

Sermon Series: *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*

The Promise of God and the Offspring of Abraham

Galatians 3:15-18 (ESV)

15 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.

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.

17 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.

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

Introduction

The idea that dominates this paragraph and the remainder of chapter 3 is the word, "promise." Paul uses the word four times in the four verses that are before us today. Three questions come to my mind. Who is the promise for? What is the promise? And How is it received?

Listen Brothers

In verse 15 Paul reminds us to whom he is writing. He is writing to **brothers**. The Greek word is *adelphos* and refers to all the siblings of the same parents within the family. In this context, it can mean "brothers and sisters." It means Paul is writing to those who are members of the family of God.

Paul Is Writing to Christians - In Great Danger

We need to be reminded that Paul is writing to believers. He is writing this letter to the "churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2). He is writing this letter to Christians who have already made public profession of faith in Jesus (when Paul was previously with them and preached to them) nevertheless are in great danger of making a serious error in judgment.

The error had to do with their acceptance of circumcision (cf. Gal 5:3) and embracing a legalistic keeping of the Mosaic Law as the basis of their acceptance by God (i.e. their salvation). These Galatian churches needed to hear what Paul had to say. Therefore, the people of God need to hear this. We need to hear this today! This message is for believers. This message is for the church. This message is for us. So brothers and sisters, I beg you, please listen.

Remember that these churches were primarily made up of Gentiles and not Jews. The Judaizers, whom Paul calls "false brothers" (Gal 2:4), had crept in and begun teaching that it was necessary to keep the law (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). They were teaching that it was OK to begin the Christian life by faith, however, they needed to *add to that faith the keeping of the law*. These Galatians were in danger of believing that their sanctification, their continued growth as Christians, was dependent upon works and not faith. They were in danger of thinking that the process of sanctification was sustained by human effort and deeds of the flesh rather than continued exercise of faith. Paul asked them,

Galatians 3:3

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh?

More & More Like Christ

Sanctification is the process whereby believers in Jesus are increasingly conformed by degrees more and more into the image of Christ. It is the process of becoming more and more like Jesus. Sanctification is the process of becoming more and more holy in practical, everyday decisions.

Paul was warning the Galatian believers not to think that Christian maturity happens by the works of the flesh. Sanctification happens by the work of the Spirit not the work of the flesh (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). We become more like Christ through faith, not works. Sanctification is by faith in the same way that Justification is by faith.

Galatians 3:10

10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...

Relying on works brings a curse (This was the point of the sermon two weeks ago.) **Life in Christ begins by the Holy Spirit and it will be completed (“perfected,” i.e. “reach its goal”) by the Holy Spirit.** The Galatian Christians were losing sight of this truth and so Paul needed to remind them. So listen, brothers and sisters in Christ. This message that we too need to be reminded of.

The Irrevocable Promise of God

In verse 15 addresses the nature of God’s promise. Paul uses an illustration of a man-made covenant to draw attention to the abiding nature of the promise of God.

He is arguing *a minori ad maius*, from the lesser to the greater. The Greek word, *diatheke* (διαθήκη), translated “covenant” was a general term for a binding agreement and often referred to “testament” or “will.”¹

We know that wills can be changed at any time by the testator, however in Greco-Roman culture there was one type of will, *dona mortis causa*, or “gift on the occasion of death,” which was irrevocable. Under this agreement “ownership was transferred while the donor was still alive, though the donor retained ‘the right of use and enjoyment’ until his death.”²

Since this type of disposition was considered to be a gift, it was assumed to be irrevocable unless explicit mention was made of revocability, even though the recipient did not gain actual possession of the property until the death of the donor.³

Paul’s point is that *since there are man-made promises that are irrevocable, how much more so are the promises of God.* The promises of God are unbreakable and unchangeable because God never changes (Num 23:19; Mal 3:6) and it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:13).

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), p.128.

² Ibid. p.129.

³ Ibid.

The Promises: To Whom Are They Given?

Verse 16 brings us to the first question, whom are these promises for?

Galatians 3:16

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.

Abraham & His Offspring

So he answers our first question, “Who are the promises for?” Paul explains that two persons are the objects of the promise of God. The promises were given **to Abraham and to his offspring**.

Paul interprets the word “offspring,” which can be either singular or plural, as a definite singular. This is interesting because Paul knows that ‘offspring’ can be plural because he uses it as a plural elsewhere (Rom 4:16-18; 9:6-8). This is not linguistic blundering as some have thought. Paul knew exactly what he was writing and there is a reason for it. We need to know why he interprets this word as singular.

Evidently Paul has something particular in mind about God’s promise to Abraham and its connection to his **offspring**. Since **offspring** is singular, who is this “offspring?” Paul states very clearly that the “offspring” is Christ. Jesus, the Messiah, was the **offspring** in the mind of God as He made the promises to Abraham.

So what is the connection between God’s promise to Abraham and Jesus? What particular aspect of God’s promise to Abraham finds its fulfillment in Jesus. In order to answer that question, we need to know what the promise to Abraham was.

What Was the Promise to Abraham?

Genesis 12 records God’s first revelation of Himself to Abram and His promises to him. Genesis 15 formalizes and expands those initial promises in the cutting of a covenant. Let’s note three things God promised Abram that He would do.

- 1) Lead him to a new land (12:1; 15:7) and give that land to his offspring (i.e. his descendants).
- 2) To give him offspring, i.e. a son (Gn 12:2; 15:4) and that from him God would make a great nation (Gen 12:2; 15:5, 18).
- 3) That in (or through) him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4).

The first promise was partially fulfilled when God allowed Abraham to settle in the land of Canaan (though He did not allow him to own it as a possession⁴). God later granted deeper fulfillment to Abraham’s grandchildren through Joshua as he led Israel in physical possession of the land.

⁴ The only land Abraham ever owned was in Hebron, within the land of the Hittites, the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron to the east of Mamre (Gen 23:8-20).

The second promise was fulfilled through the birth of Isaac. Isaac's son, Jacob, had twelve sons who in turn grew into the nation of Israel. Indeed, God did make of Abraham's offspring a great and mighty nation.

However, where do we see the fulfillment of the third promise? In what way have "all the nations of the earth" been blessed through Abraham's or his offspring? In verse 16, Paul is saying that **Jesus** is THE offspring of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed. Jesus, THE offspring of Abraham, was included in God's original promise to bless all nations. How? What does Paul see in Jesus that brings "blessings to all nations?"

Paul answers that question in Gal 3:14.

Galatians 3:14a

So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,

In the Abrahamic blessing, "all nations of the earth" refers to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were intended to benefit from God's promise and blessing to Abraham. Gentiles were included in the promise given to Abraham and his offspring.

How were they to be blessed? In what way do Gentiles receive a portion of the promise?

The Promised Land?

When you think of God's promise to Israel, what do you think of? I think that what most often comes to mind when we think of God's promise to Abraham is the Promised Land, right? Moses was great because he led God's people out of Egypt and out of slavery and to the Promised Land. He led them away from painful servitude and hard labor in the land of Egypt and to the borders of Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey!

Joshua was great because he led Israel into the Promised Land and then led them to defeat all the wicked people of the land so that they could possess the Promised Land - the fullness of all God's promises, right? And so often when we speak that way there is something in our voice that communicates that the physical plot of dirt was the highest destiny of the children of Israel. They would no longer slave over the produce of someone else's land. Now they could own their own land. Each of the twelve tribes could have their own portion of land. What a dream come true!

The Promised Land and the American Dream

This is the American Dream too isn't it? - that everyone would have land of their own. This dream led many colonists to cross the pond in the 1600's in hope of owning their own ground. True many came seeking a land that gave freedom of religious expression, but many more came to this country to own their own land. During the colonial era advertisements depicting the new world as the Promised Land were used as inducements to attract new settlers.

Promised Land No Blessing To the Gentiles

How is the Promised Land "a blessing to all nations?" The fact that Joshua led the children of Israel to possess their own physical land, brought no blessing to the Gentiles. How are the Gentiles blessed by Israel receiving the deed to a certain plot of ground? They are not. So the blessing of Abraham coming to the Gentiles cannot have anything to do with the physical possession of the Promised Land. The Promised Land brought no blessing to the Gentiles. However, there is something else that is promised that does bring blessing to the Gentiles. Lets read the rest of the verse.

Galatians 3:14

So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

The Holy Spirit Is the Promised Blessing to Abraham

The blessing of Abraham is not the Promised Land. **The blessing of Abraham is the Promised Spirit.** The blessing of Abraham is not *physical land*, it is *spiritual life*. God's Holy Spirit is the blessing promised to Abraham's offspring.

How does this relate to Jesus? It relates to Jesus because Jesus is the One who gives the Spirit! On the night before Jesus died He told His disciples,

John 16:7

"I tell you the truth; it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper (i.e. the Holy Spirit) will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you."

Jesus promised to send God's Holy Spirit after He went away. Jesus was murdered the very next day. Then on the third day following His death, Jesus rose from the dead. And He was with the disciples for 40 days. On the fortieth day, just before ascending into to heaven He said,

Luke 24:49

*Behold, I am sending the **promise of my Father** upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*

Who was He going to send? What is the promise of the Father? How would they be clothed in power?

Acts 1:4-5

*4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to **wait for the promise of the Father**, which, he said, "You heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*

Holy Spirit is the promise of the Father. Jesus was promising to send Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would clothe them with power.

Acts 1:8

*8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and **to the end of the earth**.*

Power to witness to the ends of the earth. **To the end of the earth?** Now that sounds like something that would be a blessing to the Gentiles!

They waited ten days until the day of Pentecost. Then on the day of Pentecost they were all gathered together waiting just as Jesus had commanded them. We find this account recorded in Acts chapter two (vs.1-7).

And Jesus chose *that* day to pour out the Holy Spirit upon them. “Poured out” carries the idea of overflowing abundance. Their souls were filled with the Holy Spirit and what happened? What was the result? ***They began speaking languages that the Gentiles could understand.***

Why did Jesus until *that* day to pour out His Holy Spirit? He waited because the feast of Pentecost (which was a harvest feast) brought into one city ***devout men from every nation under heaven*** (Acts 2:5). That has the ring of Abraham's blessing doesn't it? “*In you shall all nations will be blessed.*”

The result that day was that they were “***bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language*** (Acts 2:6) ...***the mighty works of God***” (Acts 2:11).

Ultimate Fulfillment of God's Promise to Abraham

Peter understood the giving of the Holy Spirit on that day to be the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and he said so as explained to the watching world what was happening before their eyes. Talking about Jesus, he said,

Acts 2:33

*33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and **having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit**, he [i.e. Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.*

Where does Peter get this understanding that the Holy Spirit was part of the promise? God hinted at this initially in the promise to Abraham by indicating that the blessing would include the Gentiles. However, God made this abundantly clear through subsequent prophets and prophecies. Peter quotes Joel 2:28-29.

Acts 2:16-18

16 But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

*17 “And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, (we might say “all nations!!!)
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;*

*18 even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.*

We also see such prophecies in the following passages;

Isaiah 11:1-2

*1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

*2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

And Is 32:15 which speaks of Israel as deserted, barren, and fruitless until...

Isaiah 32:15

until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,

*and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.*

Isaiah 42:1

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

Isaiah 44:3

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.*

That certainly has the ring of the God's promise of blessing to Abraham and his offspring!!

Ezekiel 11:19-20

*19 And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,
20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*

Ezekiel 36:26-27

*26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

(see also Jer 31:31-34; Ez 37:14)

What Paul's Point?

So what's Paul's point by talking about the promises of God and the offspring of Abraham. The point is that God gave Abraham a promise and the giving of the Mosaic Law did not alter or annul that promise.

Galatians 3:17-18

17 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. 18 For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

The promise was that God would bless all nations (i.e. the Gentiles) by faith through Abraham's offspring. Jesus is the offspring through whom that promise was fulfilled. The promised blessing is the Holy Spirit.

How Do We Receive the Promised Blessing?

The question then becomes, how do we receive the promised blessing? How do we receive the Holy Spirit? Answering this question is the whole point of the letter of Paul to the Galatians. The answer is "**by faith.**" We receive the Holy Spirit when we put our faith in Jesus, the Son of God. We are to

have faith in God just like Abraham did. To receive the blessing of Abraham you must have the faith of Abraham.

Galatians 3:9

So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Galatians 3:26

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

How are those of faith blessed? They are blessed by being given God's Holy Spirit by putting faith in Jesus! We are brought into the family of God by receiving the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 4:6-7

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 3:14

14 — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Receiving the Holy Spirit is the beginning of the Christian life. Becoming a son of Abraham means receiving the Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian means receiving the Holy Spirit. Receiving the Holy Spirit is the meaning of being a believer. You cannot be a Christian without the Holy Spirit. You don't become a believer and then later receive the Holy Spirit. You become a believer by receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul makes this perfectly clear in Romans 8:9.

Romans 8:9

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.

Paul cannot even conceive of a person being a believer without having the Spirit of Christ within him. Being a believer does not mean you agree with a certain set of religious statements. Being a believer means you have received the Spirit of God poured out within your soul. It means your cold, dead, stony heart has been circumcised by the Holy Spirit and replaced with a warm, tender, living heart that is alive toward the things of God. This kind of heart is had by faith alone. You cannot earn this kind of heart by doing good deeds.

How do you know you have received the Holy Spirit? What is the evidence that the Holy Spirit lives within you? If you have the Spirit of Christ within you, you will do things He did. If you have the Spirit of Christ within you, you will walk the way He walked. You will not walk according to the flesh, you will walk according to the Spirit and you will be putting to death the deeds of flesh.

Paul will get to the fruit of the Spirit in chapter 5. This is coming. Let me just point to the first fruit of the Spirit mentioned, love. If you have the Spirit of God within you, you will love Jesus. And if you love Him, you will obey Him (John 14:15). Obedience to Jesus is the natural result of being in love with Him.

The Holy Spirit is the promised inheritance mentioned in Galatians 3:18. Paul says that the inheritance does not come by the law but by faith in the Offspring of Abraham according to the promise of God.

What has to happen in order to receive an inheritance? The testator of the will has to die. God gave a promise that all nations would be blessed by faith through the giving of His Holy Spirit, but that promise could not be delivered until God Himself died. Jesus through His death made possible the giving of the Holy Spirit.