

Law and Promise

Galatians 3:15-22

This afternoon we have an illustration which Paul uses to emphasize his main point in this whole book of Galatians. It is an illustration which demonstrates to the Galatians just how foolish they had been to think for a moment that the law would be useful for them as a basis for their justification. The illustration also shows how equally foolish they were to act as if they now maintained and preserved their standing with God with their obedience to the law. They were bewitched, Paul says in verse 1. And so they put themselves under the curse of the obligation of perfect obedience, because they missed the main point. They were seeking to be made perfect by the flesh. Thus, last week,

v.10-11

All of this has huge implications and applications for our lives, most notably the freedom which we have in Christ. The freedom from the curse of the law, where one breach, one act of disobedience disqualifies you from inheriting the promise. And the freedom to cry out to God, Abba, Father, knowing that the promise of the gospel is yours.

And so, the illustration of all of that, the great biblical illustration, Abraham.

v.15-16

Paul introduced Abraham in our text last week, speaking in verse 14 of the blessing of Abraham. It is easy to understand the curse of God's condemnation. Let's look this morning at the blessing, the blessing of Abraham. Simply put, that blessing is a promise, God's promise. And what was that promise? Specifically, this,

Gen. 12:1 "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Ultimately, however, it was the promise of the gospel, the promise of redemption. The promise of salvation. It was the promise of God's covenant, a promise of God in which he said to Abraham, "I will be your God and you will be my people." And remember how Paul described that promise in,

Gal. 3:8 "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations be blessed. 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

My point today is that,

I. THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH IS GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM.

More importantly, that's Paul's point. This is the very foundation of our faith, and if you think I have belabored the point the past few weeks, I have! With some intention, that the emphasis of the Apostle would be crystal clear.

So we are talking about the promise of God's covenant, made so evident through Abraham. And we are understanding that promise to be the very foundation of our faith. And in that context, then comes the question, "Why then the law?" You see, understanding the promise is the only sure way to rightly understand how we use the law. So today, the promise first.

What is it that Paul wants to emphasize with regard to the promise of God to Abraham? That is an easy question to answer from our text.

A. God's promise is unchangeable.

That's the emphasis. That's the point.

v.15

In other words, arguing from the lesser to the greater, we realize that even human contracts are honored. Human agreements are binding. When human covenants are ratified, they are valid. Obligatory. Even human contracts, a man-made covenant. Much more so, a covenant promise made by God. That's verse 15.

Then read,

v.17

From the time of the promise to Abraham, Genesis 12, until the people of Israel were assembled at Mt. Sinai, 430 years past. And though some of Paul's words in this text can be difficult to interpret, at this point it is easy. When God gave the law through Moses at Mt. Sinai, he was not canceling the covenant promise made to Abraham 430 years earlier.

Let me say in passing, however, that a very popular and widespread system of doctrine for understanding Scripture says just that. It is called dispensationalism. It was popularized by the Scofield Bible and the Ryrie Study Bible. It is possible even that a majority of Christians would articulate something of the idea that while the promise of the gospel was made to Abraham, Moses initiated a new and different dispensation in which law was the operative principle. Let me give you just one quote from a dispensationalist writer, "Since Abraham and his descendants had

failed to obey God on the basis of the ... [of promise], God began a fifth dispensation by instituting the Mosaic Law as a new ruling factor."

They failed to obey God on the basis of the giving of a promise, so now God will institute something new and different, law. But no, beloved, there is no contradiction between law and promise. There is no failure of the promise which rendered the law necessary. There is no new dispensation in which the principle of law now replaces the principle of promise. God's promise is unchangeable. Irrevocable. The promise of the covenant was not annulled. The promise was not made void. And to make that point even clearer, we also read,

v.18

For Paul, it was always one or the other. Promise or law. And if the blessing of God is described as an inheritance, then that inheritance must come to God's people either by the law as reward for sufficient law-keeping, or it must come to God's people as the result of a promise. A will, a testament, in which the will-maker promises to give his inheritance to recipients of his own choosing. Beloved, if you inherit property or goods in a will, you are not required to earn them. You are not required to work for them. They are granted freely, by the promise contained in the will.

But now let me go back to verse 16, for this is a little bit more confusing. At least the details. The main point of the verse isn't hard to figure out. The idea is that,

B. God's promise is guaranteed by Jesus.

Look carefully at verse 16. "The promises were made to Abraham and his offspring." Now, what is the plural of "offspring." Why, "offspring." Same word. It is like sheep. If you have one

sheep, you have one sheep. If you have five sheep, it is still five sheep. Not sheeps. That bit of grammar is consistent in the Greek language. The Greek word for “offspring” or “seed” is also the same whether singular or plural.

So the promise was made to Abraham and his seed, his offspring. Or more broadly, his descendants. Please note well that this covenant promise of God is always given in a generational context, it is given to you and to your children. As God declares, “I will be your God and the God of your children.” As that idea came into Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, we read,

Acts 2:38 “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

The promise is for you and your descendants. I should note, that is the biblical foundation for baptizing our children. We are claiming this promise. But what is so obvious here in Galatians 3 is that Paul has emphasis upon a particular selection within those descendants. A narrowing, for promise will be extended to the children of Abraham with his wife Sarah, not Ishmael who was born to Hagar. Isaac is the seed, not Ishmael. In the next generation, God’s promise would be carried on through Jacob, not Esau,

Rom. 9:6 “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but Through Isaac shall your offspring be named. 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. 9 For this is

what the promise said: About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son. 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— 12 she was told, The older will serve the younger. 13 As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Thus Paul goes out of his way in Galatians 3 to emphasize that ultimately this promise is made to the singular seed of Abraham whose name was Jesus. Just one offspring, according to verse 16, Jesus. Here is the point, I believe, as one commentator puts it, that “the promise of justification by faith to the Gentiles was made through Abraham and his seed, meaning by his seed, the Messiah.”

Calvin says this, “Before pursuing his argument, [Paul] introduces an observation about the substance of the covenant, that it rests on Christ alone. But if Christ be the foundation of the bargain, it follows that it is of free grace; and this too is the meaning of the word promise.”

And so this great covenant promise, this great promise of redemption and salvation, is ours only through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is guarantor of that covenant promise, for we read that,

2 Cor. 1:20 “... all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”

The promise of God to Abraham is unchangeable. And it is further guaranteed to us because it comes to us through Jesus, the seed of Abraham. The promise of God does not come to us

through law-keeping. Abraham is the illustration to prove that.

Again, v.18

Now there should be an obvious question in your mind.

II. WHY THEN THE LAW?

If all of that is true, with all the emphasis that we have had in studying these verses in the book of Galatians for several weeks now, with all that clear, repetitive emphasis upon the truth that “by works of the law no one will be justified,” the question is obvious. Why did God give the law? We know what the law wasn’t for, but what was it for?

Paul asks and answers that very question.

v.19

Not hard to understand, I don’t think.

A. The law was necessary to define our sins.

Verse 19, “it was added because of transgressions.” It was added, not as an alteration or a replacement, but a supplement. Because of transgressions. I believe a good explanation of that is found in,

Rom. 5:12 “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— 13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.”

So sin existed before the law was given, but it wasn’t “counted.” It wasn’t defined. As Paul said in,

Rom. 7:7 “What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no

means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, You shall not covet.”

The law taught me that I was a sinner. It defined my sin for me. But that law did not teach me to repent. Sadly, as Paul describes the plight of every unbeliever,

Rom. 7:8 “But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

Because of my fallen nature, the law actually provoked me to sin. Back in,

Rom. 5:20 “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The law actually made sin abound, because once that sin is defined, fallen man will live out his slavery to it. So the law was given by God for that very purpose, to expose and bring to light the sinfulness of sinful man. And to make obvious the necessity of the promise, that our salvation could only come as a gift. We would never be able to earn it by the works of the law. And that was the distinct role the law carried in the Old Testament. Paul makes it clear that,

B. The law was necessary before Jesus was incarnate.

v.19-20

Now it gets a little more confusing, but I will try to be clear. It is easy enough to figure out the meaning of the words, “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.”

That’s Jesus. The law was established as a precursor to Jesus, and that is really what the rest of this chapter will be all about.

But notice then, verse 19, “it was put in place through angels.” The reference there is to the ordinary mission and ministry of angels, God’s ministering spirits whom he uses to carry out his will and purpose. More significantly, we read in verse 19 of an intermediary.

v.19b “...it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.
20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.”

One commentator notes, “Perhaps no passage in Scripture has received so many interpretations as this.” The questions can be simplified to these, “Is the intermediary Moses, or is it Jesus?” And, secondly, “What is the meaning of the words, ‘more than one’?”

Let me give you what I believe is the best understanding, thought admittedly this is not a verse about which I can be strongly dogmatic that I am absolutely certain of how I interpret it. But this is what I think. Verse 19 actually says, “by the hand of a mediator,” and I believe the most obvious reference there would be Moses. When God gave the law to his rebellious people, when he revealed himself on Mt. Sinai, Moses was a clearly defined mediator between God and the people. And I believe, therefore, that Paul’s point is this. Moses was a mediator between two parties when the law was given, but the purpose of God involves only one party, one group.

There are not two parties whom God claims for his people, namely the Jews and the Gentiles, as if one were to be saved by their works of the law and the other by faith in Jesus. There is no longer Jew and Gentile. There is only one, for God is one, as Paul writes in verse 20.

God is one, and therefore God’s people are one. God’s plan of salvation is one. God’s purpose is one. So,

C. The law was never able to give life.

That’s the point. There was never the idea that when God gave the law to Moses, the intermediary, that the people would be justified on that basis, while later on, when the promise to Abraham was made clear with the incarnation of Jesus, that faith would be the operative principle. That was never the case. God is one. And the inheritance could never come from the law. Not then. And not now.

Because, if it could, if we could be justified by the law, then we would be! And Jesus wouldn’t have had to die.

So the law is not contrary to the promise. That’s the whole point of this passage.

v.21

So now the million dollar question? If you have followed me through this explanation, or more to the point, if you have followed Paul through this text, then the obvious question remains, “Why then the law?” We are ready for the answer.

D. The law was used to define our condemnation.

Not just to define our sins, but our judgment. With obvious reason, for when we are defined as condemned by God’s law, the promise of the gospel begins to make sense. When you realize that you are stand before God condemned for your sin, and

enslaved to that sin, then you are prepared to hear the gospel.

The promise. Are you ready?

v.22

There is the relationship between,

III. LAW AND PROMISE.

The law imprisoned you. The law defines your sin and defines the judgment that sin deserves, leading you to the promise. And that is the subject of the next sermon,

v.24 “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”

Beloved, there is no escaping this reality, that your standing before God is a matter of faith, not of works. Your justification and the whole of your salvation is a gift of his grace, not a reward you earn by your own efforts.

Receive that free gift as it is offered to you in the gospel. Believe the promise of God, the promise of his blessing, illustrated by Abraham. And don't be bewitched. Don't be led astray by the ever-present temptation to be perfected by the flesh.

Gal. 3:2-3

No, beloved. The answer, a thousand times over, the answer is no. You are not being perfected by the flesh, “for all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.”

v.22