

Living by a Promise

Galatians 3:15-22

Intro: Boys and girls, as I'm sure you're aware, Christmas is just a few weeks away. Some of my grandchildren have already made a Christmas list – I noticed them sitting on our kitchen counter. Boys and girls what if your parents came to you and said, 'we're going to do Christmas presents a little different this year. We aren't just going to give you things – you're going to have to work for them'. That would be a bummer, right? But then it got worse. When they told you the things you would have to do to earn your presents – they were all things that you couldn't possibly do. Your Dad said he wanted you to rebuild the car engine and your mom wanted a new addition on the back of the house. You had to do it, by yourself, and it all had to be done by Christmas or you weren't going to get your presents!

That sort of deal would sap the joy right out of Christmas wouldn't it? Well, there are many Christians who have had the joy sapped out of their Christianity. They are working hard, trying to do the impossible, hoping that it will be enough to gain God's favor and everlasting life. They've forgotten that God's gifts are always, always, free.

In this letter, Paul has been battling the Judiazers. The Judiazers were like the aforementioned parents: they were teaching the Christians in the churches of Galatia that, in order to gain the "gift" of everlasting life, they were going to have to earn it by submitting to the law of Moses. As Paul continue his devastating rebuke of their error, he argues from the Scriptures, from Genesis and Exodus, to prove that God always gives his gifts freely and by grace and by promise.

The word "promise" is the dominant word in our text. It appears 7 times in verses 14-22.

I. The Principle of Promise (15-18)

Paul has been arguing from Biblical history – specifically Gods' dealing with Abraham. He's reminded his readers of the covenant God made with Abraham way back in Genesis.

Genesis 12:7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

There are several things Paul wants us to see about this covenant.

First, Paul wants us to see that God's covenant with Abraham was a unilateral, unconditional, one-sided promise. So, when God came to Abraham, he didn't make a

deal with him. He didn't say, "Abraham, if you will do such and such for me, then I will do so and so for you." He didn't say, "if you do your best to serve me, I promise bless you with offspring and a land". He didn't ask Abraham to do anything.

John Stott: "There were no 'strings attached, no works to do, no laws to obey, no merit to establish, no conditions to fulfill." (88)

It was all promise – from top to bottom, front to back, and beginning to end. It was a free, unilateral, unconditional promise to give Abraham and his offspring the land.

Secondly, the promise was unchangeable. That's the point of verse 15.

3:15 To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.

Now if you know anything about law, you might think, that's not really true. In American law you are allowed to change your will after it's ratified. Boys and girls, that means that if your parents tell you that they have written a will and all their money is going to go to you – you still need to be nice to them because if you're not, they can change the will! It was the same in Roman law. But it wasn't that way in Greek law! (And Paul is writing to people who would be familiar with the Greek pattern.) In Greek law, once the will has been ratified, once it has been officially signed and sealed, it can't be changed. If you've been written into someone's will – they can never take you out of it! Even if you should fall out of their favor – the promise contained in the will can't be annulled. The inheritance is guaranteed!

Paul's point is clear. If that is the case with human law – how much more when it comes to God. God's promises are certain and cannot be annulled.

Romans 11:29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Third, this promise was made to Christ – and all who belong to Him. That's Paul's point in verse 16.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.

Suddenly, we realize that this promise is about way more than the land of Canaan. The only way to understand what Paul is saying here is to realize that he reads the promise with both a physical and a spiritual meaning.

The first meaning is the physical meaning – God promised to Abraham and his physical descendants the land of Canaan. Paul isn't denying that. But that doesn't exhaust the promise. The promise contained a deeper truth – it was the promise of an eternal inheritance, not just a temporal one. Abraham understood this. In the book of Hebrews, we are told that Abraham realized that the promised inheritance was more than some land in the middle east – it was an eternal city with foundations whose builder and maker is God. Abraham was looking for a better country, a heavenly one! So, there was a deeper significance to the promise concerning land. And there was a deeper significance concerning the recipients. This promise was not only given to Isaac - but to Christ!

In Christ Jesus, the promise is fulfilled. He is the true, ultimate offspring of Abraham. And by His life and death – he has gained the ultimate inheritance, a new heaven and earth, for all those who belong to Him. In other words, the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off! The gospel promise is the promise of an eternal inheritance for all the true children of Abraham – all those who have faith in Christ.

So, we have established that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional and immutable, irrevocable – fulfilled in Christ and received by all those who believe in Christ. What then of the law of Moses??

II. The Place of the Law

A. *The Law of Moses cannot possibly Annul the Promise.*

3:17 This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

The argument is perfectly clear. If God *promised* to give the land to Abraham – and that promise was unconditional and unchangeable, then the law he gave to Moses can't possibly annul the promise to Abraham. It would be like promising to buy someone a Christmas present and then, much later, making them pay for it. It would make God a liar.

3:18 For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

The promise given to Abraham and the law given to Moses are two very separate things. In the promise to Abraham God said "I will...I will...I will.... But in the law of Moses God said "thou shalt and thou shalt not".

John Stott, "The promise sets forth a religion of God – God's plan, God's grace, God's initiative. But the law sets forth a religion of man – man's duty, man's works,

man's responsibility....The conclusion to which Paul is leading is that the Christian religion is the religion of Abraham and not Moses, of promise and not law." (87)

We are saved by promise, not by law; by grace, not by merit. This is the grace of the gospel – and it is so important for the believer's assurance and joy and peace.

Ryken: Salvation in Christ does not rest upon a law that we inevitably break, it rests on a promise that God cannot break!" (128). And again, "This is the grace of God, that he does not deal with us according to our performance but on the basis of his promise." (129)

That's the point! The gospel operates on the principle of promise – not law! God does not deal with us according to our performance but on the basis of his promise! The gospel is God's free, unconditional, and irrevocable promise that every sinner who calls on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved, shall receive the inheritance of everlasting life. The gospel is God saying, "I will, I will, I will."

- I will be merciful toward your iniquities and remember your sins no more.
- I will pardon all your transgression and cast them into the sea of forgetfulness.
- I will deliver you and show you my salvation.
- John 6:40 Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day."

I will. I will. I will. These are all the things God promises in the gospel to those who believe. The law cannot annul one of them. Our sins cannot revoke them. They are irrevocably ours by God's own promise. That's the gospel.

So why then the law?? Paul anticipates the question. What was the purpose of the law?? God clearly is the author of both the promise to Abraham and the law given to Moses. Why did he do that? What's the relationship does the law have to the promise – and to the Christian today?

B. It Was Added because of Transgression.

What does that mean?? We might think that Paul is saying, 'God saw how wicked people were and so he gave them his law to help them be good.' And the law does have the effect of restraining sin to some degree. But it doesn't make people good. And it was never meant to. If anything, it makes people bad. Its purpose is expose and even arouse sin. **Romans 5:20** "The law came in to increase the trespass."

F.F. Bruce says that a way to paraphrase Galatians 3:19 is to say, "the law was given in order that there might be transgressions. (found in Ryken, footnote 2, 132)

Think of it this way. Imagine you live in a small town and everyone routinely drives 50 miles an hour through town. The mayor had publicly stated that he wished people would slow down a bit – but there were no posted speed limits and people did as they pleased. But then the city council passed a law and signs were put up that said “Speed Limit: 35 MPH”. Now suddenly you have a law, and everyone who goes over 35 is in violation of that law and will be penalized accordingly. The law increased the transgression.

That’s similar to the argument Paul is making. God gave the law so that

- a) sinners are made culpable in a new way. Their sin is now a transgression of God’s declared law – and justly deserving his just sentence.
- b) The sinfulness and inescapable power of sin of sin might be revealed.

Paul’s point is to show that the purpose of the law was never to impart salvation, or help sinners merit salvation, but to show men their desperate need of salvation!

Luther, The true function and the chief and proper use of the Law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.”

This is why moral crusades nearly always get both the law and the gospel wrong – whether it be the temperance movement of the 1920’s or the social justice movement today. Moral crusades nearly always turn the gospel into a law and then rely on law to make men good. But the law isn’t able to do that. All it can do is expose sin. And there’s no hope in that. No help in that. No grace, no freedom, no transformation in that.

If there was a law that actually *could* make sinners righteous – then there would be no need for the gospel. That’s Paul’s point in verse 21. The law is not contrary to the gospel – it just reveals the desperate need for it. It was given to imprison men, not to free them. .

²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Those two words, ‘*so that*’, are so important. God had a gracious and saving purpose in mind when he imprisoned men under sin. “Scripture imprisoned everything under sin – ***so that***, to this end, for this purpose – “*that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*”

The promise of God is given – not earned. It’s a free gift of eternal life to those who believe.

1 John 2:25 “And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.”

That promise is meant to define our life. It did for Paul. Listen to how he introduces himself in his letter to Titus.

Titus 1:1–2 “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, ...² in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began.”

Hope means confidence. Paul lived his life in the conviction that he would receive the promised inheritance of eternal life. Why? Because God, who never lies, had promised it - unconditionally and irrevocably.

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to live with the same confidence.

Hebrews 10:23 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

This promise is intended to be your joy and your peace. No matter what circumstances you are facing in your life today – if you have cast yourself upon the mercy of God in Jesus and believed in His Name – then the promise is for you.