

## Galatians 3:15-18 – The Law Did Not Rule Out the Promise

### Community Group Galatians Lesson 6

#### I. Review

- A. **Chapters 1-2** – By attempting to conform your lives to the law to satisfy men, you turned away from the gospel. Other believers have tried before to live under the law to please men – even Peter – and it must be rebuked because it denies the only true gospel of grace.
- B. **Chapters 3:1-14** – God’s plan has always been a plan of grace. Don’t you remember that even Abraham was justified by faith, since the Law justifies no man?

#### II. The Promise Came Before the Law

**Galatians 3:15-18**

- A. *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. 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. (v. 15-16)*

Here Paul uses an illustration. *Even* earthly covenants between people do not have additions made to them after they are ratified. They are held to be true by both parties (and by governing entities where that applies) as soon as they are signed, notarized and registered. For example, if you agree to a mortgage and the lender agrees to the mortgage with you, and the contract is ratified, that mortgage agreement does not change unless it is paid off. So it is with God’s contracts (covenants).

This is important because Paul wants his hearers to understand that the covenant God initially described in Genesis 12:1-3 and formally ratified with Abraham in Genesis 15 was a one-way gift promise of God to Abraham, requiring of Abraham only that he believe God. It was not an agreement for Abraham **to do** certain things.

Take a moment right now to read Genesis 15 with me. **(READ)**

1. God unconditionally promises a) to be a shield to Abraham, b) a son, c) a progeny more numerous than the stars and d) land.
2. Abraham believes God and God counts that faith as his righteousness (v. 6).
3. Although Abraham is not pledging or committing anything, God commits Himself to Abraham. God demonstrates His commitment by “passing through” the severed animals – a standard covenant agreement sealing process (like a closing on a house). If this were a mutual agreement, both parties would pass through. But in one-way agreements (more on that in a few minutes), only the more powerful party would pass. In this one, only God passed. It was a one-way promise.

The later addition of a mutual Covenant of Circumcision (Gen. 17) and later a mutual Covenant with Moses (Exodus) does not cancel this agreement God made. This will make more sense in a moment when we examine two kinds of covenants.

Paul also wants his readers to understand that the promise given to Abraham was also a promise to his seed – that is, Jesus Christ. While aspects of the covenant with Abraham were fulfilled in his lifetime (a son and a nation) and others in the lifetime of his progeny (most of the land), ultimately the covenant was to be fulfilled through the Messiah. The blessing to all the families of the earth mentioned in Gen 12:3 and 22:18 will happen as people from all nations believe on Christ – something still future.

- B. *What I am saying is this: the Law, which came 430 years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if **the inheritance** is based on law, it is no longer based on promise. But God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.* (vv. 17-18)

Here Paul reminds his listeners that the covenant made in Gen. 15 with Abraham was ratified 430 years before God makes a very different kind of covenant with Moses. That covenant with Moses does not replace the rules on the Abrahamic covenant.

The first covenant with Israel – the Abrahamic Covenant – was a one-way (God □ Abraham) covenant of promise. This covenant of promise regards a son and a people (15:4-5) a land (15:7) and a blessing to the nations. It is summarized in 15:18 – *On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates...(the lands of the -ites).”* That promise is not altered when the Mosaic covenant comes.

The Genesis 15 covenant was a Middle East covenant called a suzerainty-vassal treaty covenant (SVT). SVT covenants were entered into by a sovereign on behalf of His subject. In such covenants, the suzerain (sovereign) determined the conditions.

Now there were two broad types of SVT. One was a mutual agreement and one was a promissory covenant. In the mutual agreement, both parties swore to uphold their respective responsibilities. The Mosaic Covenant was one such covenant, as was the Covenant of Circumcision. But in the promissory agreements, only the more powerful party held themselves to a responsibility. The Noahic covenant was one of these (God won't flood the earth) and so was the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 15 (son, progeny, land, bless the nations).

That this one was a one way promissory covenant including conditions only about what God would do is made evident in two ways. First, Abraham has no conditions on this covenant in Genesis 15 other than to believe. Second, only God passes through the severed pieces of animals (as an oven and as a flaming torch), which was the way they would ratify (sign, notarize and register) such agreements. Had it been a mutual obligation treaty, Abraham would have had responsibilities and commitments and he would have passed through the pieces after God did.

The other covenant with Abraham is the Covenant of Circumcision (Gen. 17). This is not about a son or a people and not about a land and the blessing on the nations. It is about God blessing Israel. This covenant involves commitments for Abraham and God. But it is not the covenant that Paul is referring to in Galatians 3.

By the way, the same is true for believers in Christ. God has made unconditional one-way promises to us which we simply believe. Those include that because of our faith in His promises, and because of the blood of Christ, He forgives our sins, gives us a home in heaven, makes us His child, makes us new creatures and scores of other blessings.

However, just as Abraham had a Genesis 17 covenant with God which was conditional – blessings for obedience and severe consequences for disobedience – so, too, God has a similar type of agreement with Christians. That will be for another time.

Galatians 3:18 goes on to say that Abraham's inheritance was by the promise and not by the law. What he means is that the primary inheritance of Abraham – the son, the people and the land – were the result of God's grace to him. They were to the praise of the glory of His grace because He believed God and (partially) received these promises.

Similarly, Christian believers' primary inheritance – life forever with God in heaven and in the new heavens and the new earth (the eternal state), forgiven, loved and included as His children – are all the result of faith in a promise.

But there are other inheritances which are conditional. Abraham and Israel's conditional inheritance in Genesis 17 (repeated in Deuteronomy 28) is a special blessing ***if they were faithful***.\*\* Similarly, there is a conditional inheritance for believers in Christ. For those who abide in Him and walk in the Spirit,

- We will have peace like the world does not have
- We will share in reigning with Christ
- We will not shrink away from Him in shame when we see Him
- We will have a special name known only by Christ and us
- We will be rewarded.

### III. Discussion

1. Why is the principle of contracts not having conditions added important? (Gal 3:15)
2. What part of the Abrahamic covenant has been fulfilled? What was it that Abraham did that made that take place? (Galatians 3:16)
3. What importance is it – even for Jews – that the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 15 preceded the Mosaic Covenant of Exodus 19-24? (Gal. 3:17)
4. What role does obedience play in the fulfillment of God's promises to believers?

\*\* For more on this topic, read *Final Destiny* by Joseph Dillow and many other such books.