

THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S PROMISE
PART 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:15-18

July 18, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In Galatians, Paul is opposing the Judaizers who placed the Mosaic Law above God's promise to Abraham. The Judaizers maintained that the Abrahamic Covenant and Patriarchal period served only as a prelude to the more perfect and complete covenant given at Mt. Sinai.

Once God instituted the Mosaic Covenant, He established a new ground for justification, so it was argued (i.e., the Law). Obedience to the Law (e.g., circumcision) became the condition for obtaining the blessings offered by the promise. God's Promise then to Abraham then was merely temporary. When the more perfect and complete covenant with Moses was instituted, it annulled the promise.

Paul refutes this objection in 3:15-18. He responds by arguing that God didn't promise to justify Abraham through faith and then annul 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

If human wills, once they are ratified, are not annulled or modified but remain binding and permanent, how much more so God's! Second, the Law doesn't annul or modify God's promise because:

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

Because the promise is concentrated and fulfilled in Christ alone (the one seed), nothing, not even the Law, can annul or modify it. Paul continues to prove the permanent character and superiority of the promise in v. 17. The Law doesn't annul or modify God's promise because:

LESSON:

III. THE PROMISE IS ANTECEDENT TO THE LAW. v. 17

Paul bases his third argument from the history of salvation. He shows that the promise is superior to the Law because it came first.

During all the intervening centuries between the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenant, God's promise to Abraham had been effective without the Law. Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, was justified before he was circumcised and before the Mosaic Law existed. In Romans 4:9-11 Paul writes,

“⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well...”

In light of this obvious fact of the history of salvation, it is impossible to make the fulfillment of the promise dependent on the keeping of the law. It is clear that God never instituted circumcision in the Law as a condition for justification. If this were so, it would modify or annul the unconditional nature of the prior covenant of promise.

The underlying question before us is: Why does Paul stress the seniority of the Abrahamic Covenant over against the Mosaic Covenant?

The answer is twofold:

A. TO UPHOLD THE CHARACTER OF GOD.

The contrast between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant is not just one of timing but also of character (cf. George, Galatians, p. 249). By focusing on the intervening time between the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, Paul was stressing the faithfulness of God. He was exalting God who keeps His promises!

In his commentary on Galatians Martin Luther writes,

“If the Law abolishes the promise, then it follows that by our works we make God a liar and make His promise invalid. For if the Law justifies, it liberates from sin and death, and, consequently, so do our works and human powers that keep the Law; then the promise to Abraham becomes invalid and altogether useless. Then it follows that God is a liar and a babbler. For if one who promises does not want to perform what he has promised but wants to make it invalid, what does this mean but that he is a liar and babbler,” (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 299).

If God makes a promise and then rescinds or fails to perform what He has promised, we have no basis by which to trust Him. Such an action makes God into a capricious tyrant

whose word is untrustworthy and unpredictable. Trusting God would be like trusting the word of the stereotypical used car salesman who says, “Trust me.”

However, Paul has already argued in v. 15 that if such a modification or annulment is not even tolerated in human legal affairs, how much more so with God! Timothy George writes, “How dare we attribute to God the kind of chicanery we do not even tolerate among sinful human beings,” (*Galatians*, pp. 248-249)?

Thus, Paul argues that God didn’t originally make a promise to Abraham and then hundreds of years later change His mind and add burdensome requirements to His promise, which no one could fulfill. Instead, he maintains that our faith and hope rests upon the trustworthiness and faithfulness of God who keeps His promises.

This is why David, after Nathan exposes his adultery with Bathsheba, immediately begins Psalm 51:1, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”

God’s steadfast love is His covenantal faithfulness (*chesed*). It is His sure love that will not let us go, even in the midst of our sin and weakness. God’s covenantal faithfulness (i.e., His steadfast love) is the foundation for our salvation, comfort and hope.

The first reason then Paul stresses the seniority of the Abrahamic Covenant over the Mosaic Covenant is to uphold the character of God. The second underlying reason Paul stresses the seniority of the Abrahamic Covenant over the Mosaic Covenant is:

B. TO GUARD THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH ALONE.

If God had subsequently given the Law for obtaining righteousness, such an action would not only call into question God’s character but would also radically alter how we relate to God.

Justifying righteousness would be earned on the basis of law keeping rather than inherited by a promise. The ground or basis of our relationship with God would be based on performance rather than promise. But, God, Paul argues, gave the promise centuries before He gave the Law.

Why?

He did so in order to leave no doubt that justification is obtained through faith in His promise rather than by works of the Law.

Martin Luther writes,

“...it was intentional that He preceded the Law with the promises; for if He had wanted us to be justified by the Law, He would have given it four hundred and thirty years before the promise or certainly with the promise. But now He is

completely silent about the Law at first; He establishes it finally after four hundred and thirty years. Meanwhile, for that entire time, He speaks about promises. Therefore, the blessing and the gift of righteousness came before the Law, through the promise. And therefore the promise is superior to the Law. Thus the Law does not abrogate the promise,” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 300).

The problem with the Judaizers is that they took circumcision out of the Abrahamic Covenant, where it served only as a sign and seal (a sacrament) of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised and placed it into the Mosaic Covenant thereby making it a condition for justification.

If then the subsequent giving of the Law annulled the prior giving of the promise, Paul argues that the truth of the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:5, 14), namely the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, would be radically altered.

The gospel would be remodeled from a free promise into a conditional promise. Saving faith would become a “conditional faith,” in which acceptance with God comes not only in believing the promise but also by actually living a perfectly righteous life.

The promise of the gospel, however, is a free promise. It sets forth God as a God of grace in Christ. But, the promise of the covenant of law (Mosaic Covenant) is grounded on the performance of perfect duty (cf. Ex. 34:7-8).

Thus, 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 (i.e., *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus*, cf. 2:16).

God gave the promise centuries before the Law to leave no doubt that justification is obtained by grace through faith in His promise rather than by works of the Law. Therefore, it follows that the subsequent giving of the law cannot annul the prior giving of the promise.

This leads us to Paul’s fourth and final argument in v. 18. The Law doesn’t annul or modify God’s promise because:

IV. THE PROMISE IS THE BASIS OF THE INHERITANCE. V. 18

In v. 18, Paul brings his argument together in a fitting conclusion. In v. 18, Paul sets forth his primary thesis, which is to show that inheritance by law (3:21) is incompatible with inheritance by promise (3:18b, “but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”).

This is the first introduction of the term, “inheritance,” in Galatians (cf. 3:29; 4:1, 7; 5:21). The “inheritance” is the blessing promised by God (i.e., justification and the reception of the Spirit, v. 14).

In view of these mutually exclusive covenants, Paul is once again setting forth a clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Note his logic: “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”

The principle Paul has been seeking to establish is this:

God accepts sinners on the basis of promise not performance.

Many believers confess that justification and forgiveness of sins are by grace through faith in Christ alone. However, the mistake they make is to assume that this just has reference to the “initial act” of getting “saved.” Once a person gets “saved” by grace, the Christian life becomes a matter of coming in and out of God’s favor and blessing based on performance. Paul has already addressed the erroneous way of thinking back in Galatians 3:2-3. And he again clearly reasserts it here in 3:18.

Note closely at the end of v. 18 what Paul says, “...God gave it to Abraham by a promise.” The word, “gave,” is critical to Paul’s argument for two reasons.

First, the word “gave” is the Greek word *κεχάρισται*, which means “to give or grant graciously and generously, with the implication of good will on the part of the giver,” (Thayer, Accordance Bible Software). This verb is based on the Greek noun *χάρις*, (*charis*), which translated is *grace*. God graciously granted (graced) Abraham an inheritance. Abraham did nothing by way of obedience or merit to deserve the promised inheritance. Thus Paul emphasizes that salvation is a free gift that is meant to be received not earned.

Second, “gave” is in the perfect tense, which emphasizes the permanency of the gift. God gave the inheritance to Abraham by a promise and the effects of that giving continue forever!

Paul shows how the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants were completely different in their nature and character. They operated on mutually exclusive principles.

The covenant God made with Abraham was a free grant, an unconditional promise consisting of irrevocable grace, an announcement of divine promise. The covenant God later made with Moses set forth demands and was conditional. The principle was clear: “Do this and you shall live.”

The Mosaic Covenant required the oath-taker to fulfill (i.e., perform) all the terms and conditions or else suffer the sanctions/penalties (cf. Ex. 34:7-8). And, unlike the Abrahamic Covenant where God obligates Himself to fulfill His covenant promises and assumes the sanctions of the covenant, He did not bind Himself to fulfill any specific obligations in the Mosaic Covenant (cf. George, Galatians, p. 249).

This is why Paul argues that the Mosaic Law was never given for the purpose of providing the inheritance, life or righteousness, cf. 3:18, 21; 2:21). God never instituted

the Mosaic Covenant as the basis for justification. He didn't command Abraham, "Do this and you will receive the blessing!" Rather, God promised, "in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..." (cf. Gen. 22:18).

Martin Luther noted,

"...the promise and the Law are as far apart from each other as heaven and earth. For the Law demands: "Do This!" The promise grants: "Accept this!" Therefore Paul concludes as follows: The blessing is given on the basis of the promise; therefore it is not given on the basis of the Law. . . Therefore, he who has the Law does not have enough, for he does not yet have the blessing and so remains under the curse. Hence the Law cannot justify, because the blessing has not been added to it... This is an argument from contraries: The inheritance is given on the basis of the promise; therefore it is not on the basis of the Law," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 303).

It is undeniable that God gave the inheritance to Abraham by a promise, a free gift.

REFLECTION:

As we consider Paul's argument for the superiority of God's promise to Abraham over the Mosaic Law instituted with Moses, let us ever remember this important truth:

God accepts us on the basis of His promise and not our performance.

The gospel is not: "God helps those who help themselves." The gospel removes all room for boasting. The gospel sets forth the sufficiency of Christ alone. Before Moses was ever born, before the Mosaic Covenant had ever been put into place and before anyone could have attempted to keep the law, God had already taken the initiative and granted the inheritance by promise.

Listen to Phil Ryken,

"Salvation in Christ does not rest on a law that we inevitably break; it rests on a promise that God cannot break. . . Salvation in Christ is not a commercial transaction. My relationship with God is not based on my ability to make a deal or strike a bargain. The Christian life is not a quid pro quo, so that if I do what God wants, then God will do what I want. God simply does not operate this way. Instead, my relationship with God is based entirely on believing His gracious promise," (*Galatians*, p. 128).

Justification (3:11), redemption (3:13), regeneration (3:14), Paul says is an inheritance that is received not a paycheck that is earned. Just like Abraham, we believe and trust God to fulfill His promise. And we can trust God because He doesn't annul or modify His promise once it has been ratified.

Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has forever ratified and guaranteed His promises to us and it is in this that we trust. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, His covenant promise is permanent and irrevocable. It stands firm forever.

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