

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-FOUR)

“A GOD-MADE COVENANT”

(PART 3)

GALATIANS 3:15-18

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

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.

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.

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.

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

In verses **15-18**, Paul argues that the blessing of Abraham-justification by faith, inclusive of the receipt of the Holy Spirit, was covenanted to Abraham before the Law was given. Therefore, the Law cannot annul that which was done by God prior to its introduction.

In verse **15** Paul uses human logic and makes an illustration from everyday life in order to argue that the Abrahamic Covenant is still in force, and he bases his argument upon the fact that it is a preeminent and

unalterable covenant. He states that it is common knowledge that when individuals make a contract that is agreed upon by all the parties, it cannot be modified or changed except by the mutual consent of all the parties. Paul applies this rule to God's covenant with Abraham, contending that the Mosaic Covenant of Law cannot modify the Abrahamic Covenant since it was given centuries later.

In verse **16** Paul argues that the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise was superior to the Covenant of Law because it was **Christ-centered**. It was centered in Jesus Christ, the singular "offspring" or "seed" mentioned in **Genesis 22:18**. The Abrahamic covenant could only be fulfilled by Christ. Only in the infinite Son of God could all the families of the earth be blessed. But Christ is viewed by Paul as also being the head of a new family. According to **Galatians 3:28-29**, all who receive Him by faith become sons of Abraham in a spiritual sense.

The promise that God made to Abraham was actually the promise of salvation which would be made available to both Jews and Gentiles. And just as Abraham entered that covenant by faith, so too all who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham likewise enter that covenant by faith. The Abrahamic Covenant was an unconditional covenant that God planned and implemented. Man's part was to receive and enter the covenant by faith. Today, although the New Covenant supersedes the Abrahamic Covenant, they are related in the sense that both were made, or "cut," by God. Both are unconditional and both are entered into by faith. They are both God-made covenants!

In verse **17**, Paul writes, *"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 statement of the length of time that elapsed between God's covenant with Abraham and His giving of the Law to Moses, a period of 430 years, implies that the Law was something new and different and therefore could not affect the promise made to Abraham. God had been saving men and women on the basis of faith without works since the

time of Adam, or approximately 2,500 years before the Law was given! The Law was in force from Moses to Christ, or for a period of approximately 1500 years. At the Cross it was done away with. Paul's argument is as follows: If a covenant once in force cannot be changed or rendered void by any subsequent action, God's covenant with Abraham cannot be changed or rendered void by the subsequent introduction of the Law.

In verse **18**, Paul writes, *“For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”*

The word *“For”* at the beginning of the verse, indicates that Paul is giving a reason for the statement he had made in verse **17**, that the Law, which came 430 years after the Abrahamic Covenant, does not cancel it, so as to make the promise invalid. *“For”* if the inheritance is based on law, it would be the payment of a debt and not the faithful fulfillment of a promise.

Paul's argument in this verse is, that if the Law affects the promise in any way, it renders it null and void. In other words, the Law cannot be added to the promise without destroying the promise. Salvation must rest either upon the promise or upon the Law. It must rest either on grace or on works. It cannot rest on both as the Judaizers claimed. Paul contends that the Law did not cancel the promise, and therefore, it had no effect upon it. Thus, if as the Judaizers contended, the inheritance is on the basis of obedience to the Law, then it is not on the basis of promise. But, Paul adds, God gave it to Abraham on the basis of promise. That settled the matter. The words, *“law”* and *“promise”* are without the definite article in the Greek, indicating that Paul is speaking of them here in their character of two opposing **principles**, the principle of **faith**, or the principle of **works**.

Paul is saying in effect, “you cannot have it both ways. There cannot be a **“law way”** of salvation and a **“promise way”** of salvation. There cannot be a **“works way”** and a **“grace way,”** for both principles are

mutually exclusive! If you hold to one you must of necessity exclude the other.”

Brothers and sisters, an **inheritance** is something that is given as a gift, not something that has to be worked for or earned. Paul’s point is that, as it relates to God’s salvation, there is no room for compromise between law and promise, between works and grace. The two are always antagonistic. When law is added to faith, when works are added to grace, salvation based on the unconditional promise of God is destroyed! The inheritance of the blessing was based on an unconditional promise from God to Abraham that established an irreversible, eternal relationship. The Judaizers, however, were alleging that the inheritance was now based on Law! This represented a complete misunderstanding of the function of the Law of Moses in God’s plan and purpose.

In **Romans 4:13-16**, Paul made a similar declaration to the one he makes in **Galatians 3:18**:

13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

(English Standard Version)

In verses **22-25**, we read,

22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,

24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,

25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

(English Standard Version)

The inheritance that was given to Abraham by God was that of justification by faith. All that Abraham had to do to be counted righteous by God was to believe God’s promise to Him. The inheritance was not given to Abraham by law, that is, Abraham could not work for it, nor could he merit it in any way. Paul clearly states that “*God gave it [the inheritance], to Abraham by a promise.*” The same promise of being counted righteous by God by faith is given to all believers.

We must bear in mind that the promise was not made to Abraham alone. It was also made to his “offspring” or “seed” (singular), Who Paul identifies as being Jesus Christ. This means that the promise cannot be separated from Christ in any way. As the solitary Heir, Christ becomes the universal Heir, inheriting the promise for all of His people. It follows then, that for anyone to participate in the promise, he or she must be “in Christ.” And how does one get “in Christ?” By being baptized, or placed, or immersed into Christ by the promised Holy Spirit, according to **1 Corinthians 12:13**. And how is one baptized, or placed, or immersed into Christ by the promised Holy Spirit? Paul tells us how in **Galatians 3:14**: “*so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith*” **(English Standard Version)**.

The Canadian–American theologian and author, **Henry Allan Ironside**, wrote the following:

"Perhaps, reader, you have been struggling for years to fit yourself for God's presence, you have been trying hard to work out a righteousness of your own, 'trying to be a Christian.' Let me beg of you, stop trying, give it up! You cannot become a Christian by trying any more than you could become the Prince of Wales by trying. **You are what you are by birth.** You are what you are as a sinner by natural birth, and you become a child of God through second birth, through believing on the Lord Jesus Christ...The blessing of Abraham is yours when you receive it by faith."

Speaking of the inheritance, Paul says, "*God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*" The word "gave" is a translation of the Greek word, **charizomai: (khar-id'-zom-ahēe).** **Kenneth Wuest** explains that,

"This is a specialized word. It denotes not merely a gift, but a gift which is given out of the spontaneous generosity of the giver's heart, with no strings tied to it. The Greek word grace (**charis**) has the same root and the same meaning. Thus the word refers, not to an undertaking based upon terms of mutual agreement, but upon the free act of one who gives something, expecting no pay for it. This at once shows the difference between law and grace. If salvation were by obedience to the law, that would mean that it would be based upon a mutual agreement between God and the sinner whereby God would obligate Himself to give salvation to any sinner who would earn it by obedience to the law. But the very genius of the word charizomai militates against the teaching of the judaizers, namely, that salvation is by works....

Furthermore, the verb "gave" is in the perfect tense here, which tense speaks of a past completed act having present results. The past act of God giving the inheritance on the basis of a promise, has present results, present to the writer. God gave the inheritance to Abraham by promise 2000 B.C. The results of this act were still in existence in the

century when Paul wrote. The law was given 1500 B.C., and the promise still held good after the law came and had been set aside."

Brothers and sisters, the fact that the word "*gave*" is in the **perfect tense** here, which speaks of a past completed act having present results, clearly indicates that God gave the inheritance to Abraham as a free gift at a specific time in the past, which was the moment he believed the promise of God, and that the "gift" was still in effect, still valid and permanent!

In **Galatians 3:15-18**, Paul emphasizes the pre-eminence of faith through an appeal to the chronological sequence of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. He argues that since man-made agreements are not cancelled or changed once they have been ratified or "signed off" on, how much more are the covenants of God unchangeable? Long before ratifying His covenant with Moses, God promised an inheritance to Abraham, and nothing can add to that or change it. If Abraham and his offspring receive it by faith alone, then it is received by faith alone forever, no matter what any later covenant may stipulate.

In **Galatians 3:16**, Paul argues that the promise made to Abraham's offspring was not made to many, but to one—Jesus Christ. Paul understood that the term "offspring" or "seed" is a **collective singular** that indicates many individuals, but he also understood that the Lord Jesus is the supreme, preeminent offspring or seed, for only He was utterly obedient to the Father. Identifying Christ as Abraham's one offspring to whom God made His promises is Paul's concise way of saying that salvation was pledged to the one family unified in Christ, who is the supreme, preeminent expression of this people.

Therefore, we are blessed as Abraham's offspring only if we are in Christ Jesus, and it is only by grace through faith that we can get in Him!

As we stated in **Lesson 42**, God Himself covenanted to do all that was required to ensure that the inheritance was secured for Abraham, His offspring or seed, Christ, and all of who were chosen in Christ before the

foundation of the world. When He appeared to Abraham as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch that passed between the divided animal parts, God swore that His plan would be accomplished or He would die in a similar manner to the animals (**Genesis 15:17**). Since it is impossible for God to die, it is impossible for His promise to fail. In Jesus Christ the “offspring” or “seed,” God did all the work that was necessary to ensure that the inheritance was secured for all of His elect.

We will conclude our Lesson this evening with **William Barclay’s** descriptive summation of **Galatians 3:15-18**:

“Again and again Paul comes back to the same point. The whole problem of human life is to get into a right relationship with God. So long as we are afraid of God, so long as God is a grim stranger, there can be no peace in life. How can we achieve this right relationship? Shall we try to achieve it by a meticulous and even self-torturing obedience to the law, by performing endless deeds, by observing every smallest regulation the law lays down? If we take that way we are forever in default, for man’s, forever climbing up a hill in which the peak never comes in sight, forever under condemnation; but if we simply abandon this hopeless struggle and bring ourselves and our sin to God, then the grace of God opens its arms to us and we are at peace with a God who is no longer judge but father. Imperfection can never fully satisfy the perfection of God; we are forever frustrated. Paul’s whole argument is that that is what happened to Abraham; it was on that basis that God’s covenant with Abraham was made. And nothing that came in later can change that covenant any more than anything can alter a will that has already been ratified and signed.”