

“God’s Promise and God’s Law”

February 20, 2011

Text: Galatians 3:15-22

Many years ago, I helped a Sunday school teacher prepare a lesson on God’s giving of the Law (Ex 19).

I began by asking how he planned to approach the subject.

He said he was going to mention the Law briefly, then switch as quickly as possible to grace and our Xn freedoms, since the Law doesn’t really have anything to do with us as Xns today.

Grace trumps Law, so the less we say about it, the better.

The problem with that kind of thinking is that the Law is, after all, God’s Law, reflecting His own moral character/nature.

Simply ignoring it can’t be the answer, because it can’t possibly be His will for us, His people.

We as Xns must deal w/ the question that faced that young man=>

What approach should we take to the OT Law?

* Try to live by it, as if our souls depended on it?

* Politely leave it alone as if it were an obsolete nuisance, like a grumpy old uncle around whom everyone tiptoes, hoping not to wake him up?

In our text this morning (Gal 3:15-22), Paul answers such questions for some Xns being told that obedience to the Law is absolutely necessary for their salvation.

* He doesn’t answer simplistically, in order make the truth sound easier to understand/apply than it actually is;

* Nor does he go along w/ error just to avoid conflict/controversy.

His statement about Xnity & the-Law is both thoughtful and detailed enough to be practical/useful for us as believers today, if we will take the time and to go to the effort, to really try to understand it.

Paul takes us back to our origins—God’s covenants with 2 iconic heroes of OT times—Abraham & Moses.

He says the Abrahamic Covenant was a Covenant of Promise, and the Mosaic Covenant was a Covenant of Law—

2 very different (even opposite) principles=>

* God’s Covenant of Promise with Abraham simply said=> “I promise to do this, and I promise to do that.”

* God’s Covenant of Law with Moses said=> “Thou shalt do this, but that shalt not do that.”

The Covenant of Promise represents religion as God would have it, based on His graciously saving men's souls, asking them to do nothing more than Abraham once did=> trust/believe Him.

The Covenant of Law represents religion as man expects it, based on earning one's own way spiritually with good works or religious deeds.

According to the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise, God merely asks man to enter into a trust-relationship w/ Himself, through faith—a relationship in which God can love the individual by granting him blessings, & showing him mercy/kindness, for time and for eternity without end.

The Covenant of Law is more like a business relationship, with each party looking to get the best deal possible out of it for himself.

The point of all this, is that Xnity is the religion of Abraham, based on God's Covenant of Promise.

It's not the religion of Moses, although a vast majority of religious people (including "Xns") think it is.

They try to earn their salvation by Moses' Law, obstinately refusing to submit to the tried/true faith of Abraham.

In today's text, Paul teaches us how to apply both Abraham's Covenant of Promise, & Moses' Covenant of Law, to ourselves/our-faith, using 3 simple principles=>

* The Covenant of Promise Is Inviolable

* The Covenant of Law Is Inferior

* The Covenant of Law Is Invaluable (when used as God intended).

*** The Covenant of Promise Is Inviolable**

Paul begins by comparing the Covenant of Promise to an ordinary covenant among men, illustrating the fact that, like all covenants, it is inviolable.

By their very nature, covenants cannot be arbitrarily violated, annulled, or changed by either partner, unilaterally.

[Galatians 3:15]=> "*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* [the key idea here: acting alone] *sets it aside or adds conditions to it.*"

Like any contract, a covenant that has been "*ratified*" cannot be changed, unless both parties agree to it.

Ratification would involve any formal means of solemnizing the agreement, such as a handshake, a signature, or a deposit of earnest-money; or in a wedding, a kiss.

Nor does anyone have the right to arbitrarily add new conditions to an established covenant.

E.g., if you buy new carpet, but forget to include in your contract the expense of hauling off the old carpet, you can't slip that in under the original contract, without the installers agreement.

In addition, if a new covenant were to be established which somehow conflicted with the original covenant, the first one would take precedence over the second, not automatically being invalidated by it.

Paul's point here is this=> If human covenants cannot be arbitrarily/casually set-aside/changed, how much more is that true of a covenant/contract established by God.

E.g. God's covenant with Abraham.

[Verse 16]=> *"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."*

We learned last week in Gal 3:14, that the "*promise*" to Abraham which Paul is referring to, was the "*promise of the Spirit through faith*"=> receiving H.S. through faith in Jesus X.

When the H.S. is-received/indwells a person, He regenerates/sanctifies him, so "*the promise*" God made to Abraham involves first/foremost, all the blessings of salvation through the H.S., based on X's atoning death.

1 Jn 2:25 confirms that=> *"This is the **promise** which He Himself made to us: eternal life"* (i.e., salvation received through the H.S.).

Although "*the promise*" begins/centers on the salvation of a soul by faith in X, its ramifications reach out far beyond that, to the whole world.

God repeated/elaborated-on His covenant promise to Abraham several times—in Genesis 12, 15, 17, & 22.

E.g. in Gen 22:18, it took this form=> *"In your **seed** all the **nations** of the **earth** shall be **blessed**."*

So the promised blessing of salvation would include all the nations of earth, & would come through a "*seed*."

The "*seed*" mentioned by God in Gen 22, & by Paul in our text, is a reference to the Messiah—Jesus X.

In verse 16 of our text, Paul stresses the singular "*seed*," to point out that it refers to 1 man, not many, as Abraham's "*seed*."

I.e., to Christ, not to Israel as a nation.

Although "*seed*" can be a collective noun referring to a lot of people, e.g. to all of Abraham's descendents, Paul under the inspiration of H.S., interprets the meaning of the singular "*seed*" in Gen 22, to refer to X alone—the "*seed of Abraham*."

He is the seed whom God had first promised, clear back in Gen 3:15, when He cursed Satan=> *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your **seed** and her **seed** [the Messiah].”*

In our text, Gal 3:16 speaks of *“promises”* (plural) made not only to Abraham, but also to his *“seed”* (Christ).

I.e., God the Father seems to have made a promise to X, prob. before the world began.

This cannot be salvation, because X doesn't need saving, being forever sinless.

So what kind of covenant promise did God the Father make to X?

We find a clue to that in John 17:24, where Jesus prays=>

*“Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast **given Me**, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory.”*

God had promised His Son a glorious Kingdom, and He had given Him the people to populate that Kingdom, before creation.

X would save their souls, give them eternal life, and transform them into Kingdom-citizens.

So ultimately, the *“promise”* involves not only the salvation of individuals who believe in X, but also God's whole master-plan for the Kingdom of God, filled w/ those who have become born-again/saved through faith in X, & ruled over by X Himself as Lord.

Abraham's great descendant (his *“seed”*) will someday rule this worldwide Kingdom from Jerusalem, so that Rom 4:13 says=> *“The **promise to Abraham** or to his [spiritual] **descendants** that he would be **heir of the world** was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of **faith**.”*

God ratified His covenant promise to Abraham in Gen 15, utilizing an ancient ratification ceremony.

In Gen 15:6 we read that, after God had reaffirmed His promise to give Abraham as many descendants as there are stars=> *“He [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness.”*

At that very point, God then ratified His covenant promise to Abraham.

In Gen 15:9, He told Abraham=> *“Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”*

Verse 10=> *“Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.”*

With the animal halves all lined up in 2 parallel rows forming a bloody ceremonial walk-way, it was time for God/Abraham to walk together down the middle, ratifying their covenant by doing so.

But that's not what happened.

Instead vs 17 says God took the form of a smoking oven & a flaming torch,
& He alone went between the pieces.

The significance of this is enormous.

God didn't seek any sort of commitment/promise from Abraham, that he
would keep the covenant, or obey His commands.

Instead, God alone made a promise, swearing by Himself, to Himself.

And with that, an irrevocable/inviolable covenant was formed, that
nothing/no-one but God could annul/modify.

And God Himself would never do so, because He is immutable, "*the Father
of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow*" (Jms
1:17).

He never changes His mind or gets caught off guard by some unforeseen
turn of events.

God's promise to Abraham was simple/profoundly-significant=>

* "You are justified before Me because of Your faith alone. No works, no
laws, no conditions, no contingencies.

* "I will also save those from every nation on earth who believe as you have,
& give them eternal life and all the eternal blessings I have given
you."

* "I will accomplish all this through your Descendant, your '*seed*,' the
Messiah, to whom I have given all those people as a worldwide
Kingdom."

**Paul's purpose in reminding us of all this, is to say that nothing could ever
preempt/replace/change/nullify God's covenant promise to Abraham &
to his spiritual descendants=> us who believe in X.**

Paul's opponents, the Judaizers, were prob. saying that covenant had been replaced
(or at least changed/added-to) by God's covenant with Moses, given at Mt.
Sinai, centuries later.

They argued that, once the Mosaic Covenant of Law was established,
Gentiles could no longer get saved by simply believing as Abraham
had, and getting included in on the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise.

Paul's answer was, that they were mistaken.

[Verse 17] (Paul)=> "*What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred
and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by
God, so as to nullify the promise.*"

The Law, being a subsequent covenant, could not disannul God's promise to
Abraham as the Judaizers claimed.

That promise had precedence and was inviolable.

The Judaizers might then say=> OK, suppose the Abrahamic Covenant is inviolable, how does our telling people they need to obey the Mosaic Law invalidate/nullify it?

[Verse 18] (Paul's answer)=> *"For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has **granted** it [kecharistai—given it as a grace-gift] to Abraham by means of a promise."*

"Granted" is a perfect tense verb, meaning God granted the inheritance, and it remains granted.

"The inheritance" is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his spiritual descendants (believers)=>

It is salvation realized/projected out to its fullest dimensions/perfections.

It includes justification by faith and inclusion in all the eternal blessings belonging to those in the Kingdom of God.

Paul's answer to teaching that the Law nullifies the Abrahamic Covenant, is that salvation by obedience to Law, & salvation by faith in Jesus X the Messiah alone, are incompatible opposites.

You can't mix/match them as the Judaizers were doing.

So if they are mixed together at all, grace gets nullified.

Mixing even a little man-made righteousness in with God's grace nullifies grace and invalidates the principle of salvation by grace alone.

The Abrahamic Covenant, which is at the root of our salvation, is, and must always remain, the inviolable promise of God.

He says to us=> Believe in the crucified X & I will save your soul, just as I saved Abraham.

That is My promised blessing, and it no more depends on your doing good works and religious deeds, than My promise to Abraham depended on his walking between the animal-halves with Me, when I ratified My covenant with him.

So the 1st principle needed, to understand why our faith is 1 of Abrahamic promise, rather than Mosaic Law, is=>

That the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise is inviolable.

As believers today, we are still receiving the blessings God gave Abraham, because we've been grafted into his covenant, like branches grafted into the trunk of a tree.

Rom 11:24=> *"You were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree."*

The 2nd principle pertains to the Mosaic Covenant of Law=>

* **The Covenant of Law Is Inferior** (to the Cov. of Promise)

The obvious question which Paul knew the Judaizers would now ask was, So what's the point of the Law anyway?

[Verse 19]=> *“Why the Law then? [Paul’s answer=>] “It was added because of transgressions [parabaseon—not simply sins that miss the mark, but intentionally/defiantly stepping over the line, knowing full-well where it is], having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made.”*

In explaining why God gave man His Law, Paul reveals its inferiority to the Promise, on 4 points=>

(1) Instead of justifying man, it condemns him for his transgressions.

It reveals his transgressions for what they are—violations of the very God who will someday be his Judge;

He may have thought of his sins as minor mistakes, or and peccadilloes, but the Law shows them to be defiant acts against God.

Why the Law?

It forces man to see his sin as God see it=>

A critical moral crisis in his life that he must take seriously.

Though the Law condemns him, by making him aware of his sin, it can't do anything to save him from it, as the Covenant of Promise does.

(2) The Law's purpose was only temporary (until the seed come—until X came).

When Jesus came to earth, He fulfilled the Law, sacrificing Himself to provide atonement for men's violations of it.

The whole sacrificial system of OT ceremonial Law had pointed forward to X, but after He had fulfilled its prophetic types, it was no longer needed, so God ended it in A.D. 70.

Why the Law? (That was the original question)=>

Initially, because the Law pointed Israel to X (the “Seed”).

(3) The Law came through a mediator, not directly from God (as the Covenant of Promise did).

That mediator was Moses, who stood between God & His people when they were so frightened by His presence at Sinai, that they told Moses=> *“If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we shall die. /... / Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it”* (Deut 5:25, 27).

In addition to Moses, the angels seem to have played some undefined role as mediators in the giving of the Law.

So like a physician's assistant, who runs interference to keep patients from speaking directly with the doctor, the Law and its mediators became obstacles between God & His people.

By contrast, when God gave Abraham the Cov. of Promise, He spoke to him directly as a Friend.

Not as a Buddy—we know that because Gen 15:12 says that during the covenant ratification ceremony=> *“a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.”*

God was still God, and Abraham still feared Him, and yet Scripture calls him the *“friend of God”* (Jms 2:23).

There was fear/reverence, but no hostility;

Only a respectful friendship.

Commentator Stephen Neill=> *“The promise came to Abraham first-hand; and the law comes to the people third-hand—God, the angels, Moses the mediator, the people.”*

The Law is inferior because it is indirect/impersonal.

The Promise is direct/personal.

(4) The Law was a contract (unlike the Abrahamic Covenant, which was a personal promise)

This contractual nature of the Law was the reason why it needed a mediator—originally Moses, but later on, Aaron.

[Verse 20]=> *“Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.”*

Like any contract, the Law makes promises, but they are all contingent on the people’s keeping their part of the deal.

So in Deut 28, God told Israel=> *“All these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the LORD your God”* (Deut 28:2).

Then in verse 15, God added=> *“But it shall come about, if [here’s the contingency] you will **not** obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments & His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”*

It all depended on whether/not the people obeyed the Law.

By contrast, God’s promise of blessing to Abraham was absolute and unconditional (i.e., there were no “if” clauses).

The Lord told him that through his seed, all the nations of the world would be blessed, and He added no conditions such as, *“If you will obey My command.”*

In a contractual situation, the mediator must keep an eye on both parties, to make sure nobody cheats.

But a 1-party promise needs no mediator, because the one making the promise expects nothing in return.

So Paul says=> *“Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.”*

We do have a mediator, but He is God—Jesus X, the 2nd Person of the Godhead.
As a result, we have no need of human priests to serve as mediators between God/us.

Obviously, the Mosaic Covenant of Law is inferior to the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise.

Praise God, our salvation is an outgrowth of God’s promise to Abraham—not His covenant with Moses.

Why the Judaizers would want to undermine that simple/wonderful/personal promise by imposing the Mosaic Law on it, is unimaginable, (apart from the insanity of man’s sinful pride).

The last principle needed to understand how our faith relates to both the Abrahamic-promise/Mosaic-Law is this=>

*** The Covenant of Law Is Invaluable (priceless).**

Having just seen the inferiority of the Mosaic Covenant to the Abrahamic Covenant, one might view the Law as totally valueless/unnecessary/useless, something to be ignored/avoided as a nuisance (as the Sunday school teacher thought).

But that’s not true.

The Law is inferior to the Promise, but it has an invaluable role to play in the application of God’s Covenant of Promise to men’s hearts.

It brings people to that covenant, prepared to believe/embrace it.

[Verse 21]=> *“Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.”*

If God ever created a law that could save/regenerate the soul, it would be in competition w/ the Covenant of Promise.

It would mean that man could save himself w/ his own good works, apart from a loving relationship w/ God through faith.

But God never has, & the Mosaic Law itself can’t give spiritual life or make anyone righteous, so there’s no competition or conflict at all.

The Law does 1 thing well, that makes it very useful=>

It can lead a sinful heart to desperate feelings of guilt that prepare it to believe in Jesus for forgiveness/new-life.

[Verse 22]=> *“But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”*

The Law, found in “*the Scripture*”, imprisons/shuts-people-up, encircling them with an inescapable awareness of their own sinfulness, so that they can’t flee from it.

Consciousness of one’s sin is an essential first step towards believing in Jesus X for justification from sin.

With his sins revealed, man can realize how urgently he needs a Savior to remove from him the Law's curse.

The epistle to the Romans tells us all about it=>

- * Rom 5:20 says the Law actually causes transgressions to increase, as man willfully resists it, making him all the more aware of the depths of his sinfulness, and driving him to X for forgiveness/cleansing.
- * Rom 3:20 says the Law makes him knowledgeable of his sins, forcing him to face them.
- * Rom 4:15 says it creates wrath, by exposing man's sin.
Before he was confronted by the Law, his vague awareness of his sin was insufficient to make him feel his need for a Savior.
Once he comes to the conclusion that his sin is going to destroy him, he runs to the cross to find forgiveness and deliverance.
- * Rom 7:7 says the Law defines man's sin for him.
He may have been unaware that coveting was even sinful, till the Law told him it was.
The Law brings him to a realization that he bears a far heavier weight of guilt before God than he had ever imagined.

Martin Luther put it beautifully=> "The principle point... of the law... is to make men not better, but worse; that is to say, it shows them their sin, that by the knowledge thereof they may be humbled, terrified, bruised, and broken, and by this means may be driven to seek grace, & so come to that blessed seed (Christ)."

A couple of years ago, Ray Comfort taught us to ask people if they have ever broken God's Law by lying, stealing, or disobeying any others of the Ten Commandments.

Once they are squirming with guilt, they are humble and prepared for the message of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus X—alone. They are ready for the blessed Covenant of God's Promise, inherited from Abraham.

May we keep these 2 covenants in proper perspective=>

- * Not trying to earn God's acceptance by obedience to the Law,
- * But allowing the Law to convict us of sin, in order to...
- * Drive us to our beloved Savior/Lord, finding rest/peace, security/comfort in God's gracious/unconditional promises.