

**“The Promise”**  
Galatians 3:15-22

*<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. <sup>19</sup> Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. <sup>20</sup> Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. <sup>21</sup> Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. <sup>22</sup> But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (ESV)*

In an ongoing effort to keep my daughters’ education current though school just ended, like every parent, I’m concerned that my daughters don’t just shutdown for the summer. I want them to keep learning. In the summer I like to teach them skills that are really going to do them well for the rest of their lives. This summer what we’ve started to do is watch a marathon of the television show *24* because by watching that, I believe that they’ll know if terrorists ever attack or things like that eventually. So we watched season one, and we’re about half way through season two of *24*. There’s an interesting dynamic which I’ve always noticed, but since we’re doing this marathon it’s even more interesting. The question is this: At what point does your seat not become your seat anymore? Do you ever have that problem at your house? In other words, we have a relatively small house, and a relatively small living room. Everyone gets the seat they want. A person gets up to go do something and comes back and someone else is in that person’s seat. The person says, “Hey that’s my seat!” and the other person says “How do I know it’s your seat? It doesn’t have your name on it.” “But I was sitting right there!” And it escalates and finally someone says, “Dad!” and I say, “Get out of her seat!” “Which one of us?” “I don’t care.” On the other hand, there’s one seat that’s nonnegotiable. Guess which one that is. It’s not Judy’s. It’s mine. Why? Because I was there first. I was there before you kids were ever born. I was there before we even thought of having you. That’s been my seat. There’s no question as to whether it’s mine simply because of historical priority if nothing more than the fact that I’m also a lot bigger than you. Get it?

Today we’re going to talk about the book of Galatians, of course, but up to this point, Paul has been arguing. If you remember the whole point of the book of Galatians, it’s basically this: Paul is making the argument that Jesus plus anything equals nothing, or Jesus plus nothing equal everything. In other words, Paul went through Galatia and he preached the Gospel of free grace, this doctrine of justification by faith alone. In other words, the way you’re counted righteous before God is by faith alone and not by works of the law. We know from the book of Acts and other places and certainly from Paul’s argument here that people came in afterward and started saying, “Jesus is good, but you also need to be circumcised. Jesus is good, but you also need to obey works of the law.” And so Paul in Chapter three began to address those issues directly. The first thing he did in chapter three was to address the issue of whether the law is important for our salvation by asking the question of experience. He asked the Galatians, “When Jesus saved you, did he save you by works of the law or did he save you through hearing in faith?” No answer, right? They should have had no answer because the question was a rhetorical question. Of course it’s by faith. And he said, “Did the same one who saved you by faith, is he now going to perfect you or finish the job by works of the law?” And the answer of course is “Absolutely not!” Paul addressed the question experientially, and then last week we looked at him addressing the question biblically. Are works of the law important or necessary for us in order to be saved? Interestingly enough, Paul uses the book of the law, the Torah, to show them that even the law says that the law is not enough to save you. That even the law says that the

righteous will be made that way by faith. That Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him or credited to him as righteousness. So this week he nails another nail into this coffin of the Judaizers, the false teachers. He's gone from experience to telling them what the Bible says and this week he's going to make an argument from history and ultimately theology. And what argument is he going to make? We're going to look at two points today: the priority of the promise and the purpose of the law.

So what's the priority of the promise? It's a question of who was there first and if someone comes after, if that changes the game. Let's look at what Paul says. Paul says in verse 15,

<sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.*

Just to give you some historical context here, what's probably going on is that God came to Abraham and made a promise. 430 years later he came to Moses and he gave him the law. What the Judaizers, or the false teachers, were probably teaching the Galatians was that of course the law is more important than the promise because it's the latest thing. In other words, God reveals himself progressively and the law came after the promise which means the law must annul, or at least overshadow, the promise. The promise is good but even God added law to the promise. That's what they would say. Paul's going to address that. So he says, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. The first thing Paul does is give a sermon illustration. He says, "Let me give you a human example." When you talk about covenants in the realm of the law and human affairs (the word here is something like the last will and testament that a parent might leave for a child) once a covenant or a will has been ratified, you can't change it." In the Greek system in those days, you literally could not change it even if you're the one who made it. Once you made the will, everyone signed off on it and you filed it with the public records house, you couldn't change it. In Roman law you could change it, but once you were dead, no one could change it. In other words, the law is the law so once a contract is signed and once it's ratified, either because it's put in the public house and you can't change it or someone dies, even in the realm of human affairs, you can't change a covenant once it's ratified. How much more do you think God's promises and God's covenant would be binding? That's where Paul's going with this. So what does he say next? He says,

*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.*

Now Paul does something interesting here because the word "offspring" is an interesting word. "Family" is a similar word as well. If I said to you, "Is the word 'offspring' plural or singular?" What would you say? Most of us would say, "Well, it's plural." But it's not. The word "offspring" is singular just like the word "family". If I said, "Is the word 'family' singular or plural?" your knee jerk reaction, like mine, would be to say that it's plural. But it's not. It's a singular noun that refers to a plural thing or a plurality of things, and that's what Paul is doing here. He's playing around with the grammar. Even though it says "the promise was made to Abraham and his offspring", he's really saying that what it means is not the plural offspring, but the one offspring: ultimately Jesus is the one promised to Abraham. Remember that to Abraham, God said, "To you and through your offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed." Paul is saying here that Jesus is the true offspring of Abraham through whom all the nations and all the families in the world will be blessed. And as much as we're in him, we will be blessed too. How do we get to be in Jesus? By faith in him, which Paul explains further. This, by the way, is what most commentators would agree is one of the craziest passages in Galatians to try to make sense of. At least at one point I'm going to say, "I don't know." If you look at the next verse, Paul says in verse 17,

<sup>17</sup> *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.* <sup>18</sup> *For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*

What is he saying here? He said, “This is what I mean; the promise was given 430 years before the law, but the promise was ratified by a covenant.” Remember, God made a covenant with Abraham and he actually sealed it himself. You remember in Genesis 15, God comes to Abraham and has the covenant ceremony. He tells Abraham, “OK, I’m reiterating the promise to you. We’re going to have a ceremony in blood to make sure this happens.” He cuts animals in half, and in those days what would happen is that the big king and the little king would have to walk through the animals and say, “If I don’t obey my side of the covenant, may what happened to these animals happen to me.” Abraham wakes up in a dream and realizes that God is going through the pieces of these animals by himself. So God makes the promise, ratifies the promise and actually promises to take on the curses of the covenant if it’s not ratified. Paul says, “Because this covenant was made by God, the law that comes after doesn’t annul it.” The key to all of this ultimately is the offspring. Notice what Paul says in verse 18. He says,

<sup>18</sup> *For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*

By definition an inheritance comes to you by grace. It comes to you because someone gives it to you. You can’t work for an inheritance. I mean, I suppose you can make the argument that you’re working for it, but that’s really not an inheritance because you’ve earned it. An inheritance is something that is given to you, and God gives the promise. He says, “If it came through the law then it wouldn’t be an inheritance anymore. It wouldn’t be grace anymore.” If you remember, the one in whom all of these things come together is the person of Jesus. Why is this offspring so important of Abraham? We’ll find that out when we look at the purpose of the law next.

In verse 19, Paul asks the logical question: Why then the law? He says the answer is that it was added because of transgressions until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. It was put in place through angels by an intermediary. It’s interesting, when I’m studying, every time I’m going to preach through text I literally go through and I type out every word of the text and outline it. As I’m typing things out, I’ll ask questions in the margin. As I was typing out these texts, the first question that came to my mind was, “What then the law? What good is it?” And then I got to verse 19 and went “Whoa!” Paul’s anticipating that question. Paul anticipates that if he says that the promise came before the law, the law doesn’t annul the promise, the law can’t change the promise, the law’s not by grace, the law doesn’t give you inheritance. The question you’re going to ask is “What good is the law? Why bother with the law?” That’s a big question of course for people who are recovering Pharisees or ex-Pharisees. What good is the law? For what purpose is the law? Do we just get rid of the law? Is it all grace? Does that mean I can do whatever I want? What do you think Paul’s going to say to that? Absolutely not! The question isn’t “Is the law useful?” the question is “To what end is the law useful? What purpose is the law useful?” The first thing that Paul says is pretty interesting. “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions.” What does he mean there? That’s one of those things that’s hard to translate. It was added because of transgressions, which can mean either one of two things, generally speaking. It can mean it was added because of transgressions in order to restrain them. In other words, transgressions had gotten to such a point that things were so out of control that God gave the law in order to restrain wickedness, because according to the law you not only shouldn’t commit murder, but there are also penalties if you do. That’s what John Calvin would call the second use of the law: it restrains wickedness. That you look at the law and you say, it says don’t murder and it says if I murder I will be killed, so therefore I don’t want to be killed therefore I won’t murder. That’s what we use our own civic laws for all the time. Is it to restrain wickedness or it could mean a punishment. And actually, there’s probably more of a sense that it could mean this.

Instead of Paul saying it was added because of transgressions in order to restrain them, he says it was added because of transgressions and that it is in order to provoke them. Remember Paul says over and over if you read the book of Romans and Corinthians, "I wouldn't have known what sin was, were it not for the law. I wouldn't have known what coveting was, were it not for the law." Once a law is given, don't you want to break it? I was thinking through this yesterday and I believe if my parents were smarter they would have just kept their mouths shut because every single thing they told me not to do, I did. For that reason, by the time I was about fifteen years old, I had broken every bone in my body except for my collar bone, including my back. "Tommy! Don't you go on that rope swing or you'll break an arm." I came home, arm dangling because I went on the rope swing. You see, because they told me I shouldn't go on it, there must have been something about it that was important. They'd say, "Tommy, don't go on that rope swing again or you'll break your back next time." I couldn't walk home because my back was broken. Everything they told me not to do I did. So instead of saying, "Tommy, don't you build a ramp and put cinder blocks and glass underneath it." They should have said, "Tommy, here's what you should do. The new law is this: you go out and get your new banana seat bicycle and we want you to build the biggest plywood ramp in the world and we want you to put cinders blocks and glass and rusty pipes all underneath it and we want you to just go for it." If they'd have told me to do that I'd have said, "I don't wanna." It's not exciting anymore. There's a sense in which the law provokes us. We want to know what will happen if we do touch the stove. We want to know what will happen if we peek behind the curtain. You see, the more law there is, the more opportunity there is to sin. The more tax law there is for example, the more tax cheats there will be. Name a law and increase it and there will become more sin. Paul says the law was added in order to add to transgressions.

Then Paul does something else when he's talking about the law. Next he says, "The law was added because of transgressions until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made." Remember, Jesus is the one to whom the offspring had been made, but what we find out here is that the law was temporary. It was given, whether it was given to restrain wickedness or it was given to provoke wickedness, temporarily until the one to whom the promise had been made would come. The promise has priority and so as soon as the recipient of the promise arrives, the law is gone. Now how can that be? That's because the one to whom the promise was made is also the one who fulfilled every aspect of the law. The reason the law is null now is not because it's not good, it's not because it doesn't have power, it is because it has been utterly and completely fulfilled in the one to whom the promise was made. His name is Jesus, of course. In the Old Testament there are basically three types of laws: there are moral laws, there are sacrificial or ceremonial laws, and there are judicial laws. What are the moral laws? The moral laws are the Ten Commandments, things like that. Thou shall not kill. Thou shall not commit adultery. Jesus obeyed the moral law perfectly. He fulfilled it. He didn't sin, not one time. If there's a moral law, Jesus obeyed it perfectly. Not only that, but he also obeyed and fulfilled all of the ceremonial and sacrificial laws. Remember, on the eighth day his parents had him at the temple and he was circumcised. He obeyed everything, and not only that, but with regard to the sacrificial laws he not only was the priest who provided the perfect sacrifice, but he was the perfect sacrifice himself. The Old Testament prescribed that a lamb would be slain for our sins. Jesus was the lamb who was slain for our sins. In the Old Testament they would take a scapegoat and they would lay their hands on it and send it outside the camp. Jesus was the one who became our scapegoat. Our sins were laid upon him and he was sent outside the camp. He was crucified. And that leads to the next aspect of the law, the judicial aspect. The Judicial aspect of the law lays down all of the curses and punishments that should happen if you disobey parts one or two. Jesus fulfilled the judicial aspect of the law by going to the cross and being cursed and hung on a tree for you and for me. That Jesus bore our sins. He bore our curse and in bearing our curse, having obeyed the law perfectly, he completely and utterly fulfilled the law. The law has no claim on your life now. Does the law have purpose? It does and we'll talk about that later, but it has no claim. The law can't point its finger at you anymore and say, "Lawbreaker". The law can't point its finger at you and accuse you.

You know I had a great time this week. I got to teach. It was revival week at New Beginnings Fellowship down the street. They asked me to teach. Basically, they do a Vacation Bible School for kids and an adult version that's about an hour and a half every night, which I got to teach every night. I taught them Galatians. I think the greatest applause line (though people didn't clap but they certainly were Amen-ing) was Martin Luther's words that when Satan comes to you and the Devil comes to you and the law comes to you and says, "Tommy, you are the worst sinner who ever lived. You're the biggest lawbreaker who ever lived. You're the biggest adulterer, thief, liar, jealous, angry person who ever lived." You are to look the Devil in the eye and say, "Thank you for preaching the gospel to me. Thank you." You see, you just articulated the very person that Jesus came to save. He didn't come to save the righteous. He came to save the unrighteous, so when you remind me of my unrighteousness, you remind me of my savior. That's where Paul's going next when he talks about the purpose of the law. Let me point out one thing. Paul basically disrespects the law here. He says,

<sup>19</sup> ... *the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.*

In other words, the promise came to Abraham directly from God with no mediator, but when the law came, it came third hand. We learn at the end of Deuteronomy that when God delivered the law to Moses, there was a host of angel there and so it came through angels, through Moses, to you. Therefore it's third hand as opposed to the promise being first hand. Is that important? I don't know. I thought it was interesting. But where does Paul go next? Look at verse 20. He says,

<sup>20</sup> *Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.*

What does that mean? I have no idea. Remember I warned you I was going to say that. In fact, tradition is that there as many interpretations of that one verse as there are years between the promise and law - 430. I didn't read them all, because I didn't have time. What most people think it means is something like, the same God that made the promise makes the law, and that the God who gave the law gives the promise. God is one. It's not two different Gods. It's not a God of promise and a God of law because look what he says finally. He asks the question,

<sup>21</sup> *Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.* <sup>22</sup> *But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*

So Paul asks the question again, "Is the law contrary to the promises of God? Are they set against each other?" The answer is "Certainly not." The law and promise are not opposed to each other but in fact they are teammates. They work together and each have their own role. Next Paul says something interesting, "If there was a law that could give righteousness then righteousness would come through the law." In other words, the law in and of itself is powerless to give you life. It's powerless to give you righteousness. The law (many of you have heard me teach this before) the law is just the law. Just like a stop sign is just a stop sign. A stop sign can tell you to stop. A stop sign can tell you that it is a good idea to stop. You can disobey a stop sign and the stop sign, as you're looking at it in the rear view mirror, can accuse you of having not stopped. It can make you guilty in your conscience, but guess what: the stop sign can't do anything for you. It certainly can't love you, can't hold you, can't forgive you, and can't comfort you. It can't do anything but be what it is. It's just the law. It's an inanimate thing. It's words on paper. Paul said if there were words on paper that could bring life then God would have done that. But you can't do that. You need something else and he says what happened was that the law imprisoned everything under sin. What he's getting at here is that the law shows that everything about us is sinful

and that it drives us to the promise. That's the ultimate purpose of the law. That's what John Calvin said the first purpose of the law was out of three. The law reveals our sin and drives us to Jesus. It's like an ambulance. Can an ambulance save you? Ultimately it can. An ambulance can take you to the doctor. It can take you to the ER, but if you just get in an ambulance and sit there and it doesn't do anything it's useless. Paul says "Here's the purpose of the law: to drive you someplace." It's to drive the person and work of Jesus to all who would have faith and believe in the promise. So the law is not contrary to the promise but in fact, the law drives us to the promise and without the law, we wouldn't even see our need for the promise. Without conviction of sin we wouldn't see that we need our sins forgiven. We wouldn't know that we need a sin bearer. If you're not a Christian and you're here today, I want you to think through that when you leave. Do I feel guilty about my sins? Do I feel guilty about who I am? The reasons for your guilt are number one because you are guilty, but also in order to drive you someplace, a place where your guilt can be relieved. If you are Christian, I ask you to remind yourself of that.

I was thinking this morning about one of my favorite passages from *Pilgrims Progress*. Have you ever read *Pilgrims Progress*? If you haven't read it you should. It's about four or five hundred years old now so you're a little late if you haven't. Charles Spurgeon read it over a hundred times. He says that's why he's such a good preacher. If you know the story, it's one man's journey from being an unbelieving person through to faith and to the Celestial City. It's an allegory and there's a place where the man, Christian, meets someone named Hopeful and he and Hopeful as they're walking down the King's highway, decide that they're going to take the easy way, the path by the meadow. Taking the easy way they're captured by a giant and the giant throws them into the Dungeon of Despair. The giant constantly comes in and harangues them. He wants them to kill themselves. He wants to make them feel so guilty that they can't live anymore. They are sitting in the dungeon and here's what happens with Christian. He says,

Now a little before it was day, good Christian, as one half amazed, broke out in this passionate speech:  
"What a fool am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk with liberty! I have a key in my bosom called Promise, that will, I believe, open any lock in doubting Castle."

(You see earlier evangelists had given him this key called Promise.)

"Then," said Hopeful, "that is good news, brother. Pluck it out of your bosom and try."

Then Christian pulled it out of his bosom, and began to try at the dungeon door, whose bolt, as he turned the key, gave way, and the door flew open with ease, and Christian and Hopeful both came out. Then he went to the outward door that leads into the castle-yard, and with his key opened that door also. After that, he went to the iron gate, for that had to be opened, too. Although the lock was exceedingly hard, finally the key did open it.

You see if you're a Christian, you possess the promise already as is if it were a key, and to all the doubts, all the troubles, all the struggles, do you apply the promise of the gospel or do you not? Do you wallow in your troubles, in your despair, like Christian in the Dungeon of Despair? Do you say, "Oh woe is me. Everything is hard, nothing is easy." Ask my family if they ever hear that. You know what I have to tell myself over and over again? "Behold there's a key around my neck called Promise!" And Hopeful Judy has to say, "Put it in the door, Tommy. Put it in the door." Think about that.