

THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S PROMISE
PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:15-18

July 11, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In this new section in Galatians, Paul is anticipating an objection from his opponents based on his previous arguments in 3:1-14.

Paul's opponents were not willing to admit that Abraham was justified through faith alone in God's promise. And, even if they conceded this point, it was simply because Abraham and all pre-Sinai believers didn't have the Law. But, when God instituted a new covenant with Moses He established a new ground for justification (i.e., the Law).

Faith alone was no longer sufficient. God's Law, they argued, was superior to His Promise. The Mosaic Law, so it was argued, annulled and replaced the Abrahamic Covenant.

It is this objection that Paul anticipates and refutes in 3:15-18.

Paul considered it crucial to make a clear distinction between the Abrahamic Covenant of promise and the Mosaic Covenant of Law in order to protect the truth of the gospel. He demonstrates 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).

To support his argument, Paul gives four reasons why the giving of the Law doesn't annul or modify God's promise to Abraham.

These four arguments demonstrate the Superiority of God's Promise. First, the giving of the Law doesn't annul or modify God's Promise because:

I. THE PROMISE IS PERMANENT. V. 15

The Good News of the unfolding story of redemptive history (i.e., the Bible) is that our covenant keeping God has never annulled, rescinded or modified any of His promises.

To show this, Paul begins his argument with an illustration from the legal realm. His point is simple: If a man-made last will and testament cannot be revoked or modified once it is executed and ratified how much more so God's Promise!

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. The Abrahamic Covenant was not a contract. It was a royal grant, a one-sided, unconditional promise based solely on God's faithfulness to fulfill what He promised.

But, if an alteration or annulment were possible, any basis for hope or comfort in our standing with God would be impossible.

An alteration or annulment, however, was impossible because once the Great King ratified ("cut His covenant"), it could never be annulled or modified. It is permanent and this is our hope and comfort!

In Psalm 89:33-34, God promises, "³³ I will not remove from him My steadfast love or be false to My faithfulness. ³⁴ I will not violate My covenant or alter the word that went forth from My lips." Just like the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant is also a one-sided, unconditional covenant of promise.

The good news is that Christ is not like us. Psalm 15 celebrates the model worshiper of the Lord, who of course was Jesus. In v. 4 David says the model worshiper, "...swears to his own hurt and does not change." We really don't have a problem keeping our word when it is to our advantage. But, when the circumstances change and the promise or contract are no longer to our advantage or perhaps to our detriment, we find a way to get out of our prior commitments.

Christ, however, never turns from His Word. He always keeps His word. Jesus embraced the covenant and didn't change even when He swore to His own hurt. He kept His promises and didn't seek to get out of them, even though it was very costly to Him.

Our faith, Paul argues, is founded on the eternal and unchangeable promising keeping God. What a comfort it is for us to know that God never changes. His unwavering faithfulness to keep His promises instills the confidence and peace that are necessary for true faith/trust. His faithfulness alleviates our fear of Him suddenly changing His mind or becoming unpredictable. It establishes a basis of trust because we know exactly where we stand. Once His covenant is ratified, nothing is able to annul or modify it.

This leads us to Paul's second argument.

The Law doesn't annul or modify God's promise because:

LESSON:

II. THE PROMISE IS GROUNDED IN CHRIST. V. 16

Verse 16 serves to heighten the superiority and permanency of the covenant of promise God made with Abraham. Paul is indicating the *ground* on which the permanency and unconditional character of the promise rests (Ridderbos, *Galatians*, p. 132). Because the

promise is grounded and fulfilled in Christ alone (the one seed), nothing, not even the Law, can annul or modify it.

A. Christ is the True Heir of the Promise.

The promises, Paul says, were made to Abraham and an individual descendant (“offspring” not “offsprings”), namely Christ. The promises made to Abraham are concentrated in the person and work of Christ. They were ultimately made in reference to Him and are thus grounded in Him. Therefore, it is impossible that the Abrahamic Covenant could have received its fulfillment before God gave the Law.

James Boice notes,

“If the promises made to Abraham were made only to Abraham and his immediate descendants, they might well be considered fulfilled even before the giving of the law; the law would simply inaugurate a new era in God’s dealings with mankind. But the promises were not fulfilled in the period before the giving of the law, Paul argues. They were embodied in the coming Redeemer through whom the fullness of blessing was to come. That Redeemer was Christ. Consequently, God’s blessing of justification by grace through faith spans the ages; and the law, whatever else one might think of it, must be seen to have served only an interim function,” (*Galatians*, pp. 462-463).

The promised blessing is fulfilled in Christ not through the giving of the Mosaic Covenant! Scripture, then, is centrally a witness to Christ. He was promised from the beginning. He was shadowed forth by types. He was the expected seed for many ages. In the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), He appeared in the flesh, just as had been promised In Luke 1:68-75, Zechariah declares,

“⁶⁸ Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ *the oath that he swore to our father Abraham*, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days,” (emphasis mine).

Christ, then, is the true offspring, the true seed of Abraham. Because the promise is concentrated and fulfilled in Christ alone (the one seed), nothing, not even the Law, can annul or modify it.

Not only is Jesus the true heir of the promise, but He also determines the fellow heirs.

B. CHRIST DETERMINES THE FELLOW HEIRS

Christ is not only the fulfillment of the promise He is also the dispenser of its blessings.

The Judaizers, however, boasted that they were the inheritors of the promised blessing by virtue of their physical lineage (privilege) and observance of the Law (performance).

In response, Paul argues that the promise is not inherited by privilege or performance but rather by promise.

From the very beginning, the true recipients of the promises were intended only for those who belong to Christ through faith alone (cf. Gal. 3:7, 14, 28-29). Only those who trust in Christ alone are included in Abraham's offspring (i.e., Christ) and are recipients of the promised blessings.

The Scriptures clearly reveal that God did not promise the blessing of justification simply to Abraham's physical descendants (i.e., on the basis of privilege). For example, Ishmael was a physical descendant of Abraham who was also circumcised (cf. Gen. 17:23; 25-26; he possessed both privilege and performance) but he wasn't a recipient of the promised blessing.

In Genesis 17:20-21, God says to Abraham, ²⁰ "As for Ishmael, I have heard you..." ²¹ "But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you..." Again, later on, God makes it very clear to Isaac and Rebekah that the promise would continue through Jacob rather than Esau (cf. Gen. 25:23; 27:27-29).

Concerning the recipients of the promised blessings, Calvin writes,

"They (Jews-J.F.) will, no doubt, boast that they have obtained it by their own merit; but Scripture, on the contrary, asserts that all depends on the calling of God; for we must constantly return to the privilege conveyed in these words, 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called.' (Gen. xxi. 12.) The uninterrupted succession to this privilege must have been in force until Christ; for, in the person of David, the Lord afterwards brought back by recovery, as we might say, the promise which had been made to Abraham," (*Calvin's Commentaries vol. 21*, p. 95).

Each time God reiterated His promise throughout the unfolding history of redemption, He demonstrated that it was still in force. So, it is clear that the promise is not inherited biologically (privilege) or by way of law keeping (performance). Rather, the promise is received through faith in Christ alone, who is the true Heir/offspring of Abraham.

It is only through faith in Christ that we become fellow heirs (cf. Gal. 3:29; 4:7; Rom. 8:17). And when we possess Christ, to whom the promise was really made, the promise also belongs to us. But it belongs to us by grace not merit, faith not works.

In Christ, God's promises were fulfilled and it is through faith in Christ that the nations of the earth would be the objects of the promised blessings. All of God's promises are

concentrated in Christ alone. He is the true heir (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20). And, all of God's promises are received in all ages through faith alone just like Abraham.

REFLECTION:

What is Paul teaching? What does the promise made to Christ have to do with believers? Paul's whole intent is to establish the superiority of the gospel/promise above the Law. He does this by showing that:

1. CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT FOR JUSTIFICATION.

The promise was made to Christ. This is precisely what the Galatians were in danger of forgetting. And this is what we are constantly in danger of forgetting. Our sinful hearts, Calvin said, are perpetual idol factories. Even as believers, our flesh constantly seeks to erect idols to trust in rather than Christ alone for our justification. This is why we must continually preach the gospel to ourselves.

It is because of this idolatrous propensity that Paul sets forth the excellency, sufficiency and primacy of Christ, in whom the promised blessing is grounded and dispensed. Because the promise was made to Christ, it is in Him, and nowhere else, that justification is found. Justification is not received by observing the law (performance) or by physical descent (privilege).

Thus, the subsequent giving of the Law cannot grant the blessings promised to Abraham but only issues in a curse (Gal. 3:10; cf. Deut. 27:26). By seeking justification through the Mosaic Covenant (covenant of law), the Judaizer's brought into question the sufficiency of Christ (cf., Gal. 2:21).

They were teaching the Galatians to trust not only in Christ but also in works of the Law for their acceptance before God. By doing so, they missed the fulfillment of the prior covenant of promise in the "seed" (Christ) who is received through faith alone.

We must never forget that Jesus is the one and only heir by right/merit and we are heirs only by promise/grace (cf. Gal. 3:29; 4:7; Rom. 8:17). He alone is sufficient for our standing before the Heavenly Judge.

2. THE WAY TO OBTAIN GOD'S BLESSING IS TO RECEIVE HIS PROMISE.

The English Puritan William Perkins wrote, "The right way to obtain any blessing of God, is first to receive the promise, and in the promise Christ: and Christ being ours; in Him, and from Him, we shall receive all things necessary," (*Galatians*, p. 186).

God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ. He is freely promised to us in the gospel. Through faith, we are brought into union with Him. And through our union with Him, whatever is His becomes ours.

By possessing Christ through faith, we also possess the blessing promised to Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:14).

By His death, Jesus redeemed sinners from the curse of the law (redemption; Gal. 3:13). He gave us a new, permanent legal status (justification; 2:16). And, by His curse bearing death, He bestowed upon us new life in the Spirit (regeneration; Gal. 3:14).

Since then the promise is concentrated and fulfilled in Christ alone (the one seed), nothing, not even the Law, can annul or modify it. We are regenerated, redeemed and justified forever!

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