3-23-25

Galatians 3:15-29

The apostle Paul is writing to the Galatian church because some people have come in teaching a false Gospel. These Judaizers insist that Christians must also follow the law of Moses in order to achieve salvation. Paul has been arguing that it is only by faith in Jesus that one can be saved and that no amount of following the law or any set of rules or works will help. As he says to the Ephesian church: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.* (Eph 2:8-9) Further, Paul has used quotations from the Old Testament to prove his point.

Paul can foresee the next argument that the Judaizers are going to use against him: they are going to claim that he is forsaking the law; that he is advocating lawlessness. So now he gives a thorough explanation of the purpose of the law of Moses. But first, he shows that the law did not set aside the original promise given to Abraham; the promise that Abraham believed and was counted to him as righteousness.

Beginning with a lesser argument, Paul talks about a covenant or agreement made between people. Once an agreement is ratified, it can no longer be changed. For instance, if you make an agreement with someone to buy a house and sign all the proper documents; the seller can’t come back and make the sale price higher. Likewise, you can’t come back and make the purchase price lower. Likewise with a last will and testament. Once it is made and the person is deceased, others cannot change it. Yes, in this life challenges to documents happen all the time; but that’s not the way it’s supposed to be: that is just the way of things in a sin filled world.

Now to the greater argument: a covenant made by God. No one is going to change it. Some might choose to disobey it and reap the consequences, but they are not going to change it. God made a covenant with Abraham. And the promise to Abraham was also to his seed or descendent. Paul makes sure to point out that the specific seed God referred to was Jesus. Jesus was the one descendant of Abraham that the promise revolved around and depended upon.

Remember that this promise involved Abraham having many descendants; even kings and nations would come from him; it also gave him land, and most importantly for us a means of blessing for all the nations. That blessing is the salvation offered through Jesus.

In verse 17 an important point is made to counteract the claims of the Judaizers: another covenant which came after the covenant of promise, does not nullify the first covenant. That first covenant of promise was made by God and it stands, it is not replaced by the covenant of Moses; it is not replaced by the law. The promise, or inheritance, given to Abraham did not depend on any law; remember that in that original covenant, God did not require anything of Abraham. The promise of children, land, and blessing came from God strictly because He chose to give them to Abraham.

Fortunately, Abraham chose to believe God, and this faith was counted to him as righteousness; but it was not a requirement to receive the promise. Down through the centuries, there have been many Israelites who have not believed God and although they might receive some of the promise in land or descendants, they did not receive righteousness. The supreme example being the rejection of Jesus when He came to them. By rejecting Him, they rejected the only One who could provide them with righteousness.

Paul now goes ahead and asks the obvious question, if the covenant based on promise still stands, why in the world did God give the law? The blunt answer is because of transgressions; because of sin. First off, it makes absolutely sure that we know what sin is. Now, we know right from wrong. What tree did Adam and Eve eat from? It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Just as we inherited a sinful nature from our first parents, we inherited a knowledge of good and evil. Because of our inherent sinful nature, our tendency is to choose evil when we get the chance.

We can see that from when God had to destroy the earth with a flood due to the absolute corruption of mankind. We can see that from when God told the Israelites to wipe out every person who lived in Canaan due to their wickedness. Leviticus 18 lists a series of sexual sins and grievous sacrifices the people of Canaan committed because they were unrestrained in their wickedness. And that part of the law is telling the people of Israel not to do those things.

The law gave a restraint to the people whose natural desires are set against God. And these laws reflect the holy nature of God; which is one of the most important reasons we can’t ignore the Old Testament. The law showed how horrible sin actually is and how terrifying the consequences are. In the same way, Jesus, who fulfilled the law, demonstrated on the cross how evil sin really is and how devastating the consequences. As Christians we are truly saved by grace through faith in Jesus; but still, we must never take sin lightly.

Now, as I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there are a few verses in Galatians that are notoriously difficult to get an exact interpretation of; and the second half of 19 and verse 20 fit that category. In fact, I have from a couple sources that verse 20 has over 300 different interpretations. I guess somebody had nothing better to do than sit around and count them. Regardless, when we have a situation like that, we don’t worry about it. We glean whatever is obvious and move on.

One is the important idea of a mediator. Obviously, Moses was a mediator. He went back and forth between God and the people. God gave Moses the law and instructions for the tabernacle and its furnishings and in turn Moses explained them to the people of Israel. Furthermore, Moses interceded for the people. So many times we read in the Old Testament of Moses falling on his face before God and pleading for the people. God dealt with His people through a mediator.

Then we have Jesus. He is also a mediator between God and man. It is Jesus who removed the enmity between us and made peace possible where previously only wrath existed. And even now we know that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding on our behalf. He was able to access God when we were not, and then bring us into His presence.

Now think for a moment about God’s promise to Abraham; there was no mediator. God dealt directly with Abraham giving him and his seed the covenant of promise. Then came the law which was given through a mediator. But then there was Jesus, who instituted a new covenant in His blood; which actually fulfilled the promise and the law. Not only that, while we consider Jesus as a mediator, remember that He is God the Son; He is part of the Triune God; He is God. So in the fulfillment of the promise we are actually dealing directly with God as Abraham did. What a beautiful and awesome gift our God has given His people; that we His creation can speak directly to Him and have fellowship.

Paul’s next hypothetical question is asking if the law is then contrary to the promise of God. His answer is very strongly in the negative. God’s own law cannot be contrary to His promise. That would indicate a double-mindedness in God that is absolutely impossible. God’s character is always consistent.

Paul next strikes a heavy blow to the Judaizers: *For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.* That phrase “*impart life*” is critical. Keeping the law cannot give eternal life; it was never meant to. The reason it can’t has been already pointed out by Paul when he earlier quoted from Leviticus 18: *He who practices them shall live by them.* In other words, one must keep all the law flawlessly; something no one is going to do.

So Paul gives another reason for the law: to shut up everyone under sin. Now that may seem odd but by giving the law God is trying to show everyone that we cannot gain eternal life on our own. Unfortunately, many will not heed this blessed warning and try to do so anyway. But for those who pay attention and understand that the law is not the way of redemption, God has made a way. It goes back to the promise and its fulfillment in Jesus. Faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour is the way to eternal life. Jesus has life in Himself and He will impart life to those who choose to follow Him.

But there is yet another reason for the law: it was a custodian, a tutor, or perhaps more exactly, a pedagogue. In times past, it was common for the well to do to have a wise elderly slave called a pedagogue whose responsibility would be to care for a child from about the age of 6 to 16. They were to make sure they got to school and did their studies. Once the child reached a certain age, the pedagogue was no longer necessary. The pedagogue would have done their job of pointing the child in the right direction.

And that is part of the reason for the law: it was to point the way to Jesus. Through all the moral guidelines, through all the ceremony and sacrifices, through all the civil rules; the light was shown on Jesus Christ. When He came to live here and did His work on the cross; when He rose from the dead and then ascended back to His glorious place in heaven; we were shown the deeper meanings of all the law of Moses. And once we realize our need of Christ we are saved by the original promise made to Abraham; a salvation and redemption that comes only by faith; faith in the seed of Abraham.

The law is still important to us, but we are not under its authority. The law shows us what is pleasing to God, it tells us of His holy character, and because we are imperfect people, we still need this guidance; but we are not under its authority; it no longer has us shut up under sin; it is no longer our pedagogue. As James the brother of our Lord tells us: *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.* (Jas 2:26) The point being that works do not save us; but that if we truly have faith there had better be works to prove it. By the law we know what works are acceptable and what type of living is holy.

Now one of the most fascinating verses in the Bible: *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.* And of course, that means “sons and daughters” or “children”. What an amazing thing to consider that God the Father would adopt us as His own children when we accept Jesus as Saviour. We are made co-heirs with Jesus of all that is the Father’s; and Jesus does not begrudge us. In accepting Christ, we are children of God, we are spiritual descendants of Abraham, we are all brothers and sisters here in Christ’s church. I can’t say we are always a happy family, but one day, we will be.

Paul now speaks of being baptized into Christ; in other words, Christian baptism. Baptism is an outward sign that you are associating yourself with your Saviour, Jesus. It is also to be a public proclamation of your belief in Him. But it is also deeply spiritual and an ordinance from Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, Christian baptism is associated with receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit. But there is no set order; sometimes the Spirit comes after baptism, sometimes during, sometimes even before. The Holy Spirit is not to be put in a box.

But I think it’s important to also remind you that there is at least one case where He did not come at all. It is with Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8. He’s the one who offered Peter and John money if he could cause others to receive the Holy Spirit. He was sharply rebuked. The warning here is that even if you claim Christ and get baptized, the Holy Spirit will not commit to indwelling you unless your heart is right. That’s a dangerous place to be since the seal of salvation is the Holy Spirit Himself.

But for those who have turned to Christ and as Paul puts it “*clothed yourselves with Christ*”, salvation is assured. You have permanently associated yourself with Jesus, you cling to Him as the only source of eternal life, you know that you are hopelessly sinful and that it is only by the merciful grace of God that you can look to heaven as your home.

In the Kingdom of Christ, there is no distinction between people regardless of ethnicity, social status, or sex. Please take that for what it means. It means that, in Christ, we are all equal and equally valuable to God. There are still differences in physical characteristics, and there is still male and female. While all have their work to do for the Lord, there are still different tasks for each. But the dividing wall of the Temple is gone; we are together in Christ.

We belong to Christ; we are heirs with Him; we are children of the Father; we are spiritual descendants of Abraham; and it is all according to a promise. A promise God made centuries ago, to an ordinary man. But God never goes back on His word. He is a faithful God we serve.

Prayer

Almighty and gracious God, You are able to make a promise; and then to enact laws that show us who You are, keep us from grievous evil, and also show us the way to the fulfillment of Your promise: our merciful Lord and Saviour, Jesus. You are the God of the impossible, and so we are able to cease demanding explanation, and accept Your perfect wisdom and sovereignty.

Your perfect law is good to meditate on, from it we can learn much about You. Likewise it is good to meditate on Jesus, who is Your word and the exact representation of Yourself. And how perfectly in line with Jesus is Your law, yet Jesus alone is our redemption.

We want to thank You for the inheritance we have in Jesus. I must admit, we don’t really understand what all that means. But Your word does tell us: *“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.”* So we know that what awaits us is more wonderful than anything we have experienced. So we wait with expectant joy, and ask Your guidance to do the work You have for us to do.

We pray these things in the name of our Saviour, Jesus

Amen