

Galatians | The Grace Manifesto

Promises, Promises

3.15-25

7.7.19

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 sets it aside or adds conditions to it. 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

¹⁹ *Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰ Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. 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. 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.*

²³ *But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.*

This summer we're working our way through Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It's an urgent plea to a group of churches that had once enjoyed an amazing sense of liberty and joy, being reconciled and restored into a right relationship with God by GRACE... by what Jesus Christ accomplished FOR them...

But in only a short span of time...the main idea was no longer the main idea. There were apparently some infiltrators who were saying that these churches (with all their freedom and joy) were NOT Jewish enough. And Paul responds to these critics, "No! You're not Jewish enough! You're not reading your own history in the way God intended it to be understood!"

"Jewish? You want Jewish?! I'll give you Jewish – let's go back to the original Jewish man, Abraham and I'll show you from how God dealt with the first Jewish man how God intended to deal with all who followed – all those who believed like Abraham believed – I'll show you how to be truly Abrahamic!"

Today, Paul continues to show us how to read the Bible through the lens of grace – the interpretive key for understanding God’s great story and how God is working out a plan for the restoration of a people and the healing of everything that’s broken.

Let’s look at: 1) A Big-Picture View of God’s Story

2) A Big Question and a BIGGER Answer

3) How to Use and Not ABUSE Law and Promise

Going back to the pristine beginnings of God’s people and God’s way of dealing with His people, Paul takes us to Abraham. Some say that this is the climax of the Bible – when after sin and death and estrangement from God and one-another, how God stepped in and claimed a couple for Himself – Abram and Sarai. And God “graced” them – He made a promise to them which promise God would work out through the history of the Jewish people...

And when God gave this promise to Abraham and Sarah, the promise which they did nothing to earn or deserve... the promise had to do with their children and grandchildren – their descendants – but especially to ONE descendant, not their “seeds” (16) but to one Seed in particular, the Messiah/Christ.

Abraham was NOT commanded to shape up and qualify for this inheritance from God – just believe; simply take God’s PROMISE seriously and trust Him.

And Paul says, “God’s favor to this pagan man who was claimed by God was NOT based on Abraham’s measuring up to a requirement or LAW...but (18) it was based on promise: “but God granted/graced it to Abraham by means of a promise.”

And reading between the lines (just a little) we can imagine the objections of these infiltrators: they were cool with non-Jewish people coming into these churches...and converting to the religion of Abraham as long as these Gentile converts will DO what ALL THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM DO, i.e. keep the Law.

Paul responds... “Well, Abraham was a Gentile who converted to God...and Abraham didn’t keep the Law – in fact Abraham didn’t even HAVE the Law! The Law was given many years (over 400) later to Moses. Abraham didn’t get his inheritance by obeying a law but by believing God’s promise: by gift not law.”

“Well, then...smarty-pants, Paul! Why did God even impose the Law on us?” It’s the OBVIOUS question and a very short one, “Why the Law then?” (Big Q!)

Paul says, “It was added because of transgressions” and what he means is: because we, the physical descendants of Abraham, were (like all other nations) sinful, selfish, corrupt – God had

to help us to see how badly we needed God's grace and promise..."

"You could easily think that somehow God chose us because we were... you know...a little...better than THEY! (Deut 7.7-9) And the Law showed us the sinful disposition of our own hearts, that WE are no better than they are. Our transgressing the Law was meant to reveal to us that WE NEED THE GRACE OF GOD because we just can't seem to do what God commands!"

We need the Seed – the One to whom the Promise was made, Abraham's greater Son, to save us.

"Let's face it, my Jewish brothers and sisters: we felt superior to the Gentiles because we had the Law and they didn't... We were grossed out when they ate certain foods and we said, 'YUCK!' and this made us feel really good about ourselves like we were spiritually alive and they (THEY) were spiritually dead ... BUT (21) "if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. 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 didn't make us better than anyone and it didn't make us alive... it just showed us that we couldn't obey ourselves into LIFE... and it shut us up with all other nations as SINFUL – all in the same category, all imprisoned (that's the Gk word, 22 & 23 for "shut up") – the Law is a prison-guard barring the exit and locking us all in the category of offenders, that we are corrupt just like the Gentiles, all in the same class: sinful and unable to fix ourselves."

Then Paul uses another metaphor – the Law was our prison guard KEEPING us from escaping into a smug self-righteousness AND the Law is a tutor. The Law teaches us, "You can't obey perfectly as God requires...you'd better rely on something else if you want to get out of this category of the condemned."

The Law was, for the Jews, like a spiritual x-ray machine diagnosing their sin. And Gentiles who didn't have the Law, even they have this inward sense that, "something is wrong with me" – that we NEED God to save us, 'that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

And now... we have entered a new era in the history of God's dealings with the human race. We have now seen the One to whom the Promise was made, the (singular) Descendant/Seed of Abraham – faith has come and our tutor has left us at HIS doorstep.

The Law was a good tutor but we can't go back to the Law to make us right...not after we've seen clearly that a Man has come who will bring all nations back to God and will rescue those who trust Him OUT of the category of sinner and into the category of righteous, RIGHT WITH GOD – the righteousness that comes NOT by our efforts but that comes down from God as a gift...a promise.

I'm sure you noticed the title of today's sermon and the repetition in the passage: "promises, promises."

Paul has set up a stark contrast between those who are trying to live by obeying the Law (i.e. all God's commands) those who are trying to live relying on their obedience and their adherence to what's required AND ON THE OTHER SIDE, those who, like Abraham and like all God's people (ever since), who find life in God's promise... and they trust/believe.

In the Protestant Reformation these were called "The Two Words" – Law and Promise/Grace/Gospel.

It's crucially important that we know how to use and not ABUSE Law and Promise...

Law condemns and Grace/Promise acquits. Law cannot make us alive but only shows that we're dead and in need of acquittal and reconciliation with God.

All the commands of God are good (Law tell us about the good life – Law warn us about things that damage and destroy our lives) but the Law cannot IMPART life. In fact, knowing the Law often incites us to break the Law (Rom 5.20). Put a "keep off the grass" sign up and people will have a strong urge to do what they'd never even imagined doing before they saw the LAW.

In the famous Heidelberg Disputation, Martin Luther wrote, "The law says, 'do this', and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this', and everything is already done." God's grace is reiterated in all the promises and only grace can give us life/peace with God and a new frame of mind that makes us want to obey.

The commands of God show us the Good Life but they have no power in themselves to restrain our sin or give us the desire and a power to obey. But Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, by His Spirit, He is liberating us to obey. In Him all the demands are becoming our delight... What we have to do becomes what we WANT to do.

The person who finds LIFE in the Promise... the person who is believing and sharing in the life that Jesus Christ gives – that person obeys the Law but in a different way. Paul refers to it as "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1.5, 16.26) or sometimes "the newness of life" (Rom 6.4, 7.6) and sometimes as "the new self" (Eph 4.24; Col 3.10) OR (as we'll see next week) not obeying as a slave but as a son.

To obey, to LIVE out of the Promise, out of grace, out of the Gospel is a different thing altogether than trying to find LIFE in the commandment itself.

The infiltrators in those ancient churches, the Pharisees (in Christ's day) AND the infiltrator – the

OLD SELF in you (i.e. IF you are a believer in Jesus Christ) – the moralist tries to get life by using obedience to feel good about him/herself.

We all do it – using the Laws we seem to do well as a point of comparison with those who don't do those things well. When we see someone who really messes up (where WE have succeeded) we feel alive. It can be people in your own HOME whom you criticize and feel a little jolt of superiority or LIFE.

OR it can be “them” – people in the other political party... or in some notoriously bad lifestyle and when we talk about “THEM” we feel better about our “law keeping” selves...as if the Law could impart life.

But the person under the Promise, the believer who is actually believing – that person obeys and loves God and loves others like a dance... like Jesus Christ obeyed because of the joy set before Him (Heb 12.1-3). He obeyed out of the Promise. He was the One descendant who had the Promise of the Father and who out of that security – KNOWING that the Father completely delighted in Him – He obeyed NOT to get something (as if obedience could impart life!) but because it was His destiny and His delight. And it led Him to this beautiful, free, creative way of life and love (John 4.34, 13.3-5) and He also commended this kind of liberated love when He saw it in others (Lk 7.36ff, 10.88ff).

He is the Recipient of the Promise... and He is the One Descendant of Abraham who obeyed... NOT in order to GET LIFE... but in order to give life to all who share in the Promise by trusting Him.

If you find yourself secure in Him – trusting in His life, death and resurrection as your only hope, you'll be ushered into this new, liberated way of love.

And NOW He comes among us... to meet us at this Table and share His promise, His life, His very self with all who receive Him by faith. Let's Pray.