

THE LAW VERSUS THE PROMISE

Galatians 3:15-29

Key Verses: 3:26-27

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

In today's passage, Paul further explains the work of salvation by faith by contrasting the law and the promise. He outlines God's redemptive plan from Abraham to Jesus, with Moses in the middle. Both the promise given to Abraham and the law given to Moses point to Jesus Christ. The law exposes our sins so that we may come to Christ for forgiveness. But salvation is only by faith in Christ. The promise of God given to Abraham was clear about how all peoples of the world can be saved only by faith in Christ.

I. THE LAW DOES NOT SET ASIDE THE PROMISE (15-18)

Thus far, Paul used several Old Testament scriptures to prove that salvation is by faith, not by works. At this time, the Judaizers could have asked him, "If salvation has nothing to do with the law, why did God give us the law?" In particular, they might have argued that the promise given to Abraham was replaced by the law given to Moses some 600 years later. Paul addresses this question in verse 15. *Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. Suppose you sign a contract today to buy a house at certain price. Can a third party person like your uncle come along later and change the price in the signed contract? Of course, not. The only way the contract can be changed is when the two original parties to agree to do so. To add or set aside the terms of agreement would be illegal. Paul says that this is true between human beings who often break promises. But God never breaks his promises. He never has and he never will. This God established a covenant with Abraham—he promised that he would make Abraham's name great, Abraham would be a blessing and he would protect Abraham. He promised that he would make Abraham a great nation. The biggest promise he gave to Abraham, a promise that applies to all believers today, was Genesis 22:18, "... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."*

Look at verses 16-18. *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.* The promises of God were given to Abraham and his descendants. God kept the promise in Genesis 22:18 by sending Jesus to be the Savior of the sinful world. Paul says that the word "seed" is not plural but singular, and refers to one person, who is Christ (16). In giving his promise to Abraham, God looked forward to Christ. It was the promise of the

gospel of grace to all nations. The law was given to Moses after the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt for 430 years. It was given to train them to be a holy nation people since they were steeped in slave mentality. But the law did not set aside the covenant between God and Abraham. We still receive the blessing of salvation only by grace of God through faith in Jesus. Abraham was declared righteous when he believed in God and his promises. The law wasn't even introduced to him. So the law couldn't save him. The law still cannot save us. All of us are justified by faith alone, not by observing the law, as Paul said earlier in this chapter, *The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (3:8-9).*

II. THE LAW IS NOT CONTRARY TO THE PROMISE (19-25)

So we know that the law did not set aside the covenant established between God and Abraham. Abraham was justified by his faith alone. As his spiritual descendants, we are also justified by our faith in Christ. Some people might still ask the question, "If we are saved only by faith in Jesus, why do we need the law? Why do I have to struggle so much to live a holy life?" Paul addresses this question in verse 19. *What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.* The law was added because of our transgressions. The purpose of the law is to tell us what is right and what is wrong before God. Paul said, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Ro 7:7). This is true for us as well. If there were no law concerning speed limits, some of us might view I-81 like it was a NASCAR track, endangering our lives as well as others'. I did not think selfishness was wrong before God until I studied the Bible. Some young people think that sex outside marriage is no big deal (Statistics show that more than half of college students have "hookups" in dorms). Many people may not know that pride before God is a sin. In fact, the Bible says that God opposes the proud while he gives grace to the humble (1Pe 5:5). During their slavery life in Egypt, the Israelites acquired a slave mentality; they lost a consciousness of sin. So God gave them the law through his servant Moses.



Look at verses 19b-20. *The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.* The New Living Translation (NLT) paraphrases these verses this way: "God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is helpful if more than one party must reach an agreement. But God, who is one, did not use a mediator when he gave his promise to Abraham." Paul once again gives us a contrast between the promise and the law. God used Moses as a mediator to give the law to his people. The Israelites could not come to the Holy God directly. They needed a mediator. On the other hand, God spoke to Abraham directly when he gave

him the promise. And at the moment Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Jesus opened the door to God for us, the spiritual descendants of Abraham, so that we can approach the Holy God directly. Another aspect of the law is that it was a conditional covenant. Both parties (God and his people) had to abide by the law. If either party failed to do so, the covenant would be null and void. If you fail to make the payment, your sales contract to buy a house would be null and void. However, God's promise to Abraham was not conditional. God did not require anything from Abraham than his faith in the promise. It was based on God's one-sided grace. And God kept his promise by sending his one and only Son Jesus.

Look at verse 21. *Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.* "Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?" The implication of this question is that if we are saved by faith alone, the law is in opposition to the promise and we can disregard it totally. What does Paul say? He exclaims, "Absolutely not!" The law and the promise are not opposed to each other. In fact, they work together. How? The law does not save us (it cannot impart life), but it convicts our hearts that we are sinners and we need the Savior.

Paul explains this further in verses 22-24. *But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.* Romans 3:10 says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." This is a reflection of several OT Scriptures (Ps 14:3; 53:2; Ecc 7:20). There were some outstanding people who lived clean and exemplary lives in history. I respect Admiral Yi Soon Shin (1545-98), a Korean hero during a Japanese invasion of the country, for his pure and sacrificial life. Many people respect Pope John Paul and Mother Theresa. But the Bible says that even these people were sinners before God. The whole world is a prisoner of sin. Romans 3:20 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." This leads to the promise. The promise is that all who believe in Christ are saved. "The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith" (24; NLT).

So in Christ, we have now a new relationship with the law. Paul says in verse 25: *Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.* "... now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian" (NLT). We now have Christ living in us. We are led by the Holy Spirit. We don't need the supervision of the law.

On a side note here, we recall what Jesus said about the law. He said in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." As we said earlier, the law is not bad. The law serves important functions. Some laws are very relevant even to us today. There are three kinds of law: *First, ceremonial law.* For example, Leviticus 1 instructed the Israelites how to

slaughter animals, skin, cut, wash and burn them to offer as burnt offerings. The purpose was to help them to know the seriousness of sin and to point them to Christ. We no longer need to observe this kind of law. But the principles behind them (how to worship and love a holy God) still apply to us. *Second, civil law* for daily living as God's people. Deuteronomy 24:10-13, for example teaches what we shouldn't do when we lend money to our neighbor. Paul asked the Gentiles to observe some of these, not as a requirement, but for unity. *Third, moral law* (e.g. the 10 commandments) that reveals the nature and will of God and applies to us today. It is not a requirement for salvation but to live a life that pleases God.

III. WE ARE ALL GOD'S CHILDREN BY PROMISE (26-29)

Let us read verses 26-27. *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* What is our new identity in Christ Jesus? Our new identity is that we are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Why is this so amazing and graceful? We were all condemned by the law because of our sins. We had no grace and mercy under the law. But we have now the grace and mercy of God through Jesus. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1Jn 3:1). Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy (1Pe 2:10).

How did this wonderful thing happen to us? It was all because what Jesus did for us. We have been baptized into death as Jesus was baptized into his death. Our sins were put on the shoulders of Jesus. When he died on the cross, our sins died with him. Jesus said, "It is finished." We should never forget what Jesus did on the cross for us. The grace of salvation is free to us. But we should never make the grace cheap.

Paul reminds us that we are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus for we have clothed ourselves with Christ. What does this mean? We are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection. We have been born again through his death and resurrection. We are a new creation in Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 4:22-24: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Finally, Paul concludes in verses 28-29. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* We are all one in Christ Jesus. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. I heard that some Jews pray like this: "Lord, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, slave or woman." But we have been created new by the blood of Jesus. Christ accepts us as God's children. We should accept all kinds of people into our community (Ro



15:7). The Judaizers were wrong to discriminate against the Gentiles believers who were not circumcised. If we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham's descendants and heirs according to the promise.

How wonderful for us to know that we are heirs in the kingdom of God because of God's promise! We are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus! May God help us to be a community of believers who love Jesus and love one another in Christ!