

This morning we are continuing in the Galatians series. If you've been following along you know that Paul wrote to the Galatians because they were turning toward the requirements of the law, and this was a serious departure from the true Gospel of faith in Christ. So Paul's letter brings them back to the basics of simple faith in Christ alone for salvation. Now, coming to today's passage, Paul brings up two Old Testament Covenants: the covenant promise made to Abraham, called the Abrahamic covenant, and the covenant made to the Israelites through Moses on Mt. Sinai, called the Mosaic covenant, which is also called the law of Moses. Paul's intent for mentioning these two covenants is to bring a Christ-centered understanding of God's purpose for both covenants. So in the Scripture for this morning, Paul is re-asserting a proper Christian understanding of Moses' law in relation to God's promise to Abraham, and how Jesus fits into it all. Most of all, Paul wants to assure believers that because of Christ, we have indeed passed from the age of the law to the age of faith, and with that, freedom from sin and death. Now, let's turn to the Scripture, Galatians 3:15-25. I'm going to break this in half and start with verse 15-18 first and then we'll finish the message with verses 19-25. The Word of the Lord to you and me this morning:

Scripture:

First, there are a couple confusing parts that I want to clarify because they are important for understanding Paul's argument. The first confusing statement is in verse 15, Paul refers to a "human covenant." The Greek here is literally, "last will and testament." Now, the Galatians were intent on following the letter of the law for salvation, so Paul brings in a well-understood judicial reference to show them how they have gone off-track. Paul reminds them that a human will or covenant, once it has been ratified, cannot be changed. Hebrews 9:16 sheds more light on how the New Testament writers thought about the concept of "covenant" or "will." This verse will help us catch Paul's intent for bringing this up. Hebrews 9 — this is talking about Christ as the mediator of the new covenant by the shedding of his blood— verse 16 says, "in the case of a will (this is the same word that is translated as "covenant" in Galatians 3:15), it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living."

This passage goes on to explain how the shedding of blood serves to ratify the covenant so the terms of the covenant cannot be changed. In the modern western mindset, the biblical concept of covenant is hard to understand because we don't have covenants made by blood these days. I remember when I was a kid a loooong time ago- and before I tell you this I have to say I would never, never encourage kids to do this— my best friend and I made a pact declaring that we would be "blood brothers," and we each took out our pocket knives, drew a little blood on the palms of our hands, and shook hands— sounds so barbaric now— but it was a covenant by blood. We understood even as kids this was a serious covenant because it included our blood. As barbaric as it sounds, I think that concept is a distant echo of the ancient Hebrew covenant-making process. Anyway, in the modern world, a will is the closest non-barbaric example we may have to the unbreakable nature of a Hebrew covenant, in the general sense that once the person who has made the will dies, the will must be carried out. The point is, in the ancient Greek and Hebrew mindset, a covenant ratified by death or the shedding of blood is entirely irrevocable.

So, back to Galatians 3:15, here is what is happening— the covenant promise made to Abraham and his Seed was, for one, ratified through the covenant sacrifice made way back when God first gave the promise to Abraham- we'll look at that a little later— and it was an unconditional, unbreakable promise made by God that did not depend on Abraham's subsequent obedience. So, the law of Moses, some 430 years later, could not alter the earlier covenant promise that God had made to Abraham. Now, the law of Moses was a binding covenant between the Lord and his chosen people that carried conditions— it was dependent upon the obedience of the people. Essentially, the law pronounced blessing on all who obeyed and curses on all who disobeyed. If you remember the story of Exodus, the generation that rebelled against the Lord and worshiped the golden calf were banned from entering the promised land. They were bound under the conditions of the Mosaic Law, but they could not live up to the Law. The covenant promise made to Abraham 430 years earlier, on the other hand, was unconditional and not dependent upon Abraham's obedience after the covenant was made. So here in Galatians, Paul is pretty much claiming that Judaism and those who follow the law of Moses are acting as if Moses' Law has taken precedence over God's promises to

Abraham. So we see that Paul sets us up in verse 15 to 18 to think that two OT covenants are at odds with each other: the promise made to Abraham as opposed to the law given to Moses. We will talk about this more in a minute.

The second thing in this passage that might be a little confusing is Paul's interpretation of the word "Seed." The Hebrew word for "seed" that Paul references is "Tsera," which is in the collective singular form. Just as it does in English, "Seed" can mean either descendants collectively, or a single descendant— so this can seem like a shaky argument- some scholars say Paul misunderstood the linguistics of the OT. But Paul, being the literary wizard that he is, did clearly understand that "seed" could be used either singularly or collectively because he uses the same term in its collective sense toward the end of this chapter to refer to all people as Abraham's descendants, not just the Jews. So, Paul is making a theological, not a linguistic argument, and his argument is that ultimately, the "Seed" from Abraham that God has chosen to bless the nations is none other than Jesus himself. Then Paul says later that we, through faith in Jesus, are heirs to the promises made to Abraham, entirely apart from the law of Moses— we are Abraham's seed through Jesus, who is the promised Seed (capital S).

Now, there are two more issues to hammer out before we bring all of this together with the rest of this awesome passage. What exactly are the promises made to Abraham and what is the law that Paul is talking about? Let's start with the law. When we hear law we often think of the ten commandments: no other gods before me, do not steal, do not kill, honor your parents, etc. Well, that's part of it, but actually the law of Moses contains 613 commandments. and there were also requirements for eating different types of food, along with mandated festivals and ritual ceremonies. So when the Bible refers to the Law, it is talking about the entire law found in the first 5 books of the Bible. But more than that, the law of Moses, in its entirety, was given to the Israelites to separate them out from the rest of the ungodly world. God chose the people of Israel out of all the peoples of the world in their time to make them his holy priests to the world.

In Exodus 19:5-6, Moses was on Mt. Sinai, now this was after their escape from Egypt, God told Moses to tell the people of Israel, "now if you obey me

fully and keep my covenant (that is, the law given to Moses), then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” So the promise at Mt. Sinai was tied to the Law—those 613 commands and a bunch of other requirements, to separate Israel from an ungodly world. However, the covenant law came with a whole bunch of “ifs,” meaning that all of the blessings were contingent upon the Israelites obedience to the law. God knew that they were not going to be able to follow the law so the sacrificial system was built into it, allowing for temporary forgiveness for disobedience. The sacrificial system was a mere shadow of Christ’s sacrifice to come. So that’s the law. (Sermon Slide).

Now I’ll give an overview of the covenant that God made to Abraham, known as the Abrahamic covenant- this one is a little tougher. As I said already, the Abrahamic Covenant, which came hundreds of years before Israel’s birth as a nation, was not contingent upon Abraham’s obedience. Before taking a look at that, let’s spend a little more time on the word “seed” because we need to see how this seed is spoken about even before Abraham. So let’s go all the way back to Genesis in the garden of Eden and look at what God said to the serpent after the fall: Genesis 3:15, God cursed the serpent for deceiving Eve and he said this, “and I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring (or “seed”) and hers, he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The ‘seed of the woman’ that will crush the head of the serpent is referring to the Messiah. The serpent is referring to Satan. So here is the first prophetic reference to Jesus as the seed who will come to crush the head, or in other words, utterly take out the serpent. I had an experience with a very large snake when I was living in Thailand. I was out in the backyard and I saw the grass in front of me move in a zig zagging fashion- so I looked closer and it was a 6 feet long rat snake. So I tried to smack it with my rake, but it took off along the side of the house and out toward the front— I chased it to the driveway and managed to pin it’s front section against the fence with my rake. However, the back part of the snake started coiling its way up the rake and toward my hand and arm, so I started yelling — “Yam! Yam!” She came running out of the house and was like, “woah!” There were a couple of workers across the street, so we got their attention and one of them came over with a stick and nonchalantly smacked the head of the snake once or twice and killed it. (Picture 1) I was relieved because the tail of the

snake was reaching to my hand and about to coil up my arm, but I was really surprised at how just a slap of the stick on the head could kill such a large snake (Picture 2, wait 3 seconds, Picture 3). So, when the scripture here says, “crush your head,” when you’re talking about a snake, that is a fatal blow—- 1 John 3:8 says, “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” What is the devil all about? Deceiving us to sin and not have faith in God. Jesus came to utterly crush the head of that snake and set you free from his lies and deception- Amen!

Now let’s stay in Genesis but head over to 12:3, God appears to Abram and tells him that he will make him a great nation and bless him, and he said, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you,” so this gives a hint of God’s promise to Abram. A little further in chapter 15:5, God expands on his promise and tells Abram that his descendants will be as innumerable as the stars— and verse 6 is a key verse that Pastor Brian talked about last week, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” This verse is key to understanding how God imputes righteousness by faith. Let’s continue in Genesis 15 from verse 7—we need to see this to truly appreciate what Paul is saying in our passage this morning. So in verse 7 God tells Abram that he is giving him the land as a possession, and he had already told him his offspring would bless the nations, so Abram responds in verse 8 by asking, “how do I know this is real?” And what follows is a very wild arrangement of events. Verses 9-10, God tells Abram to cut a young bull, a goat, and a ram in half and lay the halves opposite of each other. So picture this, a half of a bull, goat, and ram are on one side, and the other half of each are on the other side- and then —Abram falls asleep right there next to the bloody halves of animal carcasses. While Abram is sleeping, the Lord gives him a prophetic dream of the Exodus story, and then an interesting thing happens. Verse 17 says that a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “to your descendants I give this land.” What is interesting for this kind of ritual is that Abram was supposed to pass between the pieces as well. This kind of covenant ritual should include both parties passing between the pieces to ratify the agreement and hold both parties accountable to it. If one party did not pass through the pieces, then that party had no binding accountability to the agreement whatsoever, while the party that did pass through the pieces would be held solely responsible for the agreement. The

Lord caused Abram to fall asleep so that God alone would be responsible for the fulfillment of the covenant.

Now, we'll look at one last Scripture in Genesis. It is after the story where God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac at Mt. Moriah. If you haven't heard the story, Abraham would have sacrificed his son had God not stopped him at the last second. So, because of Abraham's faith and willingness to sacrifice his only son, God makes another unconditional promise to Abraham. This time, it is the most unbreakable covenant made with the strongest oath that could ever be made— let's pick up the story from Genesis 22:16. This is God speaking to Abraham, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord"— think about that .. this is basically God saying I swear to God but he is God so there is no higher authority but himself to swear by — this is the highest oath of all oaths— it is the mother of all oaths! "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky..." sound familiar? On to verse 18, "and through your offspring— that is seed— all nations on earth will be blessed." Then he adds, "because you have obeyed me," but remember now that God has already made an unbreakable covenant to Abram that had nothing to do with the conditions of obedience. Now God is confirming his promise in the strongest terms possible on account of Abraham's faith, with no conditions tied to it. So, my friends, the Abrahamic covenant, the promises made to Abraham, were made without conditions and on account of God's grace and Abraham's response of faith. This is a model for us— faith comes before obedience— faith drives obedience.

Now, before we tie all of this together, let's look ahead to the people of Israel again to see the effect of God's promise to Abraham in relation to the law. I've already noted that the Israelites were not able to follow the law of Moses- so let's look at what God says to them in Deuteronomy 9:5. The Israelites are on the cusp of entering the promised land and after reviewing the law of Moses, God tells them in the strongest terms that they will be destroyed if they disobey the Lord. Directly after that he said this: Deut. 9:5: "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

So here we see that God’s covenant promise to Abraham stood over and above the law for the Israelites, even as they rebelled against the Lord—their righteousness had nothing to do with God fulfilling his promises to Abraham. Yet at the same time, God continued to uphold them to the law of Moses, giving them warning after warning to obey. Now let’s bring all of this together and look at the rest of Galatians 19-25: (Scripture).

So as we finish here, let me put this all together— At the garden of Eden, sin and death entered after Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life was guarded— let me ask you, have you ever felt sad that God prevented access to the tree of life? —> So God closed the access to the tree of life and drove Adam and Eve out, and then spoke to the serpent with a prophetic word: the woman’s Seed will crush the head of the serpent. This started God’s plan of redemption—> Later, God appeared to Abraham and gave his gracious promise, which Abraham received by faith —> hundreds of years later, the law of Moses came, which served to separate Israel from the ungodly nations, but the promise to Abraham remained and transcended the law—> Here comes the separation: the promise received by faith points to the Messiah and open access to the tree of life for all nations. The law gives access to the knowledge of good and evil, but it separates the wicked from God’s holy family and it cannot provide eternal life. So in effect, the law imprisons the Israelites and condemns all other people in the world—> Finally, Jesus enters as the promised Seed to fulfill God’s covenant with Abraham—> Through faith in Jesus, all the nations are invited into God’s promise of inheritance, the prisoners of the law are set free and forgiveness of sins are made once and for all— the temporary sacrificial system is no longer required— and the promised inheritance for Christians is God’s kingdom—> Then, the Holy Spirit comes as a sign of our promised heavenly inheritance where sin and death are no more. He begins writing the law directly on the hearts of those who have faith in Christ—> the law continues on as a secondary addition to show the world why they need a Savior—> However, Christians are given the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, who replaces the rebellious heart with a willing heart—> As a result,

Christians from every tribe and tongue are enabled to walk with God, in complete freedom from the conditional, condemning requirements of the law, while Christ's sacrifice washes away every sin— past, present, and future.

My friends, Paul is letting us know that you cannot obey your way into God's kingdom, and your own righteousness will never get you a pass into paradise. Christ has set you free from those requirements if you have faith in him— your righteousness is found in Christ alone. AMEN! So if you are struggling today with pain or shame from the sins of your past, or if you're struggling with wondering whether you measure up to God's standards, I invite you to receive the freedom from condemnation in Christ Jesus— you are invited to come to his gracious, loving, and accepting arms to receive his promise of healing and forgiveness, his promise of a heavenly home to call your own. In him, there is no condemnation, his blood guarantees your absolute freedom from sin and death. Now like Abraham, will you let your faith drive your walk with God as the Holy Spirit sets you apart from this ungodly world?