

THE PROOF OF GOD'S COVENANT AND PROMISE

GALATIANS 03:15–18

Introduction

Some teachers in the Galatian churches were teaching a false doctrine, a very dangerous doctrine. They were saying that a person was not saved by the grace of God through faith alone; a man had to keep the rituals of the church and focus his life upon the law and upon doing all the good works he could possibly do. Very simply stated, if a man wanted to be acceptable to God, he had to be the very best person he could, be as religious as he could, and keep all the laws of God that he could

This, of course, is totally wrong. A person is justified by faith alone; he is not justified by being religious, by doing good and by keeping the law. Religion, good works and the law all have their place in the plan of God and in the life of man. But man is not saved and made acceptable to God by his own effort. Man cannot earn, win or merit God's acceptance; for no matter how good and disciplined man may become, he is still short of God's glory which is perfection. Despite all of man's goodness and achievements, man is still too often polluted with...

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| • selfishness | • greed | • injustice |
| • trespasses | • transgression | • aloofness |
| • pride | • failure to honour God | • lack of love |
| • envy | • failure to worship | • impatience |
| • anger | • unbecoming behavior | • lust |
| • bitterness | • being easily provoked | • hatred |
| • unkindness | • failure to endure | • failure to hope |
| • favoritism | • failure to pray | • immorality |
| • prejudice | • being puffed up | • evil thoughts |

The list could go on and on. The point is that no matter how good we are, we are all guilty of so much so often — we are short of God's glory, ever so short of perfection. Our goodness just cannot earn or merit acceptance with God. If God is going to accept us, it will be because we *believe Him, truly believe that He will accept us* and that He loves us enough to honour that belief. If God does not love us enough to accept our faith in Him, then we are hopelessly lost forever. Faith in Him — in His love and in His promise — is our only hope for salvation and acceptance by God.

This is the point of the present passage. God's covenant and promise to Abraham proves that justification is by faith and not by works of the law.

- I. God gave a covenant that is permanent, lasting (v. 15).
- II. God made His covenant with Abraham and his seed (v. 16).
- III. God gave His covenant of faith before He gave the law (v. 17).
- IV. God gave His covenant or inheritance (righteousness) by promise - not by law (v. 18).

I. *Galatians 03:15 God's Covenant and Promises*

God gave a covenant that is permanent, lasting. Paul gives the illustration of a covenant between men. (See *Covenant*, 2 Cor. 3:6; See Rom. 9:4.) A *covenant* (diatheke) is an agreement made between two parties, a special relationship set up and established by two or more persons. The point is that once a covenant has been made and executed, it stands: it cannot be annulled or added to. By law the promises of God's covenant are sealed. Both parties — God and Abraham's seed — are bound to keep their word, their promise to one another.

II. *Galatians 03:16 God's Covenant with Abraham*

How do we know that a person is justified by faith alone? Because God made His covenant with Abraham and *his seed*. Note that the promise was not given to Abraham alone, but it was also given to the *seed*, the descendants and offspring of Abraham. The promise or covenant with Abraham is covered in the Book of Genesis:

Gen 17:7-8 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

The important question is: Who is meant by the seed of Abraham? Scripture declares that it is Jesus Christ. The word "seed" is singular, not plural. Therefore, God's promise points to one single person, and that person is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is...

- the *seed* promised to Abraham.
 - the *seed* who is to receive the promises made to Abraham. This is a phenomenal truth, and it means three significant things.
1. It means that the promises made to Abraham have passed down to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the descendent who is to inherit the *promised land*, the land of Canaan for an *everlasting possession*. Canaan, of course, is a type of heaven and of the new heavens and earth which God has promised to recreate (see *The Promise*, Rom. 4:13). The point is that Jesus Christ is to inherit the world and be exalted as the Sovereign Majesty of the universe, ruling and reigning forever and ever.
 2. It means that believers, too, shall inherit the world and reign with Christ through all eternity. Abraham was promised that he would be the father of many nations or of many children, and believers are those children.

Mat 5:5 *“Blessed are the meek [the humble, trusting believing], for they will inherit the earth.”*

Gal 3:6 *Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Gal 3:29 *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

3. It means that faith is the way men become justified and acceptable to God.

Rom 4:13 *It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Rom 4:16 *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.*

Gal 3:6-7 *Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.*

Gal 3:9 *So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*

In summary Abraham believed God, and because he believed, God kept His covenant and promise.

=> Abraham has been given a *seed*, a descendent who has blessed the whole world, that is, Jesus Christ.

=> Abraham has also been given nations of people who are heirs of his and of Christ. And there is only one condition to receiving the inheritance: believing God, that is, following in the “footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had” (Rom. 4:12).

Rom 4:3 *What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Rom 4:5 *However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Rom 4:13 *It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Rom 4:13-14 *He, Christ, and his descendants are to receive the promised land — a new heavens and earth that will be perfected eternally. It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless.*

Heb 11:8-10 *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.*

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Heb 11:13-14, 16 *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

2 Pet 3:10-13 *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*

Rev 21:1-7 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."*

III. Galatians 03:17 Covenant and Law

How do we know that a person is justified by faith alone? Because God gave His covenant of faith before He gave the law. The covenant of faith preceded the covenant of law. The law of God did not even appear upon the scene until four hundred and thirty years later. Note two significant things.

1. When the law was given, the promise to Abraham had not yet been fulfilled; therefore, the law could not void or change the covenant of faith with Abraham. The promises of God to Abraham and his descendent, Jesus Christ, still stood. As Lehman Strauss points out:

=> The covenant of faith finds its roots in eternity past.

John 1:17 *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

=> Since Jesus Christ, who is eternal, existed before Abraham, the covenant of faith was given to Christ even before it was given to Abraham (*Devotional Studies in Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 45).

2. The covenant made with Abraham told man how he was to follow God and receive the promises of God, that is, by faith. Therefore, when the law was given, it must have been given for a different purpose entirely. It could not have been given to show men how to follow God, for that truth was already established in the covenant of faith given to Abraham.

The point is clear: no man is justified by the law, that is, by self-effort and works, trying to become good and righteous through obeying the law. That was not the purpose of the law. A person is justified by faith and by faith alone. (See Gal. 3:19-22; Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-13.)

Thought 1. God's covenant of faith or of grace is sure. It cannot be revoked or changed. *Believers* will inherit the promises made to Abraham and Christ.

Luke 21:33 *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."*

Rom 4:16 *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.*

Heb 6:13,16-18 *When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. (The promise and oath of God are the two undeniable things which guarantee the promise.)*

IV. Galatians 03:18 Covenant — Law — Inheritance

How do we know that a person is justified by faith alone? Because God gave His covenant or inheritance by promise, not by law.

William Barclay sums up this passage in a most descriptive way.

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 imperfection can never fully satisfy the perfection of God; we are forever frustrated, 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. 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. (The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians.

"The Daily Study Bible." Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954, p. 30.)

The inheritance given to Abraham is that of righteousness, of being accepted by God and given the privilege of living forever with Him in the new heavens and earth. The inheritance was not given to Abraham by law. Abraham could not earn, win or merit it; but as Scripture declares: "God in his grace gave it [the inheritance] to Abraham through a promise."

Thought 1. The same promise is given to believers, that is, to all those who walk in the faith of Abraham: the promise of being counted righteous and acceptable to God, and of being given the privilege of living forever in the new heavens and earth.

John 14:1-2 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."*

Rom 4:13 *It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Rom 8:16-17 *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

Gal 3:29 *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

Titus 3:7 *So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

1 Pet 1:3-4 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you.*

2 Pet 3:10-13 *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. ■*