

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Part 6 - The Promise and the Law

As we continue our journey through Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we come to the second half of chapter 3. In this passage, Paul delves into the relationship between God's promise to Abraham and the Law given to Moses, explaining how both find their fulfillment in Christ. This text challenges us to understand the purpose of the Law, the nature of God's promise, and the unity we have in Christ.

Galatians 3:15-29 *"Brothers and sisters, 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. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. 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 the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.*

Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one. 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. But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and 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."

1. The Unchanging Nature of God's Promise (Verses 15-18)

Paul begins this section by emphasizing the permanence and priority of God's promise to Abraham over the Law given to Moses.

The Human Covenant Analogy

Paul uses an analogy 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."* Once a human covenant is confirmed, it cannot be altered or annulled. Paul applies this principle to God's covenant with Abraham, indicating that the promise made to Abraham is unchanging and irrevocable.

This analogy helps the Galatians, and us, to understand the permanence of God's promise. Human covenants, once ratified, are binding and secure, in spite of our fallen, sinful condition. How much more, then, is God's covenant, established by His word and character, unchangeable and reliable? This truth provides a foundation of assurance and trust in God's promises.

The Promise to Abraham and His Seed

Paul emphasizes that the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his “seed.” He points out that Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, Who is Christ. This distinction highlights that the promise given to Abraham finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The focus on the singular “seed” underscores the Christocentric nature of God’s redemptive plan. All of God’s promises to Abraham culminate in Jesus Christ, Who is the true heir of the promise. This interpretation affirms that the blessings promised to Abraham are accessible to all who are in Christ, making Him central to our faith and our eternal inheritance.

The Law and the Promise

Paul clarifies, “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.” The giving of the Law at Sinai did not nullify or replace the promise made to Abraham. The promise remains primary, and the Law cannot alter its terms. The temporal sequence of the promise and the Law is significant. The promise came first, establishing God’s unchanging purpose. The Law, given centuries later, was not intended to replace the promise but to serve a different purpose. This understanding helps us see the continuity of God’s plan and the distinct roles of the promise and the Law in salvation history.

Inheritance by Promise, Not by Law

Paul concludes, “For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.” The inheritance promised to Abraham and his descendants is based on God’s gracious promise, not on the observance of the Law.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the basis of our relationship with God. The inheritance we receive - eternal life, the blessings of the covenant, and the presence of the Holy Spirit - is grounded in God’s grace and promise, not in our ability to keep the Law. This truth frees us from the burden of legalism and invites us to rest in God’s grace.

2. The Purpose of the Law (Verses 19-22)

Paul then addresses the purpose of the Law and its relationship to the promise.

The Role of the Law

Paul asks, “Why, then, was the law given at all?” He answers, “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to Whom the promise referred had come.” The Law was given to address sin and reveal its true nature, serving as a temporary measure until Christ, the promised Seed, arrived.

The Law’s role in highlighting transgressions is essential for understanding its purpose. By exposing sin, the Law makes us aware of our need for a Saviour. It acts as a mirror, showing us our shortcomings and pointing us to Christ. This function of the Law is preparatory, leading us to the fulfillment found in Jesus.

The Mediator and God’s Oneness

Paul notes that “the law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.” The giving of the Law involved intermediaries, emphasizing its indirect nature compared to the direct promise given to Abraham by God Himself.

The mention of the mediator highlights the difference in how the promise and the Law were given. The promise was given directly by God, underscoring its immediacy and personal nature. In contrast, the Law was mediated, indicating a degree of separation. This contrast reinforces the primacy of the promise over the Law.

The Law and God's Promises

Paul asks, *“Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!”* He explains that if a law could impart life, then righteousness would have come by the law. However, Scripture has *“locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.”*

The relationship between the Law and the promise is not one of opposition but of different roles. The Law cannot impart life or righteousness; it reveals sin and points us to our need for a Saviour. The promise, fulfilled in Christ, offers life and righteousness through faith. This understanding harmonizes the roles of the Law and the promise in God's redemptive plan.

The Imprisonment Under Sin

Paul's phrase *“locked up everything under the control of sin”* illustrates the comprehensive nature of sin's power and the Law's role in highlighting it. The Law confines all under sin, revealing the universal need for redemption. This imprisonment under sin sets the stage for the liberating work of Christ. Understanding our imprisonment under sin is essential for appreciating the gospel. The Law's exposure of sin and our inability to overcome it by our efforts magnifies the necessity and sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work. This perspective leads us to a deeper gratitude for God's grace and a clearer grasp of our dependence on Christ.

3. The Law as a Guardian (Verses 23-25)

Paul describes the Law as a guardian and explains its temporary role until the coming of Christ.

Custody Under the Law

Paul states, *“Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.”* The Law acted as a custodian, keeping us confined and protected, but also highlighting our need for the coming faith. The imagery of being *“held in custody”* under the Law conveys both protection and restriction. The Law provided moral and ethical guidance, but it also exposed our sinfulness and inability to achieve righteousness on our own. This dual role prepared us for the revelation of faith in Christ.

The Law as a Guardian

Paul continues, *“So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.”* The term *“guardian”* (Greek: *paidagogos*) refers to a tutor or custodian responsible for the care and discipline of a child. The Law served this function, guiding and disciplining us until Christ came. The guardian role of the Law underscores its preparatory nature. Like a tutor, the Law provided instruction and correction, but its purpose was not to be permanent. It was designed to lead us to Christ, where true justification is found. This perspective helps us see the Law's value and its limitations.

No Longer Under a Guardian

Paul concludes, *“Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”* With the arrival of Christ and the revelation of faith, the Law's role as a guardian is fulfilled. Believers are now justified by faith and are no longer under the custodianship of the Law.

The end of the Law's guardianship signifies a new era in God's redemptive plan. Believers are now free from the constraints of the Law and live under the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. This transition marks a significant shift in our relationship with God, characterized by freedom, faith, and the indwelling presence of Christ Himself, through the Holy Spirit.

4. Unity and Identity in Christ (Verses 26-29)

Paul concludes this section by highlighting the unity and identity of believers in Christ.

Children of God Through Faith

Paul declares, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." This statement affirms that faith in Christ makes us part of God's family. Our identity as God's children is based on our faith, not on our adherence to the Law. Being children of God through faith emphasizes the intimate and relational aspect of our salvation. We are not merely servants or followers; we are beloved sons and daughters of God. This identity shapes our relationship with God and our understanding of His love and grace.

Clothed with Christ

Paul continues, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ, and being clothed with Christ signifies our new identity and righteousness in Him. Being clothed with Christ reflects the transformative nature of our union with Him. It signifies that we are covered by His righteousness and empowered to live in His likeness. This imagery challenges us to live out our new identity, reflecting Christ's character and values in our daily lives.

Unity in Christ

Paul proclaims, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This radical statement emphasizes the unity and equality of all believers in Christ, breaking down cultural, social, and gender barriers. The unity in Christ challenges any form of discrimination or division within the church. It calls us to embrace the diversity within the body of Christ and to value each person as an equal member of God's family. This unity is a powerful testimony to the transformative power of the gospel and the inclusive nature of God's kingdom.

Heirs According to the Promise

Paul concludes, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Belonging to Christ makes us heirs of the promise given to Abraham, receiving the blessings of the covenant through faith. Being heirs according to the promise emphasizes our rich spiritual inheritance in Christ. We are recipients of God's blessings, including eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the assurance of His love and faithfulness. This inheritance shapes our identity and our hope, grounding us in the certainty of God's promises.

5. Practical Applications for Our Lives

As we reflect on Galatians 3:15-29, several practical applications emerge for our lives today.

Rest in God's Promise

Paul's emphasis on the unchanging nature of God's promise challenges us to rest in the certainty of God's word. Our salvation and inheritance are based on God's gracious promise, not on our ability to keep the Law. This truth invites us to trust in God's faithfulness and to rest in His grace.

Resting in God's promise involves letting go of our attempts to earn God's favour and instead trusting in His unchanging word. It means finding peace and assurance in the certainty of His promises, knowing that they are grounded in His character and fulfilled in Christ.

Understand the Purpose of the Law

Paul's explanation of the Law's role as a guardian helps us understand its purpose and limitations. The Law reveals our sin and our need for a Savior, but it cannot impart life or righteousness. This understanding helps us appreciate the value of the Law while recognizing its preparatory nature. Understanding the purpose of the Law helps us avoid legalism and embrace the grace of the gospel. It reminds us that the Law serves to point us to Christ, where true justification and life are found. This perspective fosters a deeper appreciation for the gospel and a reliance on God's grace.

Embrace Our Identity in Christ

Paul's teaching on our identity as children of God through faith challenges us to embrace our new identity in Christ. We are no longer defined by our past, our failures, or our adherence to the Law. We are beloved children of God, clothed with Christ's righteousness and empowered by His Spirit. Embracing our identity in Christ involves living out our new identity in our daily lives. It means seeing ourselves as God sees us and allowing His love and grace to shape our actions, attitudes, and relationships. This identity empowers us to live in freedom and to reflect Christ's character in all that we do.

Promote Unity and Equality

Paul's emphasis on the unity and equality of all believers in Christ challenges us to promote inclusivity and equality within the church. We are all one in Christ, regardless of our cultural, social, or gender differences. This unity calls us to value and respect each person as an equal member of God's family. Promoting unity and equality involves actively seeking to build inclusive and diverse communities. It means breaking down barriers that divide us and fostering relationships that reflect the unity and love of Christ. By living out this unity, we bear witness to the transformative power of the gospel and the inclusive nature of God's kingdom.

Live as Heirs of the Promise

Paul's teaching on our inheritance in Christ challenges us to live as heirs of God's promises. We are recipients of God's blessings, called to live in the assurance of His love and faithfulness. This inheritance shapes our identity and our hope, grounding us in the certainty of God's promises. Living as heirs of the promise involves embracing our spiritual inheritance and allowing it to shape our lives. It means living with confidence and hope, knowing that we are beloved children of God and recipients of His blessings. This perspective empowers us to live with purpose and joy, reflecting the love and grace of our Heavenly Father.

Conclusion

As we conclude our reflection on Galatians 3:15-29, we are reminded of the centrality of God's promise, the purpose of the Law, and the unity and identity we have in Christ. Paul's teaching challenges us to rest in God's promise, understand the role of the Law, embrace our identity in Christ, promote unity and equality, and live as heirs of God's promises. May we be a people who live out these truths with integrity, standing firm in our faith and reflecting the love and grace of Christ in all that we do. Let us strive to maintain the unity of the body of Christ, working together to advance His kingdom and bring glory to His name.