

Free: The Message of Galatians Then & Now

Lesson Five - Be Free!

Galatians 3:15-29

All throughout the book of Galatians, Paul presses the point that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is as if the apostle is holding forth a priceless jewel, rotating it slowly to reveal its beauty from every angle. He repeatedly reiterates salvation by grace through faith apart from any good works. Considering what is at stake, we can easily understand Paul's preoccupation with this foundational Christian doctrine that was coming under fire by the Judaizers.

I. The Precedent (Galatians 3:15)

The Judaizers argued that since the Law came after God's covenant with Abraham, the Law had priority over salvation by grace through faith. To refute this point, Paul uses the permanence of a legal document to illustrate his point.

Once a covenant has been ratified (Webster defines *ratify*: to sign or give formal consent to a treaty, contract, or agreement, making it officially valid), no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it (Galatians 3:15).

From the time of man's fall in the Garden of Eden, the basis for salvation remains unchanged. God has only one way of saving lost humanity – salvation by grace through faith on the basis of the finished work of Christ. Hebrews 11:1-2 says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For **by it the men of old gained approval**" (emphasis mine). God dealt with His creation on the basis of faith in both the Old Testament and the New.

We live in a very litigious society that is obsessed with finding legal loopholes to overturn contracts, wills, and/or judicial affidavits. Paul is making it clear that there are no legal loopholes in God's covenants! If a manmade contract cannot be overturned once it has been ratified, how much more unbreakable is a covenant initiated by God.

II. The Promise (Galatians 3:16-18)

Paul now shows that the Abrahamic covenant has remained in force despite the later addition of the Mosaic covenant.

God called Abraham, an unbelieving idolator from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, to separate from his people and go to the land God promised to show him (see Genesis 12:1).

At this time God made Abraham a sevenfold promise (Genesis 12:2-3).

1. To make Abraham a great nation.
2. To bless him.
3. To make his name great.
4. To make him a blessing to the world.
5. To bless those who blessed him.
6. To curse those who cursed him.
7. To make him the one through whom all nations would be blessed. This is a Messianic reference to Christ

*For your personal study I have included a list at the end of your notes of all the unconditional promises God made to Abraham.

All of these exceedingly great and precious promises were initiated by God and were unconditional. All God required of Abraham was faith.

In Genesis 15, God promised Abraham an heir and descendants more numerous than the stars (see Genesis 15:5). "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). God ratified the covenant promises by instructing Abraham to gather animals which "he brought...to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other" (Genesis 15:10). "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him" (Genesis 15:12). While Abram is in a deep sleep "there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces" (Genesis 15:17).

God entered into a covenant relationship, a binding contract, with Abraham 430 years before the Law was given. This covenant was absolutely unconditional. In fact, as proof positive of God's divine commitment to fulfill His promises to Abraham, it was ratified while Abraham was in a deep sleep. The Law of Moses could never cancel God's original promise to Abraham and to Abraham's seed as well. Paul writes, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed...that is, Christ" (Galatians 3:16). Paul's divine choice of the singular form of the word *seed* draws attention to Christ as the designated Seed of Abraham in whom "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Paul writes in Galatians 3:29, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise."

The supreme goal of the *promise* to Abraham regarding the Seed was the advent of *Christ*. Everything hinges on promise, not works; on Christ, not Moses; on faith, not Law. (John Phillips, *Exploring Galatians: An Expository Commentary*, Logos)

In no way could the Law of Moses "invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God" (Galatians 3:17). God made an unconditional promise to Abraham which was based on God's faithfulness, and not Abraham.

The Mosaic Law was not a new way of salvation that canceled God's promises to Abraham; this would not be logical. Promise and faith go together, but not promise and Law. (Warren Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, p. 524)

III. The Purpose (Galatians 3:19-29)

Paul opens this section with a penetrating question, "Why the Law then?" (Galatians 3:19). The Law was added, not to annul God's great promise to Abraham, but to educate people in the scope and seriousness of their sin. The Law was in force "until the seed (a reference to Jesus) would come to whom the promise had been made" (Galatians 3:19).

Another question is then raised, "Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God?" (Galatians 3:21). Paul emphatically answers, "May it never be!" The Law was not given to impart life and a right standing with God. Its purpose was to reveal that the whole world is condemned, is held in bondage to sin, and needs forgiveness and release from the Law's penalty, all of which can only be found in Christ.

Paul writes, "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). In the Jewish culture, a slave was assigned to each child to escort them to school and supervise their education and behavior. Any infraction by the child would be met with severe disapproval by the strict tutor who would mete out the punishment. By correlating the Law with this image of a tutor, we understand that the Law was given to point out sin and the threat of God's punishment. God sent Jesus Christ into the world to provide a way to be reconciled with God through the gift of grace, which is accessed by faith. The Law led us to Christ for forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

Paul goes on, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). In Roman society, when a youth became old enough to be considered an adult, he set aside the wardrobe of his childhood and put on an adult's toga. This indicated that he had adult citizenship and responsibilities. In similar fashion, the Galatians had laid aside the old clothes of the Law and, as adult children, had put on Christ's new robes of righteousness. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Beloved, in Christ we have been set free from the rules and rituals of the Law. All human distinctions have lost their significance. "From every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9) all believers have been united in Christ! "There is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Furthermore, in Christ all believers "are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29). Hallelujah! What a Savior!!

*For your information and personal study, here is a list of the promises God made to Abraham. This covenant was absolutely unconditional. It consisted of a series of contractual promises made by God to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-22). God promised the following:

1. To make Abraham a great nation.
2. To bless him.
3. To make his name great.
4. To make him a blessing to the world.
5. To bless those who blessed him.
6. To curse those who cursed him.
7. To make him the one through whom all nations would be blessed. This is a messianic reference to Christ
8. To give Abraham a seed as numerous as the stars of the heaven.
9. To emancipate that seed from enslavement in a foreign land after four hundred years in the fourth generation. That seed would become very wealthy. God's judgment was promised against the nation that oppressed Abraham's descendants.
10. To allow Abraham himself to live to a ripe old age and then die in peace.
11. To ensure that Abraham would inherit a land that would stretch from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Still more details, including the following, were added later:

12. Abraham would become the father of many nations and kings.
13. God's covenant was established between Him and Abraham's seed throughout their generations.
14. It was to be an everlasting covenant.
15. The land of Canaan, in particular, was the guaranteed possession of the covenant seed of Abraham.
16. The seal of the covenant, as far as Abraham's physical posterity was concerned, was circumcision. The widest application was given to this rite. Apart from this rite, no person could be counted part of Abraham's physical seed and heir to the material side of the agreement.
17. Abraham's wife's name was changed from Sarai to Sarah ("princess"). She, too, would be blessed. The promised seed would come through her. She would be a mother of nations and kings.
18. Ishmael was promised greatness. He would produce twelve princes and become a great and populous nation. But the Abrahamic covenant was not to be ratified in him.
19. Sarah would bear Abraham a son who would be the heir to the promise.
20. Abram's name was changed to Abraham ("father of a multitude").

(John Phillips, *Exploring Galatians: An Expository Commentary*, Logos).