

Title: The Priority of the Promise: Paul's Fourth Defense of Justification by Faith

Text: Galatians 3:15-18

Central Idea: Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance

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[i] Scripture Reading and Prayer

15 Brethren, I speak in human terms: even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it. 16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ. 17 Now this is what I am saying: 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. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the Law, it no longer comes from a promise; but God graciously gave it to Abraham by a promise. [my translation]

[ii] My ministry has been one of biblical exposition

Partic. expository preaching. Challenging. Challenging for t/preacher (if it’s done right) & for t/listener.

I know we’ve talked about this before, so I hate to belabor t/point.

But it's a commitment to work thru books of t/Bible addressing what's there. Some sections are hard-hitting & easily applic.

Other's are challenging in that they may not seem directly relevant or are overly pedantic.

One dictionary gives as an example of t/word "pedantic"==>
"Many of the essays are long, dense, and too pedantic to hold great appeal"

Let's insert t/word "sermon"==>
"Many of the sermons are long, dense, and too pedantic to hold great appeal"

I realize that t/great majority of you hold t/same commitment to biblical expos. that I do.

So challenging passages are no big deal.

Others may feel they've heard enough about t/Law in Gal.
For them, it feels "pedantic."

Maybe it felt that way to t/Galatians themselves!

But Paul & more imp. t/HS felt it necessary to spend lots of time here. So we will also.

[iii] Last time we noted that vv. 10-25 form a long parenthesis on the Law—specifically the Law of Moses

Paul is clarifying his statement in v. 10:

3:9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Who are t/real children of Abraham? Those who follow t/Law or those who “are of faith?”

He'll return to t/idea of “faith” in v. 26:

3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Everything in between (vv.10-25) are a parenthesis on t/Law

[iv] Last time we looked at the first section of this parenthesis: vv. 10-14 (two main points)

I. Damned if you Don't: The Road of Law (10, 12b)

You are damned to eternal judgement if you don't perfectly keep God's Law. T/problem is that you can't!

II. Freed if you Do: The Road of Faith (11-14)

Only way to be saved from eternal judgment is thru faith in JC who bore t/curse of t/Law for us.

[v] Now we come to vv. 15-18 . . .

The Priority of the Promise: Paul's Fourth Defense of Justification by Faith

Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance

[vi] Remember: the Judaizers are always lurking in the shadows

BTIM - these 1st c. false teachers who demanded Law-keeping are in Paul's sites as he writes this letter.

It was t/Judaizers who were tempting t/Galatians to forsake t/truth of t/gospel of G's grace in X for one of human works thru keeping t/Law given to Israel at Sinai.

T/Law given thru Moses either added to or annulled t/covt. given to Abra.

This is t/false argument that Paul addresses here.

Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance

4 points to our outline ==>

I. The Pattern of the Human Covenant (v. 15)

II. The Person of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 16)

III. The Permanence of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 17)

IV. The Priority of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 18)

There will be a key word that accompanies each point.

I. The Pattern of the Human Covenant (v. 15)

15 Brethren, I speak in human terms: even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it.

Key word: A Fortiori (Latin, "from strength")

Paul is going to argue from t/lesser to t/greater. He's going to give a human example & argue that "If this is true among men, how much more so is it truth w/G?"

A. Brethren

Paul begins w/that endearing term “brethren” that he last used in v. 11: ἀδελφοί. He’ll close t/letter with same word.

1. Remember - He had just called them “foolish” in v. 1
They were foolish for being “bewitched” & for thinking that they could be perfected in t/faith by keeping t/Law.

2. Now he returns to that sweet word “brethren” — “brothers and sisters in Christ”

This is a demonstration of Paul’s heart as a pastor. He knew when to use harsh terms & when to tone it down. He also believed that his readers were in fact in t/faith (Xns). In spite of t/attacks from t/enemy, G. would keep them until that day.

B. In starting his a fortiori argument he’s going to give an example from every day life

15b I speak in human terms: . . .

1. This is literally “I speak κατὰ ἄνθρωπον”

He’s going to give an example from every day life, one they would be familiar with.

15c . . . even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it.

2. What is a “human covenant?”

Word he uses is normally translated “covenant” altho in classical Gk. it was sometimes rendered “will” or “testament” (as in a “last will and testament”).

a. Likely that Paul is thinking in terms of a covenant

(1) There is an interesting example from ancient Jewish inheritance law known as mattenat bāri⁹

A person could make an irrevocable contract w/another prior to death. This may be t/kind of legal transaction Jesus alluded to in the parable of the prodigal son, where t/father prematurely divided his property between his heirs, an act all the more momentous because it was unalterable.

(2) Covenants were mostly irrevocable upon death

Even as it pertains to a will, in our culture, you will have a hard time changing one after t/death of the testator.

Example: Related to a woman who upon death left all her property to a Xn university. T/woman's children, who lived on t/other side of t/country, were shocked to find that they had been left out of their mom's estate. They decided to contest t/will—they lost their case. There was nothing they could do to change t/terms of t/will. As far as t/law was concerned, t/matter had been settled when t/old woman died.

[Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 119]

This seems to be consistent w/the meaning of Heb. 9:15-17> 15 . . . He [Jesus] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called [believers] may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. ==>

16 For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. 17 For a covenant is valid only

when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.

I. The Pattern of the Human Covenant (v. 15)

15 Brethren, I speak in human terms: even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it.

Paul argues from lesser (human experience) to greater (God's economy).

II. The Person of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 16)

Key word: Christ

A. Two sentences in this verse

1. Note the first:

16a Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed.

a. Here is where Paul starts to elaborate on his a fortiori argument

b. Word “now” turns a corner

IOW - “I’ve been speaking about irrevocable covts between men. Now I’m going to talk about a greater example: T/Abrahamic Covt. that was fulfilled in X.”

c. This centers on the promise (here in the plural):

16a . . . the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed.

We saw t/word “promise” in v. 14 (used of t/promised HS received by faith). It’s used a total of 9x in this chapt.

d. What is a promise? It’s a vow you plan to keep

(1) Who makes the vow here?

16a . . . the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed.

(a) The antecedent of “spoken” could refer to God or Scripture — either way it’s God who is speaking

e. What is the promise God made to Abraham?

(1) Goes back to Genesis 12 when God called Abraham out of Ur

There G. promised that He would make him into a great nation & that all t/families of t/earth would be blessed in him

(2) A chapter later God reiterates part of the promise
13:16 “I will 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.(“dscndnts” is lit. “seed”).

(3) In chapter 15 God promises Abraham a son
Rem. A. was elderly & his wife was barren. They were childless. A. had a servant, Eliezer, who was to be his heir. G. promises that a son would be born to him (Isaac).

(a) Verses 5 & 6

15:5-6 5 And [God] took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to

count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 Then [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

i. We saw that back when we were in v. 6

Gal. 3:6 Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. {imputation - central to justif. thru faith}

(4) Then something amazing happens

G. makes an unconditional, unilateral covt. w/Abraham (AC)
Sacrificial animals are killed & separated. G. appears as a smoking oven & a flaming torch which passes between t/carcasses which symbolize t/unconditional nature of t/covt.

(5) We can sum up the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant into three

Land, seed (descendents), blessing.

(a) Paul is focusing here on Abraham’s descendent

Not Isaac, not David, but JC.

2. That’s the second sentence

a. Paul makes an argument based on a nuance of grammar involving the word “seed”

Paul uses a common method of rabbinic exegesis in doing so

16b . . . He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ.

b. Paul may have in mind Genesis 22:18 where God says (after the sacrifice of Isaac) ==>

18a “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed...”

That seed is JC, Abraham’s great descendent.

T/blessing is t/gospel received by faith apart from works.

Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance

T/descendents that cannot be counted is t/univ. CH of JC.

c. This is all about Jesus Christ

2 Cor. 1:20 For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.

T/Judaizers may have been teaching that God’s promises were given only to Abraham and his “seed,” t/Jewish people. Paul says, no, t/ultimate fulfillment of t/word seed is sing. in nature: refers to X.

As John MacArthur writes ==>

“The one and only heir of every promise of God is Christ. Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ. Therefore the only way a person can participate in the promised blessings

to Abraham is to be a fellow heir with Christ through faith in Him.

“Whether before or after Christ came to earth, salvation has always been provided only through the perfect offering of Christ on the cross. Believers who lived before the cross and never knew any specifics about Jesus were nevertheless forgiven and made right with God by faith in anticipation of Christ’s sacrifice, whereas believers who live after the cross are saved in looking back to it. When Christ shed His blood, it covered sins on both sides of the cross. The Old Covenant goes to the cross; the New Covenant comes from it. On the one hand faith pointed forward, whereas on the other it points back.” [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians,84–85]

16b . . . He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ.

d. We get a hint of this all the way back in Genesis 3:15 (protoeungellion)

In Gen 3:15, after t/fall of man into sin, God says to Satan=> 15 . . . I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.”

Satan’s goal in t/OT was to keep t/Seed (X) from being born into t/world. He knew that this “seed” would one day crush his head.

e. Again - verse 16

16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ.

Puritan William Perkins:

“The promises made to Abraham are first made to Christ, and then in Christ to all that believe in him.” [William Perkins, A Commentary on Galatians, Pilgrim Classic Commentaries, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (London, 1617; repr.

New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 184]

“Note that Abraham did not make a covenant with God; God made a covenant with Abraham! God did not lay down any conditions for Abraham to meet. In fact, when the covenant was ratified Abraham was asleep! (see Gen. 15) It was a covenant of grace: God made promises to Abraham; Abraham did not make promises to God.” [Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1, 701]

Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance.

I. The Pattern of the Human Covenant (v. 15)

Key word: A Fortiori

II. The Person of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 16)

Key word: Christ

III. The Permanence of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 17)

Key word: Promise

A. Here is the crux of Paul’s argument

17 Now this is what I am saying: 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.

1. There's lots of debate over Paul's "430 years"

I don't want to spend a lot of time here, but we know that Exo 12:40, t/Hebrew text, tells us that 430 yrs was t/time of Israel's captivity in Egypt.

a. Yet the Law came 645 years after Abraham

It may be that Paul is referring to G's reminding Jacob (Israel) of His covt. w/Abraham in Gen. 46. That was 430 yrs before t/giving of t/Law to t/nation at Mt. Sinai.

When Paul says t/Law was given 430 yrs. later, he doesn't specify "later than what?" It may have been 430 yrs after t/Jews were enslaved in Egypt.

2. Don't miss the point

T/ML was given to Israel long after t/covenant w/Abraham when t/promise was given:

17b . . . 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.

a. The Law didn't render the promises to Abraham "null and void"

(1) The Law was temporary; God's covenant with Abraham was not

MC was bilateral; Israel broke t/Covt. & voided it. That was finalized in their rejection of X & t/destruction of t/Temple in AD 70.

AC was unilateral; it was grounded in G's promise. He would do it.

T/seed (descendent) aspect of that was fulfilled in X.

**3. Note the phrase “previously ratified” in verse 17:
17b . . . the Law, which came four hundred and thirty
years later, does not invalidate a covenant
PREVIOUSLY RATIFIED ratified by God . . .**

**a. It's a perfect passive participle from a word that
means “to ratify in advance”**

Perf. tense indicates that this was done in t/past (when G. ratified t/covt. w/Abraham) w/continuing results in t/present.

(1) Those results pertain to the Gospel

(a) That's what we saw in 3:8

3:8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”

As B.A. believers, we stand in t/promise to Abraham who is t/father of faith for all who believe.

3:7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

In Rom. 4 16 Paul calls Abra. “the father of faith for us all.”

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4. The Judaizers may have been teaching two things:

1. That t/MC was a fuller expression of t/AC.
2. That t/promise to Abraham applied only to his biological descendants and those related to the Jewish nation by Torah observance. [Richard N. Longenecker, 126]

Paul renders those teachings false.

b. The promise to Abraham is not nullified by the Law

**(1) “Nullified” comes from the Greek verb καταργέω
“to render inoperative or powerless”**

T/Law didn’t render the promise inoperative.

5. The promise remains—it cannot be changed by Moses
“Man cannot succeed in perfectly keeping the law, and God cannot fail in perfectly keeping the promise. Because the covenant of promise is complete, the covenant of law can in no way improve or change it. [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, 86]

We learn from Heb. 8:13 that t/Covt. of Law has become obsolete having been replaced by a NC fulfilled in X.

T/promise remains . . . As John Stott so well explains ==>
“The promise sets forth a religion of God—God’s plan, God’s grace, God’s initiative. But the law sets forth a religion of man—man’s duty, man’s works, man’s

responsibility. The promise (standing for the grace of God) had only to be believed. But the law (standing for the works of men) had to be obeyed.” And when we say that the promise had to be believed, we do not mean a belief that is bare assent, but a firm and trusting grasp of God and all that he has promised in Christ. [John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One*

Way, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 86–87]

God doesn't make promises to break them. He's a promise keeper, never a promise breaker.

Hebrews 6:13–14 13 For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, “I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU.”

Goes on to say that G's purpose is unchangeable, and that it's impossible for Him to lie. That gives us encour. & hope.

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16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ.

III. The Permanence of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 17)

Key word: Promise

17 Now this is what I am saying: 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.

IV. The Priority of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 18)

Key word: Grace

A. Here Paul Wraps up His Argument

1. We have an If / Then / But

If X is true, then this is the consequence. But X is not true.

18 For if the inheritance comes from the Law, it no longer comes from a promise; but God graciously gave it to Abraham by a promise.

2. Through the rest of the letter Paul will say much about this concept of “inheritance” and being an “heir”

a. For example:

3:29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

4:7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

b. In order to be an heir you have to be a legitimate son

3:7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

(1) To be a “son of Abraham” is to be a “child of God”

If you are a child of God thru faith in JC you are an heir. You inherit t/promises. Central to that is eternal life.

3. Here the inheritance is connected to the promise

If it comes based on the Law, it's not longer based on a promise.

BUT (v. 18 concludes)

18b . . . **God graciously gave it to Abraham by a promise.**

4. χαρίζομαι = to give graciously, freely

Another perfect tense verb. In t/past w/ongoing results.

“God's act of kindness has ongoing, indeed irrevocable, effects.” [David A. deSilva, Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text, 69]

5. This has everything to do with out key word: “grace”

Paul's logic in this v. is similar to his logic in Rom. 4:4–5, where he argues that A. could not have been just. by works BC, if he had, his status B4 G. would not be based on grace.

Rom. 11:6: “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace”

6. Performance negates Promise

You can't work your way to God's blessing.

NT scholar Richard Longenecker's comment is worth hearing ==>

“The Judaizers of Galatia themselves might have claimed that this was not the thrust of their endeavors; that all they wanted was for Gentile Christians to supplement their faith in Christ with Torah observance, just as God directed Abraham to do and so to experience a more perfect Christian life. For Paul, however, any mingling of faith and law, even if it is claimed that this has only to do with a proper lifestyle and not justification, is a discrediting of the Abrahamic covenant, the work of Christ, the ministry of the Spirit, and the principle of faith, and so brings one right back to the issue of legalism. . . . For he is convinced that neither a true Jew (cf. 2:15) nor a true Christian can embrace legalism and still be acceptable before God.” [Richard N. Longenecker, 134–135]

What t/Galatians may have thought was a necessary supplement to their faith Paul views as a radical break w/the gospel itself.

“Salvation in Christ does not rest on a law that we inevitably break; it rests on a promise that God cannot break. God has promised forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has promised eternal life to everyone who comes to Christ in faith. God will not—indeed, he cannot—go back on his promise. His covenant is an irrevocable will and testament. It stands firm forever.

“Salvation in Christ is not a commercial transaction. My relationship with God is not based on my ability to make a deal or strike a bargain. The Christian life is not a quid pro quo, so that if I do what God wants, then God will do what I want. God simply does not operate this way. Instead, my relationship with God is based entirely on believing his gracious promise.” [Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, 128]

Poem of John Bunyan that beautifully captures the difference between the law and the gospel:

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.

At this point one may wonder why the Law was given in the first place. That is addressed in the next section.

Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance.

An illust. of what this means in practical terms comes from a professor on a university campus in t/Far East. 1 of his students came to him in despair & confided that he was struggling w/sexual perversion. “I feel like a slave,” he lamented. The professor responded by affirming that t/man indeed is a slave to sin. Then he gave him t/gospel of freedom from sin thru faith in JC.

This sounded great to t/student, but he feared he wasn't good enough. How could God forgive him for everything he had done? So he said to his professor, "First I must become a Christian like you. Then God will love me."

The professor responded by saying, "I'm no better than you are, except for the love and power of God."

Philip Graham Ryken, to whom I am indebted for this story, concludes ==>

"This is the grace of God, that he does not deal with us on the basis of our performance, but on the basis of his promise. No matter what we have done, our sins are covered by the covenant righteousness of Christ. And now that we are in Christ, our standing before God does not fluctuate with the inconsistency of our daily obedience. On the basis of the promise that he made before the law, God loves us with an **unconditional love.**"

[Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 129–130]

I'll give John Stott the last word==>

"Every sinner who trusts in Christ crucified for salvation, quite apart from any merit or good works, receives the blessing of eternal life and thus inherits the promise of God made to Abraham." [Stott, *Message of Galatians*, 89]

That, my friends, is not pedantic.