

THE LAW AND THE PROMISE

Galatians 3:15-22

Introduction:

Our text this morning is an interesting and somewhat difficult one. When it comes to preaching, there are passages of Scripture that are much easier to just pass over and ignore, because either they are too difficult to understand, or there does not seem to be any significant immediate application to our lives. This is one of those passages. It is very logical and deeply theological, but one might ask, what difference does it make to me today?

Well, I trust that as we go through these verses that the very deepening of our understanding regarding the ways of God will give us a broader and stronger foundation for our lives.

In Gal. 3 Paul brought in a human example to bolster his argument regarding salvation by faith. As he confronted the teaching and the accusations of the Judaizers that he was ignoring the Law and its requirements, he pointed his readers back to the father of the Jewish nation, Abraham.

In the opening verses of this chapter, he makes it clear that the Christian life must finish the same way it starts. You do not begin by faith and then take over and finish by your own strength and your own efforts. It is faith from beginning to end.

Then, in vv. 6-14, he turns to the example of Abraham, mentioning him 4 times, each time in the context of faith. Look at what he says. (*Read vv. 6-9, 14.*) His point is that just as Abraham was brought into a covenant relationship with God through faith, without works or personal effort, so also the Gentiles are brought into this new relationship, the body of Christ, through faith and faith alone.

So his whole argument to this point is that you can't become a complete, sanctified Christian, you can't have the blessing of Abraham, you can't enjoy the promise of the Spirit, if you are living by "works of law" instead of by faith in the Son of God. Any effort to keep the law as

a means of satisfying God is, in fact, a transgression of the law itself (2:18), and it brings a person under the law's curse (3:10). So the Judaizers are wrong to teach the Galatian Christians that they need to supplement their faith with works of the law.

One of the things that amazes me about the Apostle Paul is his ability to anticipate the arguments or accusations of his adversaries. In our text today, he responds to another apparent argument of the Judaizers. It appears that Paul is seeking to destroy a particular argument regarding why the law was given. I want to read a quote from John Piper who said is very eloquently.

The Judaizers may have been saying something like this: "Well, Paul, we don't agree with you about Abraham; we think it was his works that showed him worthy of the promised blessing. But let's grant you your point that Abraham was justified by faith. Maybe that's the way God wanted to start Israel's history. But there is no way you can escape the fact that 430 years after Abraham, God thought it necessary to add the law through Moses at Mt. Sinai. And if the law, with its commandments, does not teach that our inheritance comes on the basis of works, what does it teach? When we tell Galatian believers who have begun with faith to exert their own efforts now to complete their sanctification through works of law, we are doing just what God did. He gave our people a promise through Abraham which, you say, was received by faith, and then he added the law to make clear what our part in the process is. So the course of redemptive history shows that our inheritance does come from works of the law. Why else would God have added a law 430 years later, if not to make crystal clear that we must go beyond your view of Abraham and exert our own effort and in this way earn our right to the inheritance."

Paul's response to that is, No, we do not complete or add to our faith by the works of the Law. Let us look at Paul's argument in v. 15-18.

A Human Example

He begins by pointing out the example of a human contract. *Read v. 15.* Now we know that there are covenants or agreements that can be changed. You can change or last will and testament, or you can add codicils or appendices to it. But there were, in Paul's day, as in our time,

covenants and contracts which cannot be changed once they have been ratified. When you make a contract with another person or business, you cannot arbitrarily change the terms of that contract.

That is Paul's argument regarding the promise made by God to Abraham. Look at v. 17 – *read it*. Paul is very clear. The giving of the Law, which came 430 years later, did not annul the promise of God, which came to Abraham by faith.

The Law does not annul the Promise

In Gen. 12 we find God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland. Within that call there are a series of promises:

- I will give you a land
- I will make of you a great nation
- I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you
- In you all the nations of the earth will be blessed

Some years later God came back to confirm those promises in a covenant that he made to Abraham. We find that covenant in Gen. 15. In vv. 1-5 God confirmed the promise that he would have a son and from that son would grow a nation as great as the stars of heaven. V. 6 is the key to the promise. *Read it*. Faith is the very foundation of this covenant relationship. Abraham believed God... At this point God goes on to ratify the covenant with a ceremony involving the blood of animals and birds, through which God confirmed the promises made earlier, assuring Abraham that everything would happen as he had said.

In chapter 17, about 14 years after the covenant in ch. 15, God comes to Abraham again. Once again he repeats the promises and this time gives Abraham the sign of circumcision as a visible symbol of the covenant. This time he assures Abraham that within a year, he will have the son that He has promised him.

All of this—God's promises, His covenant with Abraham—is predicated upon Abraham's faith. If it were not for that statement in 15:6, the promise would have been meaningless. Because Abraham believed God, he was counted as righteous.

There is one more important passage we need to look at briefly.

Please turn to Gen. 22 – the sacrifice of Isaac. We are not going to go through the whole incident, but we want to look at what God says at the end of Abraham's testing. Look at v. 12, then vv. 15-18. Abraham's obedience is front and center in this passage. No doubt the Judaizers of Paul's day would jump on that to say, "See, it was Abraham's works that were important. He was righteous because of his works."

However, the New Testament sheds some light on this whole event. In Hebrews 11, that great chapter highlighting the heroes of faith, the writer tells us,

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Hebrews 11:17-19 ESV)

Clearly, even Abraham's obedience was predicated upon his faith. Obeying God's commands is never about earning God's approval, or acquiring righteousness. Obedience is a natural outgrowth of faith.

So, back to Galatians. The promise was based on faith and faith alone. The giving of the Law did not annul or rescind the promise in any way.

Now we still need to look at v. 16, which I skipped over. It is, at first a rather puzzling verse. *Read v. 16*. God gave promises to Abraham on several occasions, as we have already looked at. These were promises related to the land, to the blessing he had in store for Abraham, and the blessing he intended to bring upon all nations through Abraham and his offspring.

What is interesting here is Paul's use of the word "offspring" or "seed." Paul certainly knew that the singular term can be used as a collective singular that has a plural sense. (The singular "offspring" can mean many "descendants." He even interprets the same word in a plural sense in Rom. 4:18 where he speaks of the Abraham being the father of many nations). But it also can have a singular meaning, and here Paul uses it that way, knowing that it is only in **Christ** that the promised blessings would come to the Gentiles. He sees and points out that the

truest and ultimate fulfillment of these OT promises comes to **one** “offspring,” to one descendant, namely, Jesus Christ.

Now, jump down to v. 18. Having pointed out that the promises made to Abraham, which were received by faith, were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the “offspring” (singular) of Abraham, and then that these promises were not abrogated by the Law which came 430 years later, he now sums up his argument by restating what he has already said earlier.

Read v. 18. If you remember he already said almost the same thing in 2:21 – *read it.*

Why Then the Law?

Well, if it is the promise of God that saves us through faith in that promise, and the Law has nothing to do with our salvation, then the obvious question is, Why was the Law given? Why did God give his people the Law with its rules and requirements if it could do nothing to make them righteous?

That is exactly the question Paul addresses in the following verses. *Read vv. 19-22.* We are not going to spend long on these verses this morning. But let me just say this:

The Law was given because of sin. It was given to give people a standard by which we could see the depth our sin and our need of a Savior. The Law could never make a person righteous. Rather what it could do was show God’s people how much they needed the fulfillment of the promise. It was intended to point people’s eyes toward the fulfillment of the promise, which was the “offspring” of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

In Romans 3:19, Paul said, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Romans 3:19 ESV)

The Law was God’s way of getting people to see their own unrighteousness and their need of someone to save them from sin. *Read v. 22 again.* We will look more at the purpose of the Law next week.

Conclusion:

In the meantime, having looked at this deeply theological passage, how can we apply it? I said at the outset that there seems to be little significant immediate application in this passage. I say that again.

However, let me just make a couple of observations.

- First there is the obvious truth that has been evident throughout this study from Galatians—that no one can be saved by keeping the Law. We can never achieve the righteousness that God requires by our own efforts. The obvious application to that truth is that if you are still trying to be a Christian by doing it yourself, you are wasting your time and are in danger of God’s eternal judgment. Stop trying and start trusting. Put your faith in what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross.
- Second, as I look at a passage of Scripture like this one, I am overwhelmed and amazed at the plan of God. God knew what Abraham needed, he knew what his people needed to show them their dependence on him. From eternity past, he had plan—an intricate, detailed blueprint—to bring about a way for people, as desperate, lost sinners to be reconciled to Himself.

He knew exactly what was needed. And he still does. He knows what you need today. As we close today, remember, God knows the end from the beginning. Nothing takes Him by surprise. You can trust Him and depend on Him. He will not let you down.