

‘The promises supersede the law.’ (9)

A dying man gives each of his best friends, a lawyer, doctor and clergyman an envelope containing £25,000 in cash to be placed in his coffin. A week later the man dies and the friends each place an envelope in the coffin. Several months later, the clergyman confesses that he only put £10,000 in the envelope and sent the rest to a mission in South America. The doctor confesses that his envelope had only £8,000 because he donated to a medical charity. The lawyer is outraged, **‘I am the only one who kept my promise to our dying friend. I want you both to know that the envelope I placed in the coffin contained my own personal cheque for the entire £25,000.’**

We all know that many people break their promises and a promise is only as good as the person who gave it. In our sermon, today we’re going to see Paul arguing with the Judaizers by reminding them that when God makes a promise, He keeps it. Paul is going to remind them that the coming of the law, didn’t do away with or cancel the promise. Neither did the law become a condition upon which the promise was fulfilled or applied to our salvation.

Paul is going to argue that the promise from God to Abraham was more superior to the law. In other words, God’s promise to Abraham to bring forth the blessing to all nations, was unconditionally given. Now remember Abraham didn’t earn the promise, God simply told him what He would do in the future through Abraham’s seed. And also, remember that the law was given through Moses and he was told what he must do. In other words, the promise was given through grace, whereas law was given in order to demand obedience.

Galatians 3:15+16 “Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.”

Now the word **‘covenant’** simply means agreement or contract. And Paul begins by reminding the Galatians of the nature of the covenants that are established between humans. He says, these covenants or agreements aren’t changed after they have been approved. A covenant is made between two parties and only the parties involved can change the covenant. A third party can’t make changes to the covenant, neither can anyone other than the two parties cancel the covenant that has been made between the two parties.

It’s such a shame in today’s society we see covenants being broken all the time, **don’t we? Why do you think the bailiffs are so busy? People haven’t stuck to the agreement of paying that loan back. Why do you think solicitors are so busy? Husbands and wives have broken their marriage vows and now they want a divorce. But thank God for keeping His promises, thank God, He doesn’t change His mind and change the agreement.**

Now notice that Paul uses the word, **‘promises’** plural, **but what promises is he referring too?** Well, he’s referring to the promises God gave Abraham. **Genesis 12:1-3 “The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

God gave Abraham four promises, He said Abraham would be given a land and he would become a great nation. He would make Abraham’s name great and he would be blessed and be a blessing to all men. Now notice there are three physical promises, land, name, nation, all of which had been fulfilled by the time of Jesus. The blessing promise was in reference to salvation and was fulfilled through the coming of the Seed, who was Jesus.

But the point Paul is trying to make is, it was God who made the promises and He made the promises without any meritorious conditions on the part of Abraham. God didn’t suggest any conditions to Abraham that he must keep in order to receive the promises. And Paul says it was Christ who was the particular Seed around whom all the promises of the covenant were made. It was through the seed or descendants of Abraham that the Seed would come into the world. In other words, it was through the seed of Abraham that God would show His grace in the world through the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

But what exactly does Paul mean? What’s his point? Galatians 3:17+18 “What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”

Paul's argument to the Judaizers was that the law, which came 430 years after God reaffirmed them to Jacob, the covenant he had made with Abraham, didn't cancel the promise or become a condition for the fulfilment of the promise. The law didn't set aside the promise by becoming a condition upon which it was to be fulfilled.

Paul is saying that the fulfilment of the promise was based on God's grace. The coming of the law didn't offer a substitute for the promise, it only encouraged the fulfilment of the promise. In other words, law exemplified or displayed the sin of those to whom it was given. But the promise pointed the law-keepers toward salvation by faith and grace.

Paul says in **Romans 4:13** "It was not through the 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". Paul is basically saying, listen, the law drove men towards faith. And he says, the promise was given as a gift to Abraham regardless of the law. You see loved ones, the law had nothing to do with the fulfilment of the promise, God fulfils His promises regardless of law.

Now we can imagine those legalisers thinking to themselves, 'Paul, you don't know what you're talking about, what's the point of the law? Why did God introduce law in the first place?' And so, Paul anticipating their questions, answers their questions and says in **Galatians 3:19+20** "Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one."

A few years ago, I had an interesting incident occur at our youth group. One night while the kids were playing a game out in the field, two of the girls decided to go visit a relative who lived within walking distance of the park. And they left without either asking permission, or telling anyone they were going. Now, we had a policy that we don't permit any kids to leave youth group unless they have permission given by their parents or their parents come to pick them up. So, I wasn't happy when I realised these girls had taken off. When they returned, I approached them and asked, 'Where have you been?' One of the girls replied, 'Oh, we were just over on the other side of the park.'

The thing that was ironic about this was, if they'd told me the truth, they wouldn't have gotten in trouble. Why? Because, to the best of my recollection, I couldn't remember that I had discussed this youth group policy with these kids, and these two girls were new to the youth group. So, I realised it was possible they didn't know the policy, and therefore it would have been inappropriate for me to 'to tell them off'. Instead, I would have simply explained the policy, and that would have been the end of it. But since they lied, oh yes, you'd better believe they were in trouble! The difference, of course, was that they knew lying was not right!

You see loved ones, people wonder sometimes why God gave the law, and there are several reasons for it, but one of those reasons is precisely what I just described. God gave the law because He knew what was right and wrong, but we didn't. People already broke God's holy standard of righteousness. The law was given so that people would know what was right and wrong, and could therefore be corrected when they violated those commands.

Imagine a world in which God never said to the people, 'You shall not lie,' or 'you shall not commit adultery' or 'you shall not murder.' Can you imagine that loved ones? What a terrible place that would be wouldn't it? Why did God give law? Well, like I mentioned a few weeks ago, the law was given to highlight how sinful we are. Paul himself says in **Romans 7:7** "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law." In order to convince anyone of sin, there had to be a standard by which a person could self-inspect their life. Or as James tells us in **James 1:22-25**, a person needed to be able to look into the mirror of the law and see a dirty soul.

Loved ones when was the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror? When I last looked in the mirror, I saw this young man whose getting older, there are more wrinkles on my face now, there are less hairs on my head now. Yes, I'm still handsome but not as perfectly handsome as I once was. You see when we see ourselves through the mirror of law, we're reminded that we aren't perfect. We're reminded that we can't keep law perfectly in order to justify ourselves before God. The law was given to Israel, not to save those to whom it was given, but to show the need for God's grace in the lives of those to whom it was given.

Now we know that the Old Testament law was given through angels to Moses who was the mediator between Israel and God. And so, in effect, Israel received the law third hand but the grace of God through Jesus was given directly to Israel from God as an offering for sin. And Paul says, though 'God is one', the mediator doesn't represent just one person. In other words, the law involved two parties, one party gave and the other had to obey.

Paul is basically saying that the one God of heaven gave the promise directly to Abraham on behalf of many peoples, that is, all nations. The law required a mediator but the promises given to Abraham didn't need one.

Now again we can imagine the legalisers thinking as they heard these words being read out saying, 'Paul you've seriously lost the plot, do you really want us to believe that the law opposed the promises of God?' And so, Paul anticipating their questions, answers their questions and says in Galatians 3:21+22 "Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe."

Paul says the law didn't set aside the promises, the law didn't work against the promises. Paul says the law worked to fulfil the promises. In fact, Paul says, if anyone could have been justified by law keeping, then certainly the Old Testament law could have done that. And it's not the fault of law that men can't keep it perfectly in order to be right before God. The fault is with men, not the law of God but what the law did was not only highlight our sinfulness but also it confined us to condemnation because of our sin.

But the good news is, because the law highlighted that we are sinners and makes us to hold our hands up to our sinfulness, we see our need to trust God and His grace for us. Paul is saying that the law drove those who were the sons of Abraham by faith to accept the promise. The promise which says that salvation comes through the grace of the cross of Christ.

And so, Paul continues and says in Galatians 3:23-25 "Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian."

Paul says that before the coming of the fulfilment of the promise, people were held in the captivity of sin because the law could not make people right with God. Now I don't know of anyone who is in prison right now, who doesn't want to get out. You go into any prison in the world and simply ask any inmate, do you want to get out of this prison? And the answer will be a resounding, yes.

And that's what Paul is saying here, he's saying that the law, any law reminds us that we're prisoners, we're prisoners to our own sin. And he argues that prisoners want release, he's arguing that anyone who lives under any law wants release from the condemnation of that law.

Now notice that Paul says the law was our 'guardian'. The word guardian is an interesting word, it's the Greek word, 'pedagogue.' It refers to the trusted slave in Roman and Jewish culture who was given charge of the children to both lead and supervise the children who were six to sixteen years in age. Israel as a nation was entrusted to the law in order to be directed to Christ.

The discipline of the law actually showed the immaturity of those to whom it was given. The purpose of the 'pedagogue' was to lead to Christ, the undisciplined and immature. But once the 'pedagogue' had served his purpose, he was discharged from his duties. Paul says this same idea applies to the Old Testament law and we're no longer under that guardian.

Hebrews 10:1 "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves." The law was a shadow of good things to come and when the substance of the shadow came, the law was taken away. And what was the substance? The substance was found at the cross in the form of Jesus the Christ.

Galatians 3:26-29 "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise".

Now isn't this statement incredible? Paul is saying that Christians are actually considered by God to be His children through Christ Jesus. And how are we children of God? We are His children through faith, not through law-keeping. I remember when I was going to visit a friend of mine in Ulverston, he sent me his postcode and I followed the directions on my satnav. Unfortunately, the satnav took me to the wrong location and I ended up on a dead-end road.

Paul says that anyone who seeks to be a child of God through meritorious law-keeping are on the wrong track. They are on a dead-end road that brings only condemnation, for it's impossible for law to save simply because no-one can keep it perfectly.

But how does a person get into that new covenant with God? How do we get right with God if we're not under law? Paul says we get right with God by being **'baptised into Christ'**. Baptism is the point at which the believer comes into a covenant relationship with God, and therefore begins his or her journey of faith. Baptism is the point in time when a believer establishes and signs a covenant to trust in God for salvation by His grace.

And when a person's faith moves them to respond to God's grace, their response is immersion into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. And unlike what many people claim the churches of Christ are doing, baptism isn't a work of law in order to earn God's grace. Baptism can never be a work of law because Paul mentions it here as an argument against works of law.

Baptism is simply a response to grace by the believer, who at the time of immersion contacts the blood of Jesus that came as a result of the grace of God. In other words, the believer comes into a covenant with the One through whom the blessing was shown, that is, Jesus Christ.

Now in the following two chapters of Galatians Paul is going to discuss in great detail what he means by **'clothing ourselves with Christ'**. But for now, we'll simply say, he means we put off the ways of the world. And Paul uses two metaphorical phrases in this passage that refer to the relationship a person establishes with Christ by obedience to the Gospel. By being baptised in water **'into Christ'** a person comes into a realm where they establish a spiritual relationship with Deity. And by **'clothing ourselves with Christ'** a person takes on the spiritual nature of Deity by conforming to Christ.

And let me say this because it needs to be said and maybe some of you need to hear it. If you have never been baptised into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, you're still condemned because of your sin, you haven't received God's free gift of grace for salvation. And remember I'm saying that because that's what the Bible says. Law tells us that we're sinners and we're in need of God to save us because we can't save ourselves, no matter how good we think we are.

You see the law created within Israel the differences and distinctions of race, class and sex. But Paul says that the class distinctions of race, Jew or Greek, social class, slave or free and sex, male or female, all end in Christ. It's not that these distinctions end within themselves in Christ, but that salvation by grace and faith are made applicable to all. In Christ, there is equality to all in reference to salvation.

These social distinctions that bring division among men in the secular world are nullified when one is baptised into Christ. **Colossians 3:11 "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."** Loved ones, all Christians are one in Christ. Christianity isn't linked to any one culture of man, Jews can't culturally claim it and Gentiles can't claim it. And so, because Christianity isn't culturally linked, it can go to all cultures of the world.

All Christians are one in Christ and anyone who becomes a Christian becomes an **'heir according to the promise.'** Paul's point is that being an heir of the promise didn't depend on being a physical descendant of Abraham. It depended on being a **'spiritual descendant'** by faith. The Jews couldn't, because of their physical heritage through Abraham, consider themselves to have a special relationship with God.

Remember what John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 3? Matthew 3:9 "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham".

If anyone obeys the Gospel in order to be clothed with Christ, then they are of the seed of Abraham. Loved ones Abraham trusted God at His promise and looked forward to the cross of Calvary. As Christians, we look back to the cross of Calvary for our salvation.

If you've never been baptised into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, then please don't leave here today without finding out why baptism is so important for you do, in order to enter into that covenant relationship with God.