

THE BASIS OF OUR ACCEPTANCE BY GOD GALATIANS 3:15-22

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I knew Dave years ago when I was in my first church job. He was a single guy who came along on some of our hiking and camping trips. He was a very practical guy who would watch over the younger kids and help out wherever help was needed. He was kind and humble.

Dave was also smart. He did well in college. He got a degree in civil engineering and got a good job. He didn't really enjoy it though. He quit the company after a few months and became a carpenter. He liked making things with his hands.

Dave struggled with depression in these years when I knew him. He had a very sensitive spiritual side, but he struggled with doubts about whether God could ever accept him. We had long conversations about God and about how we could be right with him. We went over lots of verses in the Bible, but it was difficult to convince him that we could be secure in our relationship with God through faith in Christ.

It was pretty clear to me about the roots of his doubts. Dave didn't have much of a relationship with his father. Dad abandoned the family before Dave could really remember much about him. He could count on one hand the number of times when his father had shown up in his life to see him. That created deep hurts and feelings of insecurity in his life.

Most of us have had better fathers than Dave did. But for those of us with a spiritual bent, with some awareness of our mortality, the issue of our acceptance by God is a legitimate concern. We are likely to die some day and, if there is a God, He will have some say in where we spend eternity. We need and want assurance about our eternal destiny.

That was an issue of concern for new Christians living in the Roman province of Galatia in the first century. We have seen that the Apostle Paul and his friend Barnabas visited these towns in what we know today as Turkey. Paul described his own dramatic conversion and told these mostly Gentile people that they could be right with God by simply believing in Jesus. Many responded well to that, and a number of churches were started.

But then Paul began getting reports that Jews who claimed to be Christians came to this area and tried to convince the Gentile Christians that to be completely right with God, they had to become Jewish. They had to start following the Old Testament law of Moses. That created confusion among them. These circumstances prompted Paul to write this letter to them. We have seen in our study so far that Paul keeps going back to

the basic message that faith in Jesus and what He did in dying on the cross for our sins is sufficient to put us in right standing with the God who is really there. Today we find a further development in his argument.

I.

In vv. 15-18 of Galatians #3 we learn that OUR ACCEPTANCE BY GOD IS BASED UPON THE PROMISE OF GOD TO ABRAHAM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. OUR ACCEPTANCE BY GOD...) There are two things about this promise of God to Abraham which have relevance to us. The first is that it is Abraham's kind of faith which leads to justification. The second is that the promise of God to Abraham led to the coming into the world of Jesus.

Last week we saw at the beginning of #3 that the emphasis of the Jewish false teachers on the law of Moses resulted in Paul's appeal to Abraham. Abraham was an even bigger deal to the Jews than was Moses. Moses may have been involved in receiving the law of God on Mt. Sinai. But Abraham was regarded as the father of the nation. Jews were referred to as sons of Abraham.

If you have your Bibles, look back at vv. 5-8 in this chapter. There Paul writes, **“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— 6 just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’? 7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”**

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. The New Testament word for that is ‘justification.’ It means “to be declared righteous.” Paul is arguing that it is faith in Jesus alone which produces this justification. It also makes us spiritual sons of Abraham.

Then also in v. 9 we have this reminder of the promise of God to Abraham that in his descendants all of the nations would be blessed. Paul sees that promise fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and His death on the cross, which opens the way for all, Jews and Gentiles, who will believe in Him to be spiritually blessed.

Now in v. 15 Paul writes, **“To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.”** The promises which God made to Abraham took the form of a covenant, a formal agreement. In Genesis #15 v. 9 (GENESIS 15:9) the Lord tells Abraham how to set up this covenant. He says, **“Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”** In the next verse (GENESIS 15:10) we read, **“And he [Abraham] brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.”**

Back in the time of Abraham they did not have notaries. They had very few lawyers. But they did have a few wealthy people. They had tribal leaders, and they had kings. So when these top of the food chain people made agreements, they would make deals like this. They would cut a bunch of animals in half, separate them, and walk together between them. This would signify that if either party broke the agreement, he would be subject to death, just as these animals had been killed.

So in these verses in Genesis God is making a covenant, an agreement, with Abraham. This involves the promises of God to Abraham to make of him a great nation, to make his name great, to bless his friends and curse his enemies, and to bless all of the nations of the world through him. But here is the interesting twist that we find in the signing of the agreement in v. 17 of #15 in Genesis. (GENESIS 15:17) This is what it says: **“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”** Abraham does not walk through these divided animals with this manifestation of God. Only the Lord is signing this covenant, which means that the fulfillment of its terms is dependent upon Him alone. He is certain to do it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 15 of our passage Paul is saying that you can't just change a covenant or go back on a contract because you feel like it. The way that a contract was made in Paul's day was different than in the time of Abraham. But the point is the same. Signers of a contract can't go back on the terms of the deal. How much more certain it is then that God will not go back on a covenant which He has made with someone. So just because Moses appears on the scene and God makes some kind of deal with him does not mean that the earlier covenant has become null and void.

The Abrahamic Covenant still stands. The promises of God to Abraham and his descendants still stand. And the promise of justification by faith alone in God still stands. It is not superseded by the law code which God established with Moses and his people. The Judaizers are wrong in trying to put too much trust in living by this law code.

Verse 16: **“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”** Paul is again referring to a passage in Genesis. It is Genesis #22 vv. 17 & 18. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 22:17) In v. 17 of Genesis 22 God says to Abraham, **“I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies...”**

The term “offspring” in Hebrew, and in Greek, and in English can refer to a group or to an individual. In the first use of “offspring” in this verse the Lord is clearly referring to a bunch of people. These offspring will be as numerous as the stars and the sand. But in the second use of “offspring” the Lord uses the singular pronoun “his” in reference to enemies. So he is saying that one person will possess the gate of his enemies.

(GENESIS 22:18) This same one person is in view in v. 18: **“...and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”** That one person in view is Jesus Christ.

The Judaizers in Paul's day wanted to think that the divine promises to Abraham were limited to his physical descendants, to the Jews. But Paul says that those promises find special fulfillment in Jesus. So those who are connected by faith to Jesus benefit from the promises made to Abraham. The one who is connected by faith to Jesus receives the promises to Gentiles contained in the Abrahamic Covenant. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul continues in v. 17 of our passage, **“This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.”** The time reference involves the span between Abraham and Moses. There is some debate about the exact start and end point that Paul had in mind. But the apostle's basic point is that the Abrahamic Covenant was around for centuries. When Moses appeared on the scene, and God gave the law to him on Mt. Sinai, that earlier covenant with those unconditional promises was not nullified. God signed that agreement. He is certain to fulfill it.

Verse 18: **“For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”** Here we have the introduction of the new term “inheritance.” The Abrahamic Covenant promised that Abraham would have many descendants and that they would occupy a definite territory. The inheritance promise included a certain land. Gentiles were promised some kind of general blessing.

The Jews of Paul's day were convinced that their inheritance would come as a result of keeping the law of Moses. One of their early histories, 2 Maccabees, which is found in Catholic Bibles (2 MACCABEES 2:17-18), said this: **“It is God who has saved all his people, and has returned the inheritance to all, and the kingship and the priesthood and consecration, as he promised through the law.”** So it was that some of these Jewish Christians were trying to convince the Gentile Christians in Galatia that obedience to the law of Moses was necessary for them to have a right relationship with God. Paul is saying that all of you Christians should focus instead on the Abrahamic Covenant and the promises that are found there.

Law and promise involve two different operating principles. Some Bible teachers have phrased it as “I will” vs. “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” Paul is saying that replacing promises with law would be going back on God's Word. The people of God can always trust God's promises.

We Gentile Christians trace our blessing to the promises made to Abraham. Those promises were part of an unconditional covenant which finds its fulfillment in Jesus. We are blessed by virtue of our identification with Him. He is also the model for us in that He believed God, and because of that he was accepted by God.

In Ephesians #1 the Apostle Paul explains the nature of our blessings as Christians. It is not that we have to work hard in order to be blessed by God. It is that by virtue of faith in Jesus, we are already blessed. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:3) Thus in v. 3 of Ephesians 1 the Bible says, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...”** In the rest of the chapter he describes those blessings: forgiveness of sins, redemption, adoption into God’s family, reception of the Holy Spirit, revelation of God’s declared will, etc. Those things are already ours simply as a result of becoming Christians. So our motivation in life becomes not working to be accepted by God but rather working and living life because we have been accepted by the God who is there.

II.

In vv. 19-22 we learn that THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW IS TO REVEAL OUR SIN. (II. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW IS...) There are other purposes that the law serves. But this is the one in view in these verses. In v. 19 Paul writes, **“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.”** The law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai served a purpose. But it was secondary and subservient to the agreement made with Abraham and the promises contained therein.

Verse 19 explains several ways in which this Mosaic Covenant was of lesser significance than the Abrahamic Covenant. First, Paul says that it was added. That implies that it was not the essence of Jewish faith and hope.

Second, this law was added to deal with transgressions, with sins. It served to expose them and address them. It was needed to point out the seriousness of sin and the problem of sin as rebellion against God. Jeremiah described the nature of the problem in v.9 of #17 (JEREMIAH 17:9) of his Old Testament book: **“The heart is deceitful above all things,/ and desperately sick;/ who can understand it?”**

Third, the law was put in place by angels. There is not much in the Old Testament which explains how angels were involved in giving of the law. But Deuteronomy #33 v. 2 (DEUTERONOMY 33:2) does have this to say: **“The Lord came from Sinai/ and dawned from Seir upon us;/ he shone forth from Mount Paran;/ he came from the ten thousands of holy ones,/ with flaming fire at his right hand.”** This is describing the Lord’s appearance to Moses on Mt. Sinai where the giving of the Ten Commandments happened. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the word “angels” instead of “holy ones.”

The church leader Stephen adds this information in his speech in Acts #7 v. 53, as he speaks to the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem: **“...you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”** This informs us that the Jewish thinking in the first century was that the angels had a part in the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Fourth, v. 19 in our passage (PROJECTOR OFF) says that there was a mediator involved in giving the law to the Jewish people. This was apparently Moses. My interpretation of the relevance of these last two points is that Paul is saying that the promises made to Abraham came direct from God. The law of God delivered on Mt. Sinai came through angels and through Moses. It is thus of a lesser significance than the Abrahamic Covenant. It is an add-on. It certainly does not supersede the agreement and the promises which God made to Abraham and his descendants.

Then fifth, v. 19 says that the law was added “until the offspring should come.” In other words, the law of Moses was intended to be a temporary deal. Once the special offspring came, who is Jesus, the law would not be in effect. The Jews wanted to think that the Law of Moses was an eternal deal. The first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “...**for though we be deprived of our wealth, of our cities, or of the other advantages we have, our law continues immortal...**” (Ag. Ap. 2:277) That is not what Paul says here.

The opponents of Paul, the Judaizers, grew up focusing their lives on following the Mosaic Law. They wanted the Gentile Christians to believe in Jesus but also to add the Mosaic Law to their religious package. But that was not the gospel. The gospel was and is to believe in Jesus. Even in Christianity we have this temptation to add things to the gospel, to add rules and traditions and moral requirements to the gospel. But the gospel is believe in Jesus and you will be saved.

Paul continues his argument in v. 20: “**Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.**” There was a famous Anglican scholar in the 1800s who claimed that there were more than 250 interpretations of this verse. The exact meaning is uncertain. My interpretation is that Moses is the mediator in view in v. 19. Paul says that the Mosaic law involved a mediator and two parties to the agreement. The success of this Mosaic Covenant depended on human obedience. But God alone was the responsible party in the Abrahamic Covenant. He is certain to keep His promises. So that earlier covenant and its promises should be regarded as more important than the law.

Verse 21: “**Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.**” Is the law at odds with the Abrahamic Covenant and with God’s promises to Abraham? Certainly not. God gave both of them. But the law cannot give life. If it could, then there would have been no need for God to have sent His Son into the world to become a human being and to suffer a horrible crucifixion.

Paul concludes our passage in v. 22: “**But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.**” The law shows the bankruptcy of human effort. It shows the need for a Savior.

Notice that the author switches from the use of the term “law” to the word “Scripture.” At the time when Paul was writing that would have meant the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old

Testament. The whole Old Testament made the Jewish people aware of their sinfulness. But this was done so that people might see their need for a Savior.

In Greek mythology there is a story about a guy named Sisyphus who was supposedly the founder of the city of Corinth. Sisyphus was punished by Hades, the god of the underworld, for twice cheating death. (PROJECTOR ON--- SISYPHUS) Sisyphus was punished by the god of the underworld to push a huge boulder up a hill. But always when the boulder got near the top, it would roll back down. This was the picture of the effect of the law on the people of God.

The New Testament version of this situation is described in Romans #11 v. 32. (ROMANS 11:32) There the Apostle Paul writes, **“For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”**

It was Jesus who became the descendant of Abraham who fulfilled the promise that through Abraham all of the nations of the world would be blessed. He became the source of mercy for those who would recognize their state of sinfulness and their need for a Savior. The law judges, but the promise of God through Jesus becomes our source of mercy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

I have always enjoyed ministry with kids. One of my first teaching experiences with kids came when I was in seminary. Another student and I were assigned to teach a class of boys who were in about fourth or fifth grade. As I recall, there were about seven or eight of them. We sat with them in church. Then we had the Sunday school class after church. Then we also had lunch with them afterward. So we got to know them fairly well. These guys were pretty responsive to our teaching. I have had classes of boys since then which were more challenging than what we had with these guys.

There was one distinctive thing about the setting for this class of kids. It was in the Dallas County Home for Boys. It was a juvenile correctional facility. It had a chapel where we had a church service. Then we had Sunday school classes. Then we stayed for lunch.

I remember one boy in particular. He was short for his age. But somehow he had learned how to hot-wire cars. He had broken into cars and stolen them. He was so short, though, that he had to put something under his bottom so that he could see over the dashboard. He had also gone out to the airport once or twice, and followed a family onto a plane going to another part of the country. This was before 9/11 when airport security was not so strict. He was not a problem to us in our Sunday school class.

I have had tougher kids to deal with since then. But the violation of the law with which these kids were guilty had put them in this place. The law showed them to be sinners. All of us who have kids know that they are sinners. The law of God shows us that we are sinners.

The problem is that we humans tend to make laws superficial so that we can think that we live up to them. Jesus came along, however, and explained the true meaning of the law of God. He looked at the Ten Commandments, and He told His followers: "You think that you have not committed murder, but I say to you that whoever hates his brother is guilty of murder." "You think that you have not been guilty of adultery? I say to you whoever lusts after another woman who is not your wife is guilty of adultery." Then there is the Tenth Commandment which says that whenever we covet something that doesn't belong to us, we have broken the law of God. All of us break God's laws. Paul's point is that trying to win acceptance from God by living up to His laws is futile. We can never do it perfectly.

But we can be accepted by God on the basis of faith in Jesus. He provided a pardon for sin by dying on the cross in our place. We simply need to accept that pardon.

If you turn over to the next chapter, you will find another aspect of our acceptance by faith in Jesus. In #4 v. 4 Paul says, **"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law..."** Notice that it says that Jesus was born under the law. The God-man Jesus obeyed the law perfectly, so that He might qualify as our substitute.

Then v. 5 adds, **"...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."** Jesus Christ by His death freed us from our situation of bondage under the law. He did this so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Adoption had a special meaning in the Roman Empire. Paul, remember, was writing to Roman residents of the province of Galatia. They were mostly Gentiles. If a wealthy Roman lacked a son, he could choose a young man who might be fit to carry on his name and to claim the family inheritance. This wealthy man would obtain the permission of the family of the young man and the young man himself. If all were in agreement, there would be a legal proceeding in which the young man officially became part of the new family. He lost all of his obligations to the old family and became responsible only to his new father.

Roman law gave almost complete authority to the father of a family. He could kick any of his kids out of the family that he wanted. But he could never, never under Roman law disinherit an adopted son. An adopted son was forever part of the new family.

Do you see the spiritual significance of Paul's statement? When we trust in Jesus, we are adopted into His family. We become forever part of God's family. We are always accepted and loved by Him. Now we may mess up and do bad things. But as would be true of any good earthly father, He will always love us. He may need to discipline us. He may cause hard things to happen to us to get us back on the right path. But our acceptance is total. Such is the wonderful acceptance which God has offered to us in Jesus Christ.