

13.

GALATIANS 3:15-18

I. REJECT THOSE WHO TEACH YOU A DIFFERENT DOCTRINE

C. Because of Teachings of the Scripture

3. About the Covenant

Introduction

Paul's third way of showing that the Old Testament Scriptures teach salvation by grace was by emphasizing that God established a relationship with Abraham and his descendants by means of a covenant. He showed that the very nature of a covenant gives assurance that salvation does not come by keeping a law but by grace through faith. He stated three aspects of a covenant that give that assurance.

In verse 15, he based his argument on the fact that a covenant is an agreement between two parties. Each person makes a commitment that he is obligated to keep and receives a promise in return. Even when two people make a covenant with each other, they bind themselves to commitments that cannot be changed by either party without destroying or breaking the covenant. Taking away, revising, or adding to the agreements made in the covenant is a serious crime and exposes a person to punishment. The same principles hold for a covenant between a person and God. The terms of the covenant could not be changed after God offered it and Abraham accepted it. The covenant God made with Abraham did not mention the law. Therefore, keeping the law could not be added to the covenant without cancelling it. God had assured Abraham that the promises He had made in the covenant were going to be fulfilled because Abraham had trusted Him and therefore had fulfilled what God required of him (Genesis 15:6). Once God had made that promise, it was impossible to go back and add keeping the law as a requirement for receiving what God had promised. Keeping the law was not a part of the covenant, and it was not a requirement for receiving salvation.

In verse 16, Paul emphasized that the promises of the covenant were made to Abraham and to his Seed. He pointed out that God made the promises of the covenant to Abraham's "Seed" (singular), not to his "seeds" (plural). Therefore, the covenant was established or made firm by one special Seed of Abraham, who kept the covenant and made it possible for the promises to be fulfilled. That one special Seed is Jesus. Others receive the promises, not through obeying the law, which they do not do, but through faith in the one special Seed who kept the covenant completely. Everyone else receives the promises through Jesus, not through keeping the law.

In verses 17-18, he said the promises that were guaranteed to Abraham's obedient Seed Jesus could not be changed by a law that was given 430 years after the covenant was made. The covenant was guaranteed to Abraham on the basis of the covenant, so it was impossible for the terms to be changed by giving the law 430 years later. If the inheritors of the promises of the covenant receive them through the covenant, they cannot also receive them through the law. The promises inherited by the Seed of Abraham are made possible by the covenant, not by the requirements of the law. If someone depends on the law for salvation, he no longer is depending on the promises of the covenant. If a person is depending on the promises of the covenant, the law cannot add anything to what he already has received.

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Comments

Verse 15. **Brothers, according to man, I say even a man’s covenant, having been ratified, no one sets aside or adds [to it].**

The third way Paul showed that the Hebrew Scriptures teach salvation by grace through faith was by explaining the terms of the covenant God made with Abraham. First, he pointed out that even a covenant made between two people cannot be changed once its terms have been established. Paul noted that even a human covenant is permanent and unchangeable by either party after it has been agreed upon. That principle is the basis of binding legal agreements until today. When two people enter into a contract with each other, if one breaks the agreement, the other party can go to law for redress. The courts will hear his case and force the offending party to keep the agreement or pay a penalty for failing to keep it.

Certainly that principle holds in an absolute way when God is a party to the covenant. If people are that committed to human agreements, an agreement made with God is even more binding. Even God cannot and will not break His word when He has made a covenant or a promise. He cannot

break it, not because He does not have the power to do as He chooses, but because He cannot go against His own honest and holy nature. Therefore, once God made the covenant with Abraham, He could not change its terms later.

The covenant says nothing about the law that was given years later through Moses. Therefore, it is totally beyond possibility that the law is an added requirement for the covenant that was added years after God and Abraham accepted the terms of their agreement. Because the covenant was explained to Abraham and accepted by him, it cannot be changed. Therefore, it is extremely important to know the terms of that covenant. Only then can people know who can receive the promises and how they can receive them. Paul went on to explain the answer to those questions.

Verse 16. **Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his Seed, and it does not say “to the seeds,” as to many but as to One. [It says], “And to your Seed,” who is Christ** (3:16e).

Paul pointed out that God made His covenant with Abraham and with Abraham’s Seed. Paul emphasized that Abraham’s Seed meant one special Seed who would keep the covenant and make its fulfillment possible. All others receive the promises

of the covenant through the one faithful Seed, who is Jesus. If they receive those promises through the one faithful Seed, they cannot also receive them through their own efforts to keep the law. Therefore, salvation comes by trusting Jesus, not through one's own effort to obey the law.

Some difficulty exists in identifying the exact verse or verses Paul used to support his interpretation that the Seed through whom the covenant was made firm was Jesus. The problem arises because the Hebrew word for "seed" is a collective noun. In other words, the form of the word does not change from singular to plural. It is necessary to determine from the context if the verse is referring to one descendant or many. Most of the references to Abraham's seed in the Book of Genesis clearly refer to all of the physical descendants of Abraham. However, at least two verses most naturally mean one special obedient descendant of Abraham (Genesis 21:12; 22:18). Several others could be understood either way (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 17:8,19; 22:18; 24:7; 26:4). Whatever specific verse or verses Paul had in mind, the Holy Spirit inspired him to understand that the covenant could only be made effective through a descendant of Abraham who would keep the requirements of the covenant. The only one who ever did keep the covenant fully was Jesus. All others receive the promises of the covenant through the grace of Jesus.

The point is that Jesus makes the promises of the covenant available according to the original terms of the covenant. When Paul made those interpretations, he was not stretching the covenant. He was explaining the literal meaning of the words of the covenant as God spoke them to Abraham. It means that the covenant has been made effective by one special perfect son of Abraham, who is also the Son of God. Because that promised Son has kept the covenant, He now makes the blessings of the covenant available to others, who have not kept the covenant through obedience. Therefore, the promise of salvation cannot come through a person's works, even good works in obedience to the law of Sinai. The covenant God gave to Abraham affirms that salvation can only come through faith in the promised Son of Abraham, not through any works of one's own.

That interpretation of the promises of the covenant raises the question of how to interpret the verses where the word "seed" seems to clearly have a plural meaning. As such it would apply to any or all of Abraham's descendants. Were the promises that were made to all of Abraham's descendants simply forgotten or cancelled. The answer is "No." The promises were made as a part of the covenant. All descendants of Abraham can receive all the promises of the covenant if they accept and keep the requirements of the covenant. Those promises included a land, a posterity, and a blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). The problem is that Abraham's descendants never kept their part of the covenant. They never really trusted and obeyed Jehovah. Because of Israel's failure, God's promises never were completely fulfilled.

One example of how God's promises to Israel have been frustrated through all the years is that Israel's possession of the Land God promised them always always has been a troubled one. They never have possessed all of it, and over and over other nations have taken away parts of it that they once possessed. Furthermore, God took it away from them completely during the Babylonian captivity. After the Captivity, they returned; but they almost always were in subjection to a foreign nation—Persia, then Greece, then Rome. In Paul's day, they lived in their Land, but only under subjection to Rome. A few years after Paul wrote to the Galatians, Rome took the Land away from them again and drove them out across the Roman world. For nearly 1,900 years, they lived again as exiles in nations across the world. Finally, after World War I, the British, who possessed a mandate over the Land, allowed Jews to return to the Land; and in 1948 enough of them had returned that they declared themselves an independent nation again. However, from that day until today their possession of the Land continues partial and threatened. Why has Israel had such a hard time gaining control of the Land God promised them? The answer is that they never have kept the covenant to which that promise was attached. God's offer of the covenant to Israel stands, but they never have been completely fulfilled because Israel still consistently fails to keep its part of the covenant. The complete fulfillment of God's promises to Israel awaits the

day when they will fulfill their part of the contract and genuinely trust Jehovah God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, one Descendant of Abraham did keep the covenant completely. Through Him all the promises are available through faith. If those promises are available through faith, they are available to anyone who will believe. Anyone of any nation can participate in the promises through faith. The works of the law are not required for anyone to receive the promises if he will only trust his life to the One who kept the covenant. That One is Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior of the world.

Verses 17. So I say this, A covenant having been ratified previously by God to Christ, the law that came 430 years later does not annul [it], so as to cancel the promise.

Paul said God gave the law to Moses at Sinai 430 years after He made His covenant with Abraham and with Abraham's Seed. A law coming so many years later could not cancel or change the terms of the covenant that were set so many years before. The covenant then is available to Abraham, to His Seed Jesus, and to those who trust in Jesus, not to those who keep a law given so many years after the terms of the covenant were established and agreed to.

Verse 18. For if the inheritance is from the law, it is no more from promise; but God gave it to Abraham by means of a promise.

If the blessings of the covenant are inherited by keeping the law, they are no longer inherited through a promise. By promise, Paul meant the promise connected with the covenant. The promise could only be fulfilled by One who kept the requirements of the covenant. Only Jesus kept the requirements, so the covenant is made secure through Jesus, and the promise is fulfilled to Him and through Him. God clearly made the blessings of the covenant available through a promise connected with the covenant, so they cannot be received by keeping a law. The Hebrew Scriptures clearly teach that God's blessings and salvation come through the grace of the Seed who kept the covenant, not through keeping the law.

Instead of offering a way to receive the promises, the law symbolized the life God expected people who were in covenant with Him to live. As wonderfully revealing as the law was and is, it could not change the terms of the covenant God offered to Abraham and His seed 430 years previously. Therefore, the law added nothing to the covenant and took nothing from it. Receiving the promises of the covenant does not depend on keeping the law but on keeping the covenant. Only Jesus kept the covenant. Therefore, if anyone wants to receive the promises of the covenant, he must receive them through Jesus. He cannot receive them by trying to keep the law. The law remains a curse, not a way to be blessed and not as a way to be saved.

CONCLUSION

In Galatians 3:6-18, Paul showed that the Hebrew Scriptures reveal salvation by grace through faith in three specific ways:

- (1) By Abraham's being justified by faith and passing on the opportunity to the same justification to everyone in all the nations of the world (Gal. 3:6-9—Discussed in Volume 14).
- (2) By the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10-14 – Discussed in Volume 15), and
- (3) By the terms of the covenant (Gal. 3:15-18 – Discussed in Volume 16).

Those insights show that no conflict exists between the Old Testament and the New Testament. They both teach that salvation comes by grace through faith and that good works are the natural result of that salvation. They also teach that all people who trust in Jesus have a comradeship that outweighs all other friendships and that believers should practice that comradeship openly and lovingly every day

A RELATED ISSUE

WAS PAUL RIGHT ABOUT 430 YEARS BETWEEN THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM AND THE LAW?

Paul clearly stated that the law was given to Israel 430 years after God offered the covenant to Abraham. Where did he get that information? Paul's intimate knowledge of the Old Testament assures us that he must have been referring to Exodus 12:40-41. However, as that verse is read in most English versions, it says that Israel lived or sojourned in Egypt for 430 years. For instance, NIV translates that verse as, "Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years," while HCSB translates it as, "The time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years." Even NASB translates it as, "Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years." If those translations are correct, then Paul was severely wrong when he said the law was given 430 years after God made the covenant with Abraham. The length of time between the giving of the covenant to Abraham obviously was much longer than the length of time that Israel lived in Egypt. Both periods cannot be 430 years long. That discrepancy creates a serious conflict between Genesis 12:40 and Galatians 3:17.

A survey of the timing of significant events that occurred between the giving of the covenant and the giving of the law only increases that discrepancy. God offered the covenant to Abraham when Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 12:1-3; Acts 7:2-4). In response to God's offer of the covenant, Abraham left Ur when he was 75 years old (Gen. 12:4). He had the son God promised him when he was 100 years old, and he named that son Isaac according to God's directions (Gen. 17:17-22; 21:3). Isaac was 60 years old when his twin sons Esau and Jacob were born (Gen. 26:24-26); and Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel, was 130 years old when he moved his family to Egypt at Pharaoh's invitation (Gen. 47:5-10). Adding those years shows that a total of 215 years passed between God's offering of the covenant to Abraham and Israel's moving his family to Egypt. Then the Israelites lived in Egypt for enough years to multiply from 70 people to a multitude vast enough for Pharaoh and the Egyptians to fear them (Ex. 1:1-11). Pharaoh enslaved them, and eventually God sent Moses to Egypt to demand that Pharaoh set them free. After an extended struggle, Israel marched out of Egypt toward a land God promised them (Ex. 3:1-11:10; 12:39), and that same night God gave them the first commandments of the law (Ex. 12:1-28). It is impossible for the time from the covenant with Abraham to the Exodus and the time of Israel's stay in Egypt both to be 430 years. However long Israel stayed in Egypt, the time between the covenant with Abraham and the beginning of the law at Israel's departure from Egypt was 215 years longer. The time between the giving of the covenant and the law cannot be the same number of years that Israel lived in Egypt.

Many have pointed to that impossibility as an error in the Bible that proves that the Bible cannot always be trusted. It has become a strong arguing point against the inerrancy of Scripture. The problem however is not with the Bible, but with its translators. When Genesis 12:40-41 is correctly translated, the supposed discrepancy disappears. The King James Version is one of the few versions that translates Genesis 12:40-41 correctly. The correct translation is "**And the sojourn of the sons of Israel, who sojourned in Egypt, [was] 430 years, and at the end of 430 years (and it was on that very day) all the hosts of Jehovah went out from the land of Egypt.**" "Sojourning" means to live as a permanent resident in a foreign land. A sojourner could be a naturalized citizen or a legal resident alien. Properly translated, Genesis 12:40-41 says that the Israelites were sojourners in Egypt and that the full length of their sojourning was 430 years. To understand that statement, it is important to recognize that the full length of their sojourning was not spent in Egypt. From the time Abraham and his family left Ur until the Exodus from Egypt, they were sojourners, living in other peoples' lands. They spent much of that time in Canaan, where they were recognized as legitimate resident foreigners. They also were sojourners in Egypt, where they first were legitimate residents by invitation and later captives by force. The entire length of their years of sojourning included their years in Canaan and their years in Egypt.

The full length of their years of sojourning was the same as the years between God's offer of the covenant to Abraham and the giving of the first installment of the law at Israel's departure from Egypt.

*The Septuagint translators, who translated the Jewish Scriptures into Greek in the first or second century B.C. understood Exodus 12:40 in the same way as the KJV translators. The Septuagint translation of Genesis 12:40 into Greek is correctly retranslated into English as, "**The sojourning of the sons of Israel (they were sojourning in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt) was 430 years.**" Apparently the Septuagint translators had a Hebrew manuscript available to them that included the words "the land of Canaan." Whatever textual criticism may be derived from the inclusion of those words, it is clear that the Septuagint translators understood that the 430 years included both the time Abraham and his descendants lived in Canaan and the time they lived in Egypt, which is the same period as from the giving of the covenant to Abraham to the beginning of the law at Israel's departure from Egypt.*

Paul was highly literate in both Hebrew and Greek. He surely had read Genesis 12:40-41 both in Hebrew and in the Greek Septuagint translation. He saw no discrepancy between them, and he said the law came 430 year after the covenant. He had the additional advantage of being inspired by God to write without error. Paul was right, and the versions that translate Genesis 12:40-41 to say that Israel sojourned in Egypt for 430 years are the ones who are confusing us. Both Paul and the Septuagint translators were correct in their understanding of Exodus 12:40. The Exodus and the first installment of the law did indeed come 430 years after God offered the covenant to Abraham.