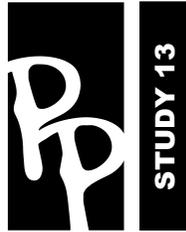


THE LAW CANNOT CHANGE

THE PROMISE



Galatians 3:15-18

This Study Paper contains the following

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

For Paul, the gospel he preached was that salvation is a free gift of God, which is received by faith in Christ crucified. Other teachers were saying that believers must also contribute something to their salvation. They were insisting that the Gentile Christians must keep God's laws, which came through Moses. Paul in the previous verses has just declared that these laws cannot make a person right with God. In fact it is impossible for a person to keep the law, so the person who relies on the law is under a curse. The law was being completely misunderstood and used in the wrong way. Paul tackles this error in verses 15 to 25, firstly by comparing the law given to Moses with the promise made to Abraham (15-18) and then secondly, by describing what the purpose of the law is (19-25).

What these verses mean

Verse 15

Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life.

Paul is now going to use an illustration from everyday human life.

Just as no-one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established,

The Greek word here means "a will", written to indicate what a man wishes to be done with his possessions after his death. No one has the

right to alter a will: it must be exactly obeyed. Under Greek laws even the writer of a will could not alter it again once it was officially declared to be his will.

so it is in this case.

So Paul is saying if what we humans do is unalterable, then surely what God did is unalterable too. What had God done?

Verse 16

The promises were spoken to Abraham

God promised an inheritance to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18-21; 17:1-14). The promise was a type of covenant, a will. It differed from the covenant God had made with Moses and the nation of Israel, normally referred to as the law. In the case of the promise there was a person who benefited from the promise but made no contribution to it whatsoever. God reckoned Abraham as a righteous man (Gen. 15:6) and promised that through Abraham's descendants people of all nations would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). God did all this quite freely. Abraham did nothing to earn these blessings. This was an arrangement based on God's grace. The covenant with Moses required the agreement of both parties. In Exodus 24:7 the people, after listening to Moses about the Lord's words, responded with one voice, "We will do everything the Lord has said: we will obey." This arrangement required the people to do something, i.e. obey the laws.

and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds", meaning many people, but "and to your seed", meaning one person, who is Christ.

Even in his old age, Abraham (with Sarah) would have a son who would be his heir. Through that son would come a huge offspring that will not be able to be measured (like the stars in the sky). But the reference "to his seed" is in the singular. Abraham's son, Isaac, had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob in turn had twelve sons. Why was Paul saying that the promises were not to benefit a group, but only one? The answer is because God was giving this promise to Abraham in trust for his ultimate "seed", Jesus Christ. The promise to Abraham was not for his physical family (nation of Israel) but to Christ himself. Through Jesus Christ sin would be conquered and a vast multitude from all nations would be rescued to inherit the Promised Land of God's kingdom. The promise was the promise of the Spirit (to Jews and Gentiles who come by faith) which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (verse 14) when he redeemed his people by dying for them on the cross.

The blessings given to Abraham were given because of Christ, who descended from him (Matt.1:1). In other words Paul is saying that the religion of Christ is Abraham's kind of religion (3:29), a religion where God gives blessings freely, for Christ's sake; they are not earned by human good works.

Verse 17

What I mean is this:

Paul is now going to bring the two types of covenant (the promise and the law) together to show how they work in relation to each other.

The law,

The law is the second type of covenant (see verse 16 for the first type of covenant, the promise). God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai for the Israelite people after they had come out of captivity in Egypt. The law contained the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments could be looked upon as the summary of the law because the law consisted of a lot of detail, which was given to Moses over a period of time.

In Exodus 24:3 Moses told the people all the LORD's words and the laws. The people responded with one voice that they agreed with what the LORD had said and would obey. Moses then wrote down the words God had spoken to him (Ex. 24:4) which was then referred to as the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 24:7). Moses read the words from the book and the people responded by confirming their assent and that they would obey (Ex. 24:7). The law is therefore looked upon as a second type of covenant in that in this agreement there are two willing parties, God the giver of the law and the people who accepted it by confirming their agreement to obey it. Whilst Moses was with God on Mount Sinai receiving further information concerning the law, the people persuaded Aaron to make a golden calf as an idol of worship (Ex. 32:1-6). This led to the first tablets, upon which the Commandments were written, being broken into pieces (Ex. 32:19). God instructed Moses to chisel out two new tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written again. Exodus 34:28 refers to the words written as the "words of the covenant". These tablets of stone were then placed into a box called the "Ark" (Deut. 10:1-5), which was then referred to as the "Ark of the Covenant" (e.g. Josh. 3:6).

introduced 430 years later,

430 years was the length of time Israel spent in Egypt (Ex. 12:40). But God appeared to Abraham at least 200 years before. So the promise was first given at least 630 years before the law of Moses. Why does Paul say 430 years? There are two points:

1. It makes no difference to Paul's argument whether it was 430 or 630 years. In either case, the promise of salvation definitely preceded the giving of the law at Sinai. The law, then, cannot annul the promise, whichever figure you take.
2. The 3 patriarchs are continually referred to in the Old Testament as "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" almost as though the three composed one unit. The promise was given to each patriarch. Genesis 28:3-4 illustrates that. Just before Jacob went to Egypt, God repeated the promise to Jacob (Gen. 46:3,4). Thus, from the last of the three foundational patriarchs to the giving of the law was 430 years.

does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.

In the same way that a human testament (a legally binding will), once made, cannot be altered, so God's promises once made to Abraham cannot be altered. The law of Moses, which came after the promise to Abraham, cannot amend or alter what came before it. The way of salvation remains the same as it was for Abraham, i.e. by God's gracious gift, not by human effort. Since it was God himself who gave the promises to Abraham, they must be thought of as firm, unalterable promises. No one can annul God's Word. Whatever he speaks is confirmed by his good nature.

Verse 18

For if inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends upon a promise;

The two distinctive types of covenant are now made relevant. The law was the type of covenant which required the action of two parties. One party, i.e. the people, had to obey and the second party, God, would bless. The promise was a type of covenant where an inheritance was being given as a gift. This did not require the participation of a second party. Now if the inheritance were based upon an agreement that required the two parties doing something, it made the other type of covenant unworkable. The two types of covenant could not sit together as the basis of salvation and work; it had to be one or the other.

but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

The Greek verb "gave" is in a form, which means "graciously gave it permanently". The word "grace" emphasises that nothing, not even the law of God, can alter the way of salvation by faith alone, which was promised freely to Abraham. Those teachers who said that faith was not enough for salvation must be very wrong.



Summary

When Paul had travelled in the region of Galatia, he had declared a message of salvation that was based upon the promise God gave to Abraham. God said: "I will, I will, I will." This was the basis of belief, a faith that was totally dependent on God's gracious act of sending his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus was the object of the promise made to Abraham. Now the false teachers were telling the Galatians that they needed to follow the rules given to Moses, the law. In other words the Galatians were being directed to a way that required total obedience, which was impossible for them to achieve. The promise and the law differed in that they were two different types of covenants. They could not be looked upon as following on from each other. The promise came first and was the type of covenant where an inheritance was willed to Abraham and his seed. This could not be changed by the second type of covenant, the law. Here this type of covenant required the participation of two parties. They are totally distinct and separate. The false teachers were therefore advocating the wrong type of covenant for the Galatians to follow. The right one was the one Paul had taught them and which had been the basis of their conversion to Christ.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

The seed to whom the promise was made (verse 16).

1. Introduction

- A. We sometimes talk about our salvation as though it were a kind of bargain God makes with each of us individually. A common testimony is: "I did this, and then God saved me."
- B. The Bible speaks in a different way about those who have become believers. Paul used the phrase "in Christ" repeatedly. Believers are not thought of as having individual arrangements with God, but as being united to Christ with whom an agreement is made by God. Christ is the seed with whom the promise was made.
- C. The promise was not given to Abraham for himself. It was given to him "and his seed" which Paul explains "is Christ" (verse 16).

Christ often spoke about his people as "those whom the Father has given me" (John 6:37,39).

2. We are all sinners because Adam, the representative human, sinned.

The idea of all individuals in a country being governed by the decisions of the head of that country is familiar to us. If the ruler of our country declares war with another country, then we are **all** at war with that country. If he makes peace, we are **all** at peace. So the actions of Adam, as the head of the human race, affect us all (Rom. 5:12). Because Adam made us sinners, we in our turn continue to sin. We are doubly guilty. This is why there has never been a sinless person on earth apart from Jesus Christ.

3. Salvation is only by being related to Christ who is the second representative human.

The title "the last Adam" is given to Christ (1 Co. 15:45,47). As Adam was the head of all human people, so Christ is the head of all spiritual people (Rom. 5:17). Believers are chosen "in Christ" (Eph. 1:4); they are united with each other "in Christ" (Rom. 12:5); their hope is "in Christ" (1 Tim. 1:1); all the blessings they enjoy are "in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). They are the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23).

So the promise of salvation to people of all nations which Abraham received (verse 8) was only because Abraham's descendant is Christ. It is for Christ's sake that God saved Abraham and all believers. The important question is NOT "Have I made an agreement with God?" (How could I do so, for I am a helpless sinner?) but "Am I **in** Christ?" God has agreed to make alive all who are "in Christ" (1 Co. 15:22).

4. Conclusion

- A. Clearly, no one can be saved without Christ (Acts 4:12, John 14:6). [Even Old Testament believers saw Christ's death illustrated in the sacrifices].
- B. We are not saved because of our faith, or our repentance, but because of Christ's life and death. Faith and repentance are given to all who are in Christ (Acts 11:18; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:1).
- C. We must come to Christ, not to any other place or person for salvation (Matt.11:28). Our sincerely coming to Christ is a sign that the Father has given us to Christ (John 6:37).



Over to you

What has been your understanding of your connection, as a Christian, with Abraham? Has he been just an Old Testament figure for you? Has your study of this passage helped you to see how your roots are to be found in the Old Testament?

We shall be dealing with the purpose of the law in our next study. Before we move on to that, how do you think the Ten Commandments should be used in your preaching and teaching?

On which type of covenant have you been basing your preaching of salvation, the promise or the law? How will this study affect your preaching in the future?