

A STUDY IN GALATIANS
Part 11 – “The Promise of Salvation”
Galatians 3:10-18

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Our title reflects a promise of God. A more appropriate word for “promise” is *covenant*. God simply is a covenant-making God. When he revealed himself to Abraham, he made a covenant with him. This covenant became the basis of the faith and hope of Abraham. Through that covenant Abraham received righteousness by faith. A part of that covenant was the four declarations concerning God’s promise:

- God promised to give Abraham a great name.
- God promised to give Abraham a great Land.
- God promised to give Abraham a son who would be the beginning of a great nation.
- God promised to use this nation to bless all the nations of the earth.

NOTE: The word “covenant” is, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word *berith* (בְּרִית) and is used some 286 times in various contexts. Whilst its active meaning is not difficult to understand from its contexts, yet the exact meaning of the term is not easy to ascertain. There are a number of views as to its literal meaning, and as to the principle of covenant as found in secular and religious literature. From various roots of *berith* it has been thought to derive from ‘fetter’ or “obligation” or from eating at a meal which the two contracting parties ate, especially in the context of sacrifice offered to the deity or deities. Some trace it from the verbs “to perceive” or “to determine”, the basic idea being “vision”. **However, the weight of scholarship comes down upon the idea of “bond” relating to the root *bara*, that is “to bind”.**

This declaration is directly related to the Law God gave to Moses. That relationship provides the basis for the rather difficult paragraph that is our text today. While it undoubtedly contained information that was very familiar to Paul’s readers, it is somewhat unfamiliar to us. As we unpack these verses we will see some very insightful and helpful information for our journey. It focuses our attention on the truth that God has a particular means of saving sinners. It is his covenant to us for redemption.

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For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. 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. 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. 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. For if the inheritance comes

by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.
(Galatians 3:10-18 ESV).

THERE ARE TWO KEY TRUTHS IN THIS TEXT:

First, the Promise of Salvation is Unchangeable (vv. 15-17).

The Apostle Paul understood the covenant that God had given to Abraham to include a promise of salvation by faith to anyone who would put their trust in the promise. Remember the false teachers Paul writes the letter to counter denied this truth. While they readily admitted the nature of the covenant that God had had established with Abraham, these men made an appeal to history. They contended that while God did establish a beautiful covenant with Abraham, years later he had come and established a covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai defining the conditions to be attached to the covenant with Abraham. It was their contention that the law given to Moses *added* conditions to the covenant with Abraham. Therefore, to them the blessings promised in the covenant given to Abraham were only valid if one lived up to the conditions set forth in the Law. Paul's response is direct, forceful, and absolutely juxtaposed to this declaration.

1. We should note the human analogies Paul uses in his response. He begins by addressing them as "brothers." This warm word of greeting indicates his change in posture from the earlier words of censure. He says he is going to give them a "human example." Actually, he is saying he is merely using some things that are generally accepted in the world, religious or not.
2. *Covenant* is the key word. While I've given you a technical definition, let's see if I can illustrate what Paul seems to be saying here.

Imagine that I come to you and express an interest in giving you a \$1,000.00. I come to you and ask you to come by my house tomorrow afternoon and I will give you the money. Happily you agree to come by in the afternoon. When you arrive to lay claim to the promised gift, I inform you that I have decided to add a stipulation to the gift. I inform you that in order for you to actually receive the gift, you must paint my house. It ceases to become a gift when I ask you to earn it! So it is with the redemptive promise of God. When God promised redemption to Abraham and his descendants, both from the Old and New Covenant eras, freely, without any condition except faith, he would not later change the agreement by adding the keeping of the Law.

This is a tremendous encouragement to me. The Apostle is very specific when he writes, *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 Promises of God can always be depended upon for they simply cannot change. The promise of salvation by faith is unalterable, irrevocable, and unchangeable. Our God stands by His word and keeps his covenant. If this were not clear enough here, the writer of Hebrews makes it abundantly clear:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for

confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 6:13-20 ESV).

Second, the Promise of Salvation is Unconditional (v. 18).

We have certainly alluded to this principle, now Paul declares it clearly. After all, grace is never very far from the mind of the apostle. Grace in the promise means that the promise is unconditional. We see this in two specifics:

1. *First, Paul emphasizes the relationship of Christ to the promise.* When God made the promise to Abraham, he extended it to the “seed” of Abraham. Our first inclination is to apply this to the descendants of Abraham. But, Paul sees something more than this in it. He sees the “seed” of Abraham as Jesus. It is another way of stating the truth that redemption has always been through Jesus, from the promise extended to Adam and Eve to us today.

NOTE: There is a wonderful example of this truth in Scripture. When Joseph was able to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, leading the nation of Egypt to a crash program of conservation in preparation of the coming famine, Pharaoh made certain promises to him. Years later when the Joseph’s brothers appeared in Egypt; they were received with favor and received special treatment because of this promise. It was only their relationship with Joseph that brought them the blessing. So it is with us. We have no standing before God except that we have cast our lot with Jesus by faith. We are granted favor by His work. Jesus really is everything. He is the Seed!

2. *Second, Paul emphasizes the fact that the Law has no relationship to the promise.* You cannot have salvation by faith and law at the same time. They are mutually exclusive of one another. This is emphasized by the verb “gave.” It is a Greek perfect, which means it is a settled matter. Further it is a word that means to give unconditionally, freely, as a gracious gift. It is rooted in God’s love and grace alone. The covenant proves nothing about Abraham and everything about God.

A CONCLUDING NOTE:

Some might ask, “What about faith? Is faith a condition?” We need to be careful not to make faith an act on our part. We cannot give merit to faith in itself. If we put a sign up outside our church and declare that we are freely giving \$1,000.00 to anyone who can establish his need for the money and someone reads the sign, believes what it says, enters the church, and quickly admits and establishes their need of the money, does his believing the offer and presenting himself to us make him deserving of the gift? Of course not! That is the way it is with redemption. God has hung out a sign in the Gospel declaring “Whoever will, let him come and take the water of life freely.” However, our believing does not make us worthy of that gift!

Our faith merely puts us in a position to receive it. WE REACH OUT WITH EMPTY HANDS AND HEARTS TO BE FILLED WITH HIS GRACE!

The promise is unconditional and unchanging!