is right but there are some different opinions that that's fine you can talk to me afterwards about it and none of the differences of opinion are that serious they're just minor kind of terminological discussions etc and in terms of the chemistry of the gospel in terms of the chemistry of covenant theology there are three big covenants that you need to know about and they are known as the covenant of works covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption now let me explain what these mean the covenant of works is the phrase used to describe the relationship between God and humanity in the Garden of Eden and so that relationship is established when Adam and Eve are created and placed in paradise the terms of that covenant relationship are that Adam and Eve are to enjoy the beauty of the garden they're to serve God as his image bearers and they're commanded not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and so that covenant contains the idea of preservation so they start off the way things are meant to be and that's supposed to be preserved and and as that in that position Adam and Eve have that extraordinary privilege and they are to remain in that state by obeying God and so sometimes theologians will describe that in the language of probation that they are to maintain this position now not every theologian likes covenant of works as a term you'll maybe see that if you read things sometimes people will talk about covenant of creation sometimes they'll talk about covenant of life and I've never seen anybody else say this but I sometimes wonder whether it would be helpful to call it the covenant of perfection because the idea is that everything has been made perfect and it should remain in that state and and that that state of perfect obedience to God is the basic the minimum that God requires if we're going to be in a relationship with him now of course Adam and Eve did not remain in that perfect state and they did not do the works that God commanded them to do they did the very thing he commanded them not to do they sinned and this covenant relationship was broken and because Adam functions in scripture as our covenant head our representative not only did he fall we fell with him as well the covenant of grace refers to God's response to that and so God in response to Adam's fall worked out across the age Adam sin he initiates a plan of salvation that is then worked out across the ages of history that covenant of grace is the promise that God is

going to provide salvation to all who trust in him God is the one who's initiating the plan God is the one who's doing everything that's required God is the one who's going to restore his people from our fallen state and that covenant of grace then works its way out across the pages of scripture it's foreshadowed in the Old Testament fulfilled in the new and all of that is a result it's all because of the third covenant we speak about the covenant of redemption this is something that happens in heaven this is referring to the eternal commitment within God where the Father initiates a plan of salvation that's going to involve sending his son the son agrees to go despite the enormous humiliation and cost that's going to be involved and the Holy Spirit commits to empowering Jesus to fulfill everything that that mission will involve and the reason we speak about this is because Jesus will speak in his mission about fulfilling what this Father has commanded him to do accomplishing what his father sent him to do fulfilling this agreement this great plan that was formed in eternity now there's loads more I could say and I'm just giving you the very very simple version of all of this and I know that there's loads to take in I find it helpful to think of it all in terms of arrows and so the covenant of works sets out the perfect standard of obedience that God requires the fall ruins that and God and humanity are separated because that covenant of works has been broken the covenant of grace describes God's action to lift us out of that mess so I couldn't quite draw this I couldn't get my diagram sophisticated enough but I want you to think of a kind of upwards direction here God is taking us up out of this mess in his covenant of grace and all of that is because God is willing to come down in the person of his son the Lord Jesus Christ so you have the covenant of works whereby our relationship is broken you have the covenant of grace God restoring us up from that mess all possible because God the son is willing to come down in obedience to all that the father requires again it's a generalization it's overly simplified but still I hope it's helpful now that's the chemistry of covenant theology all of that chemistry then unfolds itself across the geography of the Bible and so what happens is that the implications of the covenant of works keep on applying so this arrow here continues on through the Old Testament in terms of the fact that basically we are sinners and that keeps showing itself the problem of sin that starts here does not go away it keeps on continuing on and on and the reality of that problem becomes more and more stark as more and more of God's law is revealed in the Old Testament so as you walk through the Old Testament you see more and more laws revealed which means that more and more sins are exposed the problem is not going away it just becomes more and more stark at the same time God's covenant of grace his great plan of salvation begins to unfold across God's dealings with his people in response to the fall and there's several key moments first of all there's God's response to Satan I will put in God's response to Adam's sin God saying to Satan I will put enmity between you and the woman between you offspring and her offspring he shall bruise your head you shall bruise his heel this word offspring becomes incredibly important Eve becomes the mother of all living through the line of descent that comes through Seth and beyond God's purposes are going to be fulfilled then we have an explicit covenant made with Noah across Genesis 6 through to 9 and 10 God's people are delivered from judgment and key aspects of the humanities mandate as image bearers are reissued in the aftermath of the flood then comes God's covenant with Abraham known initially as Abram then named Abraham as I think this chapter later on will tell you and God says to Abraham that my purposes are going to be fulfilled through your descendants through your family all the nations of the world are going to be blessed and the need for faith becomes central in the life of Abraham and God's relations with him then you fast forward to Exodus covenant is made with Moses in the giving of the law here God is showing his people how they are to live as those who have been saved they've been saved from Egypt this is now how they are to live their lives then there's the covenant with David we sang about that in Psalm 89 you can read about it in 2 Samuel chapter 7 as well key to that is the king David is chosen to be king and of his descendants there's going to be a king who is going to reign forever all of these key names Noah Abraham Moses David God deals with them all in the same way it's all on the basis of covenant the river of God's covenant is flowing God's revealing more and more about what his plan of salvation involves and as that is revealed you see more and more key elements of God's covenant purposes becoming clearer and clearer there's and there's various things that are key to it there's the land that God promises to his people there's the law that he gives to them there's the king that he's going to set over them and in the Old Testament there was the covenant sign of circumcision as God's covenant with Abraham was established so all of these pieces of the jigsaw are starting to be laid out across the Old Testament but in all of them there's failure and so Noah Abraham Moses David there's great truths expressed

and magnificent things revealed and yet Noah Abraham Moses David and the people around them all failed repeatedly and that's because the brokenness of humanity and the brokenness of the covenant of works is still a constant problem so although the river is flowing through the Old Testament all the time it's a muddy river and at times it's tickling rather than flowing but God's covenant purposes will not fail and that's because they're ultimately not rooted in the success or failure of Adam or Noah or Abraham or Moses or David they're all rooted in the covenant of redemption the eternal commitment of the Godhead to save God's people and that's why alongside all the failure that you see in the Old Testament you also see the prophets giving repeated precious promises that the Savior is going to come so if we go back to our diagram to summarize this again I hope you're all keeping up with this and so the covenant of grace is gradually unfurled but the covenant of through Noah Abraham Moses David but the covenant of works still exposes our failures people sin is still a problem the people constantly fail and yet all the time

[26 : 44] God's ultimate purposes stand a Savior is going to come this is the geography of the gospel God's plan been revealed bit by bit across the ages of history and it's all pointing forward that's why these are all arrows they're all pointing forward it's all pointing forward to Jesus and that's why when Jesus comes he is establishing the new covenant when all of this comes together and so this covenant of redemption is fulfilled because God the Son actually has come and this covenant of works is actually fulfilled because he is perfect and he does not fail and the covenant of grace is fulfilled because through his death and resurrection Jesus is able to save all who put their faith in him and what that means is that the whole gospel is rooted in the fact that God's promises are kept what's promised is fulfilled and that's exactly how Paul speaks in

Acts chapter 13 and if you read what he says with all of this and if I've been able to explain it clearly you'll see that when I read from Acts 13 in the moment you'll see that it's saturated in covenant language let me read it after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan he gave them their land as an inheritance there's covenant language all this took about 450 years after them he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet prophets that's covenant language then they ask for a king that's covenant language God gave them Saul the son of Kish a man of the type of Benjamin for 40 years when they removed him he raised up David to be their king that's more covenant language of whom I've testified I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart who will do my will of this man's offspring there's covenant language God has brought to Israel a savior Jesus as he promised that's covenant language before his coming John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel that's covenant language John's a prophet baptism is the sign of the covenant John was finishing his course and says who do you suppose I am I'm not he but behold there's one who is coming that's covenant language the sandals of whom I'm not worthy to untie brother sons of the family of Abraham that's covenant language and those among you who fear God to us has been sent this message of salvation that is also covenant language it's everywhere the whole thing is saturated in promise and fulfillment and the amazing thing about it is that God does it all God is the one who sets the chemistry of his covenant dealings with humanity and God is the one who navigates the geography of his covenant plan he is the one who does it all now you might be thinking well that's all very interesting or you might be thinking that's all really complicated the big question is what does this got to do with us this have to do with you and maybe that's what you're thinking this is great Thomas but what does this got to do with us today well all of this means that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian you are in a covenant relationship with God Jesus is the covenant mediator God is our covenant God and we are his covenant people that's what a church is and that means three crucial things it means that your relationship with God is grounded on the deepest commitment not your commitment to him his commitment to you his commitment to you is irrevocable it stretches back across the ages of time through the valleys of the Old Testament up to the cross of Calvary into the new covenant era ultimately though it actually stretches right back to eternity it finds its source in the very nature and character of God God's commitment to you is unshakable it's eternal it means that your relationship with God is a pact formed on the most trustworthy terms he has made you promises and he is keeping every one of them every word he says to you is utterly trustworthy every detail matters every promise is fulfilled we always say that God's word is authoritative and when we say that we will always think about the fact that God's word has authority over us and that's absolutely true we must never ever forget that but we also need to remember that God's word is authoritative to God as well so what he says he does what he commits to he is bound by what he

promises he fulfills his word is utterly trustworthy and he's standing before you today saying I will love you forever and your relationship with God is a bond sealed with the strongest of ties we were united to Adam because of that we fell with him in the gospel by faith we are united to Jesus Christ and because of that we receive the benefits of everything that he has accomplished everything that he's accomplished is applied to you when you put your trust in him and the Holy Spirit binds you to Jesus with bonds that can never ever be broken our ties to Jesus are grounded in the eternal promises of covenant theology all of that is what the gospel gives you and all of it is made possible because of the cross because there on the cross Jesus took on himself all the implications of a broken covenant of works there on the cross Jesus took our place died for our sins and now can freely offer forgiveness and healing and hope and restoration all through his grace all freely offered in the covenant of grace and there on the cross as Jesus hangs and dies suffers constant mockery and dies feeling abandoned there you discover just how far he will go to fulfill everything that he agreed to in the covenant of redemption all of this is made possible because of the cross which is why we read from Luke 20 it all makes perfect sense

Jesus says this new covenant is established by my blood for all of that to be possible Jesus had to die on the cross and that's because a covenant is a promise worth dying for and what makes the gospel so amazing is God doesn't say to you my promises are so great you should die for them God says my promises are so good I will die for you and when we realize that a covenant is a promise worth dying for the gospel tells us that in terms of eternity the only person who really understands that and the only person who really takes that seriously is God himself the father looks at you and he says I want you as my covenant people Jesus says I'll go and I'll die to make it possible the Holy Spirit says I'll find them and I'll bring them home and we say wow amen let's pray