

Human Law Shows the Promise to Abraham Stands and Is Fulfilled in Jesus
(Galatians 3:15-18)

Prepared and preached by Pastor Steve Rhodes for and at Bethel Friends Church on Sunday,
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A Hands-Tied Experience

Imagine if I was preaching in a straight jacket right now...

I would illustrate our tendency to return over and over again to the constraints and strictures of the Law instead of enjoying the fact that we are "Free to Enjoy" the new life God gives us.

We limit ourselves by thinking we are saved by keeping the law. We limit our ability to rely on the Holy Spirit. We end up literally tying our hands because we are living on our own strength and not the strength of God.

Think more about grace...

I know a family who adopted an older child from an unspeakably horrific orphanage in another country. When they brought her home one of the things they told her was that she was expected to clean her room every day. When she heard about that responsibility, she fixated on it and saw it as a way she would earn her family's love. In other words, she isolated the responsibility and applied it to her existing frame of thinking that was shaped by life in the orphanage. Thus, every morning when her parents came in her room, it was immaculate and she would sit on the bed and would say, "My room is clean. Can I stay? Do you still love me?" Her words broke her new parents' hearts.

Eventually, the girl learned to hear her parents' words as their unconditionally beloved child who would never be forsaken, not as a visitor trying to earn her place in the family. After she knew that she was an inseparable part of the family story, even correction and discipline did not cause her to question her family's love for her; she understood correction and discipline to be part of what it meant to be in the family.¹

We are continuing our series on Galatians. Galatians continues to show that we are saved by grace and not by the law.

¹ David E. Prince, "How Biblical Application Really Works," *PreachingToday Skills Article* (January 2018)

My theme today is:

Human Law Shows the Promise to Abraham Stands and Is Fulfilled in Jesus

Let's read from the text:

Galatians 3:15-18:

Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. ¹⁶ Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. ¹⁷ What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

- I. The covenant doesn't change.
 - a. We see this in verse 15.
 - b. Notice that Paul begins the verse with "brethren."
 - c. He has not used a loving term of endearment since chapter 1:1.
 - d. One writes: We are struck by the fact that Paul addressed the Galatians here as "brothers," a term of endearment he had not used since 1:11, although it would occur again seven other times in the letter (4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18). Although the Galatians were confused, foolish, and bewitched, and although Paul felt betrayed, perplexed, and forlorn about them, still they were *adelphoi*, "brothers." This term of relationship is especially appropriate at the beginning of a passage that will seek to answer the questions: "What makes a family a family? Who are the true children of Abraham, the heirs of the promise, and thus entitled to call one another brothers and sisters?"²
 - e. God set a covenant with Abraham and Paul is about to show that that covenant does not change.
- II. The covenant was to Abraham's seed, Christ.

² Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 244–245.

- a. In verse 16, Paul shares that this covenant was spoken to Abraham's seed.
 - b. Paul shares that this was Abraham's seed in the singular and that would be Christ. The verse says: *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.*
 - c. The ESV Study Bible shares: God spoke promises to Abraham on several occasions, but probably Gen. 13:15 and 17:8 are particularly in view. And to your offspring. Paul knows that the singular (Hb. zera') can be used as a collective singular that has a plural sense (he interprets it in a plural sense in Rom. 4:18). But it also can have a singular meaning, and here Paul, knowing that only in Christ would the promised blessings come to the Gentiles, sees that the most true and ultimate fulfillment of these OT promises comes to one "offspring," namely, Christ.
 - d. God is faithful to the promise which is fulfilled in Christ.
- III. Now, the law came later, but does not change the promise.
- a. Verse 17 expands on this. *What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.*
 - b. There are a few explanations of how Paul got 430 years. The ESV Study Bible shares: Paul is apparently referring to the Septuagint translation of Ex. 12:40, "The dwelling of the children of Israel . . . in Egypt and in Canaan was 430 years," which would mean 430 years from Abraham to the exodus (the Hb. text does not include "and in Canaan"). Another explanation is that Paul is not counting the time from the first statement of the promise to Abraham but from the last affirmation of that promise to Jacob before he went to Egypt in Gen. 46:3–4. This method would then count the entire time in Egypt as the time from the "promise" to the "law." If this is so, then Paul is relying on the Hebrew text of Ex. 12:40 to affirm a 430-year stay in Egypt.
 - c. Exodus 12:40 does shares: *Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.*
 - d. The point is clear. Even though the law came later, it does not change the promise made to Abraham.
 - e. Remember in context Paul has been talking about salvation by grace through faith.
 - f. Look at verse 14: *in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

- g. Look at verse 6, quoting Genesis 15:6: *Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*
- h. God is faithful to His promise that we are saved by grace through faith as it was with Abraham.
- i. *In Luther's commentary on this text he drew the individual believer into the sequence of salvation history Paul had outlined and encouraged those who felt condemned by the accusation of the law to reply: " 'Lady Law, you are not coming on time; you are coming too late. Look back 430 years; if these were rolled back, you could come. But you are coming too late and tardily; for you have been preceded for 430 years by the promise, to which I agree and in which I gently rest. Therefore you have nothing to do with me; I do not hear you. Now I am living after Abraham a believer; or rather, I am living after the revelation of Christ, who has abrogated and abolished you.' Thus let Christ always be set forth to the heart as a kind of summary of all the arguments in support of faith and against the righteousness of the flesh, the law, works, and merits."*⁸⁹

IV. The covenant is based on a promise.

- a. Notice this in verse 18.
- b. *For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.*
- c. Now Paul brings up an inheritance.
- d. Think about inheritance. *The promise of a future inheritance is one of the many promises God makes to us in the Bible. But the concept itself is difficult for us to comprehend. One way to think about it would be to turn to some familiar names across the pond. When Princess Diana died in 1997, she left a sizeable inheritance for her two sons, William and Harry, in the amount of \$20.4 million. With investments and interest, that amount grew during their teens and twenties to \$31.4 million. But the provision was such that William and Harry were only able to inherit this considerable estate after their 30th birthdays. In June 2012, William turned 30 and inherited his portion. Harry will inherit his portion on his 30th birthday as well. The estate is theirs. It is has been promised to them. It is in their names, and it has been set aside for them. In the same way, as followers of Christ, we have an inheritance. Based on Jesus'*

⁸⁹ LW 26.302.

³ Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 249–250.

*promise, it is ours. It's in your name, and it's set aside for you. At the right time, you too will receive your inheritance in full.*⁴

Let's apply this passage:

1. We are saved by Jesus plus nothing, We must worship Jesus and not the law.
2. We must recognize that God keeps His promises. His promise to Abraham was kept in Christ.
3. We must recognize that our inheritance is in Christ and not the law. If it is by the law Christ died for nothing (verse 18 and Gal. 2:21)
4. Our thinking must be on Christ and not the law.
5. Our view of salvation must be focused on Christ and not the law.
6. We must not neglect the importance of the law either but see it as a second step to the promise. Like what was written: In other words, for Paul the law was not merely a late addition in the history of salvation; rather it was a completely different kind of covenant than the one God had concluded with Abraham centuries before. G. E. Mendenhall has described the contrast that was at the heart of Paul's distinction between the two covenants:⁵

It is not often enough seen that no obligations are imposed upon Abraham. Circumcision is not originally an obligation, but a sign of the covenant, like the rainbow in Genesis 9. It serves to identify the recipient(s) of the covenant, as well as to give a concrete indication that a covenant exists. It is for the protection of the promise, perhaps, like the mark of Cain in Genesis 4. The covenant of Moses, on

²²Submitted by Jared E. Alcántara, Princeton, New Jersey; source: Frank Lovelace, "Prince William turns 30, inherits share of Diana estate," *Newsday* (6-20-12)

⁵ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 249.

the other hand, is almost the exact opposite. It imposes specific obligations on the tribes or clans without binding Yahweh to specific obligations.⁸⁶⁶

7. We must trust in Jesus who keeps His promises.

Prayer

⁸⁶ G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17 (1954): 62. See also the discussion in Bligh, *Galatians*, 274–81.

⁶ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 249.