

Galatians: Free in Christ

The Unchanging Promise

Galatians 3:15-18

Christianity is utterly unique among religions in insisting that it isn't what we do for God that makes us right with Him, but only what He does for us. This is the radical and offensive idea of grace. It leaves no room for pride, but instead billboards the crucified and cursed Christ in front of our eyes. In this chapter Paul has been arguing that Christians must continue with God the way they began: by faith alone (vv1-5). To be a child of Abraham is to have faith like he did (vv6-9). Anyone who tries to belong to God through the works of law is under its curse, the same curse Jesus bore on the cross for those who look to him (vv10-14). Now Paul explains the nature of God's promise to Abraham, His unchangeable covenant of grace.

A Human Example

It's established that Abraham trusted God, that faith founded his relationship with God, but hundreds of years later God gave Moses the law. False teachers were saying "If faith was the only thing necessary, why the smoking mountain and tablets of stone? Why would He give the commandments if we weren't supposed to add works to our faith?" Sadly today much of the church believes this is really is how the Mosaic law was intended, rather than how false teachers distorted it. Paul will give the true purpose of the law in verse 19 after destroying the false one. Even between people, once an agreement is finalized, no one can single handedly nullify or add to it (v15). This is the whole point of writing it down in the first place, to make permanent until the terms are fulfilled or both parties agree to change. If Paul is talking about a last will and testament, one party is dead and therefore change isn't even possible.

The Law and the Covenant

If a human agreement is unchangeable, *how much more* solid is God's covenant given to Abraham 430 years before the law was given to Moses (v17; Gen. 12:1-4; Ex. 12:40-41). The law can't annul the promise. Say a man adopts a young boy and later leaves the family business to him when he dies. The son grows up and runs the business successfully for 20 years. At that point, can he say his father adopted him because he is a successful businessman? Or that his family status depends on his success in the business? This is what the false teachers were maintaining—that *this* is what God is like! But He confirmed the covenant with Abraham in Christ. The living God swore on His life, passing through the animals, that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land (Gen. 15:8-21). Abraham "believed in Yahweh, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (15:6). In an effort to emphasize the graciousness of God's covenant, some Christians will say it's unconditional, that it didn't matter what Abraham did. They are trying to keep "works of the law", which the false teachers insisted on,

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out of it. But God did have conditions for Abraham and Moses (Gen. 12:1-3; Deut. 7:12-13; 30:16-20), though these conditions were always expressions of trust in God—the obedience of faith (Jms. 2:18ff.)—and never a means of earning God’s salvation. “And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Deut. 26:4-5). When Jesus says to love Him by keeping His commandments, He isn’t commanding us to earn His love (Jn. 14:15). If God starts with promises and switches to righteousness-via-law, He breaks His promise. But if He tells Moses to trust Him like Abraham did, He is consistently gracious. Martin Luther: “Therefore the Law was never meant to cancel the promise of God. The Law was meant to confirm the promise until the time should come when God would open His testament in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” The law simply tells Israel how to trust in Canaan the way Abraham on Moriah. God has always been gracious, promising salvation to those who trust Him. His covenant promises open and grow more beautiful like a flower from seed to bloom.

Abraham’s Seed

God told Abraham that he would father man nation, and his offspring/seed/descendants would be like the stars: “So shall your descendants be” (Gen. 15:5; Rom. 4:18). The word *offspring* is a collective noun, so that a plurality may be included within it. The promises were made to the Seed, to Christ, so that all the seeds who are in Christ may receive it (v16). Paul isn’t relying on the necessity of the grammar. The grammar is clear by our necessity of a savior. In order for blessing to come through Abraham, a messiah, a greater one than Abraham had to come. Abraham is the seed of Christ. Instead of looking to himself or his works, Abraham believed God would send the one in whom all the promises could be fulfilled. This is why he heard the gospel when God told him that He would bless all nations through him (3:8). Abraham saw Jesus and trusted. And when the law came centuries later, Moses saw Jesus and trusted. God calls us to do the same thing: to trust and follow Him, to be Abraham’s seed because we are ultimately in Jesus, the greater Abraham.