

## **THE SUPERIORITY OF THE PROMISE**

### **Galatians 3:15-18**

When I think about this passage, I think about a baby that hasn't been born yet and is still inside the womb. Parents don't require anything from that unborn child yet. They don't and can't tell them that they must meet some sort of criteria before they can be born. They're just born. And the child that God has weaved together for you is the child you get, whether it's a boy or a girl, or strong willed or the more sensitive type. You don't decide what that child must be like before they can be born. You don't place any conditions upon it. The child is your child no matter what it is like. So it is with the adopted child. When a couple adopts a baby or a child into their family they enter into an unconditional contract with that child. There are no conditions placed upon that child in order for the child to be accepted by them. The parents adopt the child as though it was born directly into their family. They are received with the same acceptance into the family as a natural child. They are your child, period. Nothing will ever change that. You make a legal, binding agreement to adopt them unconditionally. And you love them no matter what and care for them no matter what, as your own child, with an unconditional love.

Now as time goes on and the child grows, the inevitable happens in a family relationship and parents naturally start placing conditions upon that child. They make the child lose the binky, lose the diapers, get up and go to school, clean his or her room, do chores like take out the trash every evening and help wash dishes. Parents start saying "no" a lot. No staying up late past bed time. No playing in the street. No eating food off the floor. No eating the dog's food. Stop licking everything. No, no, no. There is covenant with that child that if the child obeys, they will be blessed and receive an allowance for a reward, but if the child continually disobeys, they will be grounded and less of a reward. So now we have two family covenants going on. One based on the unconditional acceptance of adoption into the family forever and the other, a conditional acceptance more on fellowship based on obeying household rules. But imagine if the parents started talking as if the child's obedience to the household rules had an influence on the original adoption covenant? "If you don't take out the trash or clean your room, we're going to rip up your adoption papers! You won't be our child anymore!" The parents would be in serious error of confusing the two covenants. Just because the child disobeys, doesn't change the fact the child is their child. It shouldn't even cross their minds that the conditions placed later upon the child have no influence on the original promise of adoption.<sup>1</sup>

That's essentially the same thing being said in Galatians 3:15-18. We have two covenants. One unconditional and one conditional. God made an unconditional covenant promise of adoption with Abraham in Genesis 12 and just because God added the Law hundreds of years later with conditions doesn't mean now that the promised adoption is now dependent upon whether or not they keep those laws. The unconditional Promise of adoption came long before the conditional element of Law. The promise said, "I love you forever." The Law said, "Do well now, and you will be blessed. Do wrong, and things will become much harder for you." It's just like the relationship between parents and their child.

Today we're going to look closely at this incredibly important relationship between Law and Promise. And it is incredibly important, because what's the overarching theme you think of when you think of the Old Testament? Many minds start thinking of matters regarding the works-based Law with Mt. Sinai and sacrifices and the Temple. The majority of the OT Scriptures are written under Law about a people living under Law, and it's so easy to miss the faith-based Promises of God made in the Old Testament that lay underneath as the foundation of faith. It's also important now because Paul just got done explaining how the Law brings a curse to men. The same Law that was given by God and was everything to the Jewish people! They loved the Law! The Jews and the Law were the cream of the crop and now the program of

God has changing according to Paul. Please explain! When the false teachers came in and started teaching that they needed to observe the Law to join in with Abraham, it seemed logical. So Paul has to explain this further because it's quite bold to say Jewish Law is no longer the way to approach God. It had to be very confusing. To clear up the confusion, **we have to grasp Paul's point. We have to get a grasp on the covenants, especially on how the Promise to Abraham is superior to the Law of Moses.**

This matter of the relationship between the covenant of Law and the covenant of Promise is not only important, it can be very exciting. It's through studying the covenants of the Bible that everything really begins to click and the gears start to line up, even prophetically. So I welcome you to Covenant Doctrine Class 101. I warn you that there will be some big words today, lots of thinking, lots of Scripture, and lots of doctrine. And as a teacher I'm not afraid of using big words. Big words and a certain vocabulary are a part of any profession you go into. Every new profession or every new trade you learn comes with new vocabulary and since we're all Christians we need to learn a Christian vocabulary for the Christianity that we profess. We need it to defend the faith. If you're serious about understanding your Bible, today will be great, even exciting. First let's discuss from verse 15 how the Promise is superior in its nature.

### **I. THE PROMISE IS SUPERIOR IN NATURE (V. 15)**

Out of the four ways we'll discuss today on how the Promise is superior, this is probably the most critical, so we'll spend most of our time on it. By the word **nature**, I mean its inherent qualities. The Promise made to Abraham and the Law given to Israel were both covenants but one was superior in nature. Also, by using the word **covenant** we're talking about a legal, binding contract that takes place today between two parties with common interests or responsibilities. Covenants were common in the ancient Near East just like they are today. For example, Abraham and Abimelech established a covenant concerning Abraham's right to the well at Beersheba. They exchanged livestock and planted a tree there to ratify it (Gen. 21:22-24). And today, when you buy a house, you sign a contract with the bank that if the bank loans you the money to purchase the house, you will pay a certain amount back by a certain time and at a certain amount of interest. Both parties benefit from the covenant contract. But there's also a difference between a bilateral covenant and a unilateral covenant. A **unilateral** covenant is one sided, like a will or last testament. One person makes it, it can't be changed by anyone but that person. It's a one-sided covenant. **Bilateral** covenants, however, put conditions or responsibility on both parties to carry out. Though it seems like the Abrahamic Covenant of Promise is at times conditional and at other times unconditional, I think we can say that from God's specific language in the **giving and later ratifying** of that covenant that it is unconditional and unilateral.

#### **A. The Abrahamic Covenant (Promise) is unconditional and unilateral.**

Turn to Genesis 12:1-3 and let's look at the Promise/Abrahamic Covenant again, paying special attention to God's responsibility to keep it through the "I will" statements.

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which **I will** show you; And **I will** make you a great nation, and **I will** bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and **I will** bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you **I will** curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.'" So the three main areas of provision promised to Abraham: Land, Seed, and Blessing. God will provide those things. And then notice the "I will" statements. "I will make you a great nation", "I will bless you". God is putting the responsibility of fulfilling the promise on Himself.

If you fast forward a few years to Genesis 15 it gets reaffirmed. God here is reminding a questioning Abraham that He is with him and his descendants will be as numerous as the

stars. Abraham believes God and God reckons him righteous for it. Pick it up in verse 7. “He said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.’ He said, ‘Oh, Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?’ So He said to him, ‘Bring me a three year old heifer, and a three year old females goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abraham drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. God said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.’ It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch [symbolizing God’s presence] which passed between these pieces. On that day **the Lord made a covenant with Abram**, saying, ‘To your descendants **I have given** this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates;”

So here we have God clearly ratifying the original covenant with Abraham. But what’s special about it is that normally when a covenant was ratified this way between two parties, both of the parties would have walked through the sacrifices, saying, ‘let it be done to me if I break this covenant.’ But **God alone walked through the sacrifices**. He is saying it’s up to Him alone to fulfill the promise to Abraham. He didn’t tell Abraham to walk through as well or expect him too. Surely Abraham was thinking God would have him walk through too, but God actually places a deep sleep upon him and prevents him, though he’s still aware of what’s going on. By God alone walking through the sacrifices, it’s apparent that the covenant is not bilateral covenant, but a unilateral, unconditional covenant that is up to God alone to keep. **God made a promise with Himself and He cannot break a Promise**. Could sin and disobedience on Abraham’s descendants part cause the loss of covenant blessings like possession of the land? Yes, but it never cancelled the covenant and they always own the land whether they possess it or not, whether they live in it or not.<sup>2</sup> Just like how your kids are always going to be your kids whether they obey or disobey. There’s two family covenants there. One on membership, the other on fellowship and reward. John Walvoord said, “The ultimate fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, was never in jeopardy as *even in the midst of their apostasy* they were given strongest assurances of being brought back into the land in the subsequent generations and their continuance as a nation.”<sup>3</sup> There are dozens upon dozens of passages where the Abrahamic Covenant is reaffirmed to Israel despite her failures and faithlessness. I think we see a picture of our own salvation in that. Once saved, always saved. But there are different rewards. We all receive an inheritance that is the same, eternal life, but some will inherit more reward on top of that based on how they lived for the Lord and allowed His will in their lives. Look at Genesis 17:3-8 where the Lord appears to him again at 99 years old.

“Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ‘As for Me, behold, **My covenant is with you**, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram [exalted father], but your name shall be Abraham [father of many]; For **I have made you** the father of a multitude of nations. **I will** make you exceedingly fruitful, and **I will** make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.

**I will** establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. **I will** give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and **I will** be their God.” Again, the “I will” statements leave us understanding that God is the Promise-Maker and He is the Promise-Keeper, no strings attached. He keeps His covenant because He promised He would and He cannot fail to keep His Promise. But I don’t want to stop there. I want to look at each recurring affirmation of the promised provisions to get the point across.

1. **Seed Provision Reaffirmed – Davidic Covenant**

God reaffirmed the ‘seed’ aspect in 2 Samuel 7:1-16 to David when he was planning to build a permanent temple for God. It is known as the Davidic Covenant. In verse 9: “I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and **I will** make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. **I will** also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and **I will** give you rest from all your enemies. The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a **house** for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and **I will** establish his **kingdom**. He shall build a house for My name and **I will** establish the **throne** of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, **I will** correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed before you. Your **house** and your **kingdom** shall endure before Me forever; your **throne** shall be established forever.” Same thing. God reaffirming that **He will** establish the seed aspect. Key ‘seed’ words: House, throne, and kingdom. Luke 1:32-33 uses those exact words to describe Christ as the ultimate heir of the throne of David, the house of Jacob, and the everlasting kingdom.

2. **Land Provision Reaffirmed – Palestinian Covenant**

The Land Covenant is sometimes referred to as the Palestinian Covenant because it is in the land of Palestine. It was reaffirmed on several occasions and is also unconditional and everlasting. With the other provisions, its total fulfillment is yet future. The Israelites have never had all of the land that God has promised them, not even under the days of Solomon, when they were at their finest hour. However, long after the days of Joshua and King Solomon, the prophets of God spoke of a great future possession and of the land. The great hope of restoration still remains when God brings them back from their great dispersion all over the world. The land has already been reaffirmed in the passages read but to add to it, Genesis 13:15 says, “The land which you see, **I will** give it to you and to your descendants **forever**. **I will** also make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for **I will** give it to you.” So the literal land is unconditionally forever Israel’s, as they’re in some of it today.

### 3. **Blessing Provision Reaffirmed – New Covenant**

The Blessing aspect is also later reaffirmed in the New Covenant described in Jeremiah 31:31-34 that we partake of now through Christ: “Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when **I will** make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, My covenant which they broke [The breakable covenant was the Law from Mt. Sinai], although I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘But this covenant which **I will** make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘**I will** put My law within them and on their heart **I will** write it; and **I will** be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will forgive their iniquities and their sin **I will** remember no more.’” Hebrews 8 quotes that same passage and says immediately following it, “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete.” The one that is obsolete is referring to the Mosaic Law Covenant. But notice how all of these covenants connected to the Abrahamic Covenant of Gen. 12 have that unconditional “I will” phrase because they’re simply extensions of it. **The Abrahamic Covenant really consists of three covenants:** The Palestinian (Land), the Davidic (Seed) and the New (Blessing) Covenant and all have this eternal, unconditional nature about them where it’s up to God alone to fulfill and keep that covenant or promise. We leave it to Him. That’s critical to remember.

#### B. **The Mosaic Covenant (Law) is conditional and bilateral.**

The term ‘Mosaic’ doesn’t get its name from the artwork called mosaic – where bits and pieces of glass or ceramic or stone are assembled and glued together – but it gets its name from Moses. God gave the Law through Moses to Israel. It was made for Israelites who had a literal land and a literal nation to govern with its moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects. The Law had plenty of “I will” statements in it but not like those we find connected to the Abrahamic Promise, for **when the Lord said, “I will,” in the Law, it was connected with a condition. “If you do this... then, I will do this.” It was full of ‘if, then’ statements. Full of conditions.** For example, Exodus 23:22, “For **if** you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, **then** I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.” Deuteronomy 28:1 says, “Now it shall be, **if** you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you **if** you obey the Lord your God.” And Moses goes on in that same passage to list several blessings for obedience. But then you get to verse 15 and he says, “But it shall come about, **if** you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:” From there, he goes on the list the curses and it literally becomes the longest, most-depressing chapter in all of Scripture in my opinion. It is graphic with fire, brimstone, locust, drought, famine, cannibalism, plagues, worldwide dispersion. It’s horrific. And it’s exactly what has happened to Israel, being removed temporarily from the blessing place of God until that time when the tribulation does come and their hard hearts are awakened to the fact that they’ve missed the Messiah.

From studying the nature of these covenants in depth we can understand that the Promise and the Law did not function the same way. They were totally different in how they were given by God. The Promise was made unconditionally with Abraham and one-sided, whereas the Law, however, came with conditions and was two-sided, depending upon Israel's obedience to it. And no one can change those covenants. Even God must honor them. No one can take away from or add conditions to these covenants. They must remain as they are.

## II. **THE PROMISE IS SUPERIOR IN ITS RECIPIENTS (V. 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. The Law had the Israelites – “seeds” – mainly in mind while the Promise emphasized Christ – the “Seed” – as the main recipient, the joint-heir and joint-beneficiary with Abraham. And we have been grafted in to partake of the Promise, not by physically being of Jewish seed, but spiritually through Christ, who is the “Seed” – singular. Every covenant and every promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Everything leads to Christ. It's all about Him. When the Jews saw that word ‘seed’ they mainly saw themselves in that word because it can be used as a plural word. We use it that way too. For example, a farmer might tell his son to take the grain truck to town and get ‘some seed’. He's not sending him to town to pick up one seed, but seeds. And it was okay for the Jews to look at it that way for even God used the word seed to refer to his physical descendants at times but Paul picks up on the fact that He also uses that word to refer just to Christ. Also notice Paul's belief in the accuracy of the very words of Scripture from this. He believes in a verbal inspiration, that every word is inspired. Abraham and Christ are the ultimate joint-heirs, joint beneficiaries and recipients of the Promise.<sup>4</sup> And the promise comes to pass, not when people join themselves to the seed of Jewish descendants by being circumcised and keeping the Law, but by joining themselves to the singular seed that is Christ.<sup>5</sup>

## III. **THE PROMISE IS SUPERIOR IN ITS PRECEDENCE (V. 17)**

The Promise preceded the Law and is superior in that sense because it means that whatever purpose God had in giving the Law was to ultimately serve the purpose of the Promise. “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.” The Law came long after the Promise. Paul said 430 years but could have said 645 years later and proved his point further but apparently had 430 years in mind to reference the exact date it was reaffirmed to Jacob (who is Israel) in Genesis 26:24. The sequence of Promise before Law certainly says something about the superiority of the Promise because some Jews taught that the Law was there since the beginning. It was in the Garden and with Cain and Able... And what Paul says it that they're wrong. It didn't show up for long until **after** Abraham and the other patriarchs lived and were justified by faith before Law was a thing. They couldn't have been justified by Law because it wasn't even given yet. **So the Law does not nullify the Promise.** Just because God gave Israel the Law, doesn't mean that the original covenant was cancelled out. It didn't change the Promise. It didn't add to it or take away from it. It actually established it. They had just lost track of the Promise and its superiority by placing all the weight of their justification on Law.

## IV. **THE PROMISE IS SUPERIOR IN ITS PREFERENCE BY GOD (V. 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.” God chose to grant the inheritance by Promise, which requires faith. If it was by law, it couldn't be by faith. If it's by faith, it can't be by law. The Promise doesn't

need the Law to complete it or to add to it because one is a faith-based system and one is a works-based system. **If it's by Law then it's not by Promise and if its by Promise then it's not by Law. But God chose Promise.** They don't blend. Notice all of Paul's contrasts going on already in this chapter. Grace vs. Law. Faith vs. works. Curse vs. Blessing. Condemnation vs. Righteousness. Promise vs. Law. Abrahamic Covenant vs. Mosaic Covenant. Paul is treating the covenants subject just like he treated Law versus Grace because the Promise is all about grace and receiving it by simply believing God's promise. **We, as the Church, trust in God's promise to us through His written Word that we are saved by putting our trust in Christ, as Abraham trusted God's promise to him through His spoken word that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.** Promise and Law operated for a while, more or less side by side, but not blended. You have a decision to make. You are either going to live under the covenant of Law, which is outdated and growing obsolete in the grace age and is no longer the way to approach God, or you can live according to the Promise, believing that God's testimony in Christ as the Mediator of the New Covenant connects you to the Promise, and that whoever believes in His Son will be saved. If it's based on Law, it can't be based on Promise. If it's based on Promise, it can't be based on Law. But he answers the correct path to take: God has granted it to Abraham by means of a faith-based Promise.

## V. SOME OVERALL APPLICATION:

### A. Trust God's promise and not your works.

The reoccurring theme that is being ingrained in us as we go through this book is that we're saved by grace through faith in Christ and not by works. We're not under Law. And if you've never placed your faith in Christ as your Savior you need to do that today and partake of the Promise and the inheritance of eternal life.

### B. God keeps His promises!

He cannot, not keep them! God is a God who cannot lie. It is not possible for Him to break a promise because He is perfect. How great is it to know, in a world of broken promises and broken covenants, that God cannot break His! In a world of unreliability, excuses, comprising, divorces, bankruptcies, and political jargon... there's one Person whose word you can 100% fully trust and who will not go back on their word for a moment. Someone who will really love you always with an unchanging love as a father loves His child. If we as mere men respect covenants as much as we do, how much more will God keep His covenants! How much more will He honor and fulfill those He has made and put Himself under! He has even puts Himself under contract with us!

### C. God has a covenant with us!

Eternal security can be seen in the fact that He regards us according to the Promise that He made with Abraham! Sin and disobedience can cause discipline and the loss of the covenant blessings but it can't cause a complete loss of the covenant.<sup>6</sup> We may sin and grieve the Spirit of God or quench the Spirit of God in us, but He's not going anywhere and is always just and ready to forgive us of our sins if we confess them. If you've genuinely placed your trust in Christ and are truly His child, He won't un-adopt you. You are His child and will always be – just like in a real family. We've inherited eternal life and we experience the spiritual blessing of the Spirit now. Enjoy your inheritance! But as time goes on, we're going to enjoy it more and more. Even the other provisions made like the seed provision in the Millennial Kingdom where we reign with Christ and the land provision pointing ultimately to the New Earth and New Jerusalem where we dwell in sinless perfection for eternity. What a promise to behold! What grace!

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, “Insights on Galatians,” *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 8* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), 43.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 42.

<sup>4</sup> David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 309.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Benware, 43.