

THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S PROMISE
PART 1

Text: Galatians 3:15-18

June 27, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

We live in a world of broken promises and dashed dreams. Communication, human relationships, business transactions, treaties between nations, etc... are all based on promises and binding agreements.

It is of first importance that these promises be honored. Whenever they are broken the trust that has been built on these promises is destroyed and relationships become fragmented and often irreparable damage ensues.

Just as in human relationships, our relationship with God is based upon and sustained on promises. But, unlike human relationships, God, doesn't break His promises. The Good News of the unfolding story of the Bible is that our covenant keeping God has never annulled, rescinded or modified any of His promises.

Listen to how the Psalmist in Psalm 119 appeals to God's promises for his day-to-day living:

“⁴¹ Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your PROMISE..”

“⁵⁰ This is my comfort in my affliction, that your PROMISE gives me life.”

“¹¹⁶ Uphold me according to your PROMISE, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope!”

“¹³³ Keep steady my steps according to your PROMISE, and let no iniquity get dominion over me.”

These passages demonstrate the priority of God's promises for our lives. God's promises alleviate our fear of God suddenly changing His mind or being unpredictable. God is not like a despotic king who arbitrarily and capriciously alternates between kindness and cruelty. Once He is gracious, He is always gracious. God will not violate His covenant or alter the word that went forth from His lips (cf. Ps. 89:34)!

Because God is a promising God, we have a basis of trust because we know exactly where we stand before Him. His promises ground and strengthen our faith. His promises comfort and sustain us in our battle with sin because they create an atmosphere of trust and security (cf. Ps. 119:50). Precisely because God is not a capricious tyrant but rather a promising-keeping God, our hearts are driven to willingly and joyfully submit to His rule.

As we come to this new section in Galatians, Paul is continuing to deal with a Christian understanding of the Law. He has just shown that the double blessing of justification and the Holy Spirit are received through faith alone and not by works of the law (vv. 2, 14).

To prove this, in 3:1-5, he argued from the basis of the Galatians' own experience. In 3:6-14, he appealed to the authority of Scripture. Now, in 3:15-18 Paul gives a human illustration and then once again appeals to the teaching of Scripture in order to uphold the "truth of the gospel."

In vv. 15-18, he is anticipating an objection from his opponents based on his previous arguments. The Judaizers were not willing to admit that Abraham was justified through faith alone in God's promise.

But, even if they conceded that God justified Abraham as well as all pre-Sinai believers through faith it was simply because they didn't have the Law. Once God instituted a new covenant with Moses a new ground for justification was established (i.e., the Law).

Faith alone was no longer sufficient. God's Law was superior to His Promise. God's Promise to Abraham was merely temporary until the more perfect and complete covenant with Moses was instituted. Thus, Paul's opponents argued that the Mosaic Law annulled and replaced the Abrahamic Covenant.

This is the objection that Paul anticipates and refutes in 3:15-18. He is going to show that God didn't promise to justify Abraham through faith and then rescind or modify His promise when He gave the Law to Moses (i.e., base justification on works).

As Leon Morris writes, "God made promises to Abraham 'of His own free and gracious will'. The subsequent giving of the Law does not alter this, for 'once gracious, He is always gracious,'" (*Galatians*, p. 108).

So, to support his argument, Paul gives four reasons why the giving of the law doesn't annul or modify God's promise. These four arguments demonstrate the Superiority of God's Promise.

Paul reveals how the Law within the history of redemption is subordinate to God's Promise. The Mosaic Law was but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities (Heb. 10:1). Salvation in every economy of God's dealings with man has come through a covenant of grace rather than a covenant of law (i.e., one's personal performance and fulfillment of the Law). Therefore, Paul argues in 3:15-18 that God's Promise, not Law, is the primary basis for justification and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture, as Paul has already shown (vv. 8, 11), reads as one Book from Genesis to Revelation. It has one plot, one method of justification/salvation and one people.

At the heart of Paul's argument is the truth that God's covenant with Abraham was a unilateral (one-sided), unconditional covenant based solely on God's faithfulness to fulfill what He has promised.

For example, in Genesis 12:1-3, God says five times to Abraham, "I will." The Mosaic Law, however, was a conditional covenant based on man's faithfulness. In Exodus 20:3-17, God says 12 times to the people of Israel, "You shall."

Once again in Galatians, Paul is drawing a sharp distinction and contrast between the Law and the gospel (i.e., promise). Martin Luther noting the importance of Paul's distinguishing the Law and Gospel writes,

"If, then, you want to divide the Word of truth rightly (2 Tim. 2:15), you must distinguish the promise from the Law as far as possible, both in your attitude and in your whole life. It is not without purpose that Paul urged this argument so diligently; for he saw that in the church this evil would arise, namely, that the Word of God would be confused, which means that the promise would be mixed with the Law and in this way be completely lost. For when the promise is mixed up with the Law, it becomes Law pure and simple," (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 302*).

With this context in mind, Paul first shows that the Law doesn't annul or modify God's promise because:

LESSON:

I. THE PROMISE IS PERMANENT. V. 15

Paul begins his argument with an illustration from the legal realm. There has been considerable debate as to which legal system he is referring to in Galatians 3 (e.g., Roman Law, Greek Law or Jewish Law). The precise reference really doesn't matter.

Paul is simply illustrating that in any legal system, a time comes when a "last will and testament" is settled and once it is ratified, nothing can be done to change the terms.

A ratified will cannot be annulled, altered or amended. It is irrevocable, unchangeable (i.e., permanent).

Paul is arguing from the lesser to the greater (cf. Heb. 9:13-14; Matt. 7:11; In Luke 11:13, Jesus reasons, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!").

Paul's point is simple. If a man-made will cannot be revoked or modified once it is executed and ratified *how much more* so God's Promise! If an earthly court ruling is binding, how much greater authority does God's ruling have!

In the same way, once God properly ratifies His covenant, it cannot be annulled or modified. It is permanent and binding forever.

In Romans 11:29, Paul writes, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." God's people will be saved because God never revokes His saving promises.

Therefore, the Law, which came centuries later, doesn't annul or modify God's promise. At the heart of the Galatian controversy lays a confusion of the Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants. Michael Horton observes,

Throughout Galatians he [Paul-J.F.] makes the case that the covenant of law (i.e., the Sinaitic Covenant with its ceremonial and civil legislation for life in Canaan) is different from the covenant of promise (i.e., the Abrahamic covenant with its promise of a seed through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed). Paul is saying here that the former covenant concerned earthly, temporary measures that served as types of the heavenly, eternal reality promised and confirmed in the latter covenant. The earlier (Abrahamic) covenant cannot be annulled by the later (Mosaic) covenant, he insists. Those who seek to be justified by law are under the curse (i.e., sanctions) of that law, because this covenant does not grade on a curve but requires absolute, perfect, personal obedience to everything in it," (*God Of Promise*, pp. 37-38).

Unlike the Mosaic Covenant (a covenant of law), which was a conditional covenant that obligates a person to fulfill all the terms and conditions or suffer the consequences (i.e., "Do this and you shall live."), the Abrahamic Covenant (a covenant of promise) promises blessing as a gift on the basis of the performance of another.

The principles of law (i.e., personal performance) and promise (i.e., inheritance of an estate by virtue of a last will and testament) set forth two mutually exclusive forms of religion.

One is founded on an eternal, one-sided covenant of promise/grace. The other is based on one's personal fulfillment of law.

The Abrahamic Covenant is based on free grace. Justification and the reception of the Holy Spirit are based on free grace not law. The promise God makes to Abraham is carried into effect in the gospel.

Thus, Paul's analogy of a man-made "last will and testament" is a fitting illustration of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is like a "last will and testament," which is not a law but rather a gift.

Heirs do not look for laws to keep rather they simply look to receive an inheritance from a "last will and testament." Phil Ryken writes,

“A will is not a contract. It does not set terms that various parties are obligated to fulfill. Instead, it simply declares what one party intends to do. A last will and testament is a legal arrangement in which one party bestows his or her estate on someone else. It is a grant rather than a bargain,” (*Galatians*, p. 120).

God’s covenant with Abraham was a grant not a bargain. Scholars of ancient Near Eastern studies speak of the Abrahamic Covenant as a Royal Grant (Horton, *God of Promise*, p 41). Royal grants were an outright gift by a suzerain (a great king) to his subjects (vassals). The suzerain-vassal relationship was like the English feudal system in the Middle Ages.

This Royal Grant contained a list of promises that God promised to freely bestow upon Abraham and his offspring. It cannot be emphasized enough that in God’s covenant with Abraham, no obligations are imposed on Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant is a one-sided promise. It did not depend on any condition to be fulfilled by Abraham. It was a unilateral, unconditional covenant of promise based solely on God’s faithfulness to fulfill what He promised.

Let’s briefly consider the details of God’s (suzerain) outright gift (i.e., covenant of promise) to Abraham (vassal).

Beginning in Genesis 15:1, God speaks to Abram in a vision and characteristic of a suzerain bestowing a royal grant says to his vassal, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your exceeding great reward,” (cf. Michael Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 41).

God, as the Great King, promises to be both Abram’s defender (i.e. “shield”) against hostile enemies as well as the benefactor who will guarantee an inheritance for the future (i.e., “your exceeding great reward”).

Abram immediately raises an obvious objection (vv. 2-3): He has no heir and thus no future. Trying to work out his future inheritance by his own *personal performance*, Abram thinks of a member of his household, Eliezer of Damascus (possibly a slave who came from Damascus, vv. 3-4).

God, however, tells Abram that His inheritance will come only through His promise (i.e., Sarah/Isaac; “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir,” (v. 4b).

In order to assure Abram of His promise, God holds a covenant cutting ceremony. Covenants in ancient Near Eastern cultures were not based on signed contracts or a mere handshake. Rather, covenants were sealed in blood in a covenant cutting ceremony.

However, there is something very distinct about this particular Royal Grant. Instead of both parties walking together between the severed halves of animals, God (the Great King) walks alone and assumes all of the obligation for carrying

out the promises as well as bearing all the curses for its violation (cf. Gen. 15:9-10, 17-18).

Scholars point out that there are no ancient Near Eastern equivalents of a self-maledictory oath contained in a royal grant (i.e., where the Suzerain calls down curses upon Himself, cf. Horton, *God of Promise*, pp. 41-42).

The inheritance (i.e., royal grant) is freely promised in the Abrahamic Covenant because God imposes the obligations of the covenant (i.e., Suzerainty treaty) on Himself.

The author of Hebrews in 6:13, 16-17 picks up on this and writes,

“¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself... ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath...”

Because there was no one greater to swear by, God promised to perform all the conditions of the covenant and suffer all the curses for its violation (Suzerainty Treaty). In a surprising announcement, God said to Abram, “Just as these severed animals are cut up so may I, Yahweh, be cut up if I break My promises.”

Because God, the Great King, performs all the conditions of the covenant and suffers all the curses for its violation, He can freely and graciously bestow an inheritance (like a last will and testament or royal grant) on undeserving sinners.

REFLECTION:

The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were ultimately ratified and fulfilled by the death of Christ, who is our Great Testator (i.e., a person who has died and left a valid will).

Jesus ratified and confirmed His last will and testament with His own blood.

Daniel 9:26-27 says that the “²⁶ Messiah will be cut off...²⁷ and He will confirm the covenant...”

Hebrews 9:16-17 says, “¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷ For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.”

1 Corinthians 11:25, “...This cup is the new covenant (“New Testament,” cf. KJV) in My blood.”

Ultimately, Christ willingly bore the curses of the covenant for our disobedience. He was “cut off” (i.e., circumcised) for us (Gal. 3:13). Therefore, He can freely bestow the promised inheritance (i.e., justification and the Holy Spirit).

By Christ’s death there is a confirmation of the truth, reality, authority, efficacy and permanency of His covenant of promise to us. This is why ALL of God’s promises are YES! in Christ.

However, if an alteration or annulment were possible, any basis for hope or comfort in our standing with God would be impossible. But, through His death, Christ opened a way for undeserving, covenant-violating, sinners to freely receive His inheritance.

The author of Hebrews 9:15 writes, “Therefore He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”

Thus, Paul says it is of first importance (Paramount!) that once the Great King makes a promise(s) and seals it by “cutting His covenant” His promise(s) could never be annulled or modified. It is permanent and this is our hope and comfort!

This is why Peter breaks forth into a song of praise in 1 Peter 1:3-4 and declares,

“³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ *to an inheritance* that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...”

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville.