

God's Unchanging Grace

Galatians 3:15-19

A. God's covenant with Abraham is irrevocable **15**

1. There is an importance to be attached to this covenant with Abraham so that it should not be overlooked
 - a. Before Abraham's time the Lord had bound himself by promise and covenant with Adam and Noah
 - 1) He made a promise after Adam's fall of one from the seed of woman who would crush the Tempter
 - 2) He made a covenant with Noah and every living creature not to destroy the earth with water again
 - 3) What we read of the era before Abraham though speaks mostly of man's sin and of God's judgment
 - 4) Before the flood man's thoughts were on evil all the time, and Babel shows them united in evil intent
 - b. Though many stories could have been told of this era it is almost as if the story rushes from chapter 3-12
 - 1) The covenant with Abraham is spelled out in ever greater detail in four passages in chapters 12-22
 - 2) In 12:1-3 God promises to make him into a great nation, curse his enemies, bless all people thru him
 - 3) In 15:1-21 God promises a natural heir and the land of Canaan as an inheritance for his descendants
 - 4) In 17:1-21 God confirms his covenant and enhances it saying he would father many nations
 - a) Furthermore, his descendants were to know the very heart of the covenant: 'I will be their God'
 - 5) In 22:1-18 God promises 'in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed'
 - c. This covenant establishes a pattern so that it serves as an exemplar for how God works to save his people
 - 1) Testimony to the centrality and importance of this covenant is found throughout the pages of the OT
 - a) Repeatedly we see God's mercy traced back to the covenant he made with Abraham **Mic 7:20**
 - b) Even in the NT we see the arrival of Jesus as fulfillment of this covenant **Lk 1:68-75**
 - 2) The elements of this covenant that exemplify God's grace at work in providing for salvation
 - a) The Lord unilaterally established the covenant to insure the blessings of those he would save
 - b) He calls people to enter covenant relationship with him from a world and a life of paganism
 - c) He alone establishes the requirements for how those who would join in the covenant would live
 - d) The fulfillment of all the covenant blessings depend entirely on his actions alone
 - e) From the beginning it was clear that nations beyond Israel were to be included in these blessings
2. The covenant made with Abraham is still in effect
 - a. Like Jesus, Paul knew how to make the truth understandable
 - 1) Paul knew his opponents well and the kind of reasoning they were inclined to use
 - a) They might agree Abram was made right by faith but then argue that was a special arrangement
 - b) Once the covenant was established at Sinai, obeying the law became the means to righteousness
 - 2) To point out the flaw in this kind of thinking Paul made use of an example they were familiar with
 - a) Not every theological doctrine can be taught by parables, fundamental truths of the gospel can
 - b) God did not give the gospel just to geniuses so we ought to be able to make it clear to anyone
 - b. The law God gave later cannot nullify a covenant he gave earlier
 - 1) God's covenants are not more capable of being nullified once properly established than a man's
 - 2) A man may change his will many times during his life, but at his death it can no longer be changed
 - 3) This covenant with Abraham was established by the shedding of blood with the covenant sacrifice
 - 4) The Mosaic law is not an appendage to the covenant with Abraham that modifies it in any way
 - a) The promise to Abraham focuses on God's blessings, the law on how the blessed are to live

B. His promise was not to the Jewish people, but to our Lord **16**

1. The Judaizers equated Abraham's seed with the Jewish people
 - a. The implication for Gentiles was clear: to enjoy God's blessings you must identify with the Jewish people
 - b. The way one identified with the Jews was by keeping the law, specifically, the law regarding circumcision
2. Paul looks beyond Israel's role to the fulfillment of the promise
 - a. He would not deny they were Abraham's seed, but only that they did not fulfill all God meant by that term
 - b. Like the sacrifices that pointed forward to Christ, Israel pointed forward to the church, Jew and Gentile
 - c. Paul focuses on the singular 'seed,' a usage that allows for the possibility of referring to a single individual
 - d. The seed of the woman and David's offspring who would rule forever both point ultimately to Christ
 - e. So here, the fulfillment of the seed through whom all nations would be blessed speaks of our Lord
 - f. Judaizers said blessing came thru identifying with the Jews, Paul said it came by identifying with Christ
 - g. Identifying with him by trusting him as Lord makes identifying with Jews by circumcision unnecessary

- C. A promise of God cannot be annulled by an action centuries later **17**
1. The will of a dead man can't be modified, so is God's promise any more able to be modified by later events
 2. Did Judaizers really think that a covenant instituted by God and in effect for 430 years needed to be changed
 3. The Abrahamic covenant was complete in itself, duly established by God, thus beyond the need of additions
 4. Whatever benefits the Mosaic law brought, it could not do away with the promise of the existing covenant
- D. The promise is received on the basis of promise or law, not both **18**
1. The legalistic spirit that wants to make even better God's work of grace that gives righteousness is not dead
 - a. They insist that obeying the Mosaic law, or their own rules, is necessary to be truly Christian
 - b. Dietary regulations, using the right version of the Bible, banning bad instruments from worship, etc
 - c. Violate these rules and your relationship with the Lord as one made righteous is called into question
 2. What the legalist fails to see is that our eternal inheritance depends either on law-keeping or faith
 - a. These two approaches to coming before our holy God are mutually exclusive and cannot be merged
 - b. We must either work to prove ourselves righteous before God to be saved or we trust Christ as Savior
 - c. One reason they are incompatible in being saved is that one glorifies God, the other glorifies man
 - d. It salvation is by works, one who completes the last bit of what God started has something to boast about
 - e. To say that we must add our bit is to say there was something incomplete about Christ's work at the cross
 - f. Our works after we are saved add nothing to our salvation, only to God's glory as him who changed us
- E. If the law did not lead to righteousness, why was it given **19**
1. Judaizers wanted to claim they were not opposing Paul's message of faith, but only complementing it
 - a. They wanted to add that which they believed would bring believers to perfection by being obedient
 - b. The law was meant to provide a guideline for conduct that would lead finally to righteousness
 2. Paul just stated that law and gospel could not be mixed or merged to bring about righteousness
 - a. And said law cannot justify us, confer our inheritance and that Christ released us from the law's curse
 - b. All this brings up the important question of exactly what the purpose of the law really was
 - c. Judaizers were holding up the law as more than a set of valuable ethical standards to make us moral
 - 1) Faith was important, but on its own apart from the law could not satisfy God so he could save us
 3. To deal with this false view of the law it was necessary that he show why it was given in the first place
 - a. If it was not intended to impart righteousness to those who obeyed it, then why did God give it?
 - b. Paul begins his explanation by saying it was added for a special purpose distinct from the promise
 - 1) It was not to supplement the covenant promise given to Abraham that was rooted in grace
 - 2) It wasn't meant to put God's promise to bless on a more sound footing, as if his word were not enough
 - c. The law was added because of transgressions, which is explained by a related passage in **Rom 4:15**
 - 1) The law makes men certain of their wrongdoing in a way that uneasy feelings never could
 - 2) Men may feel guilty, but without something to tell them they should feel that way, they excuse it
 - 3) Many dismiss guilt feelings as a product of misguided moral standards; law gives divine standards
 - 4) The law is not unrelated to righteousness, but the specific reason given here is to teach us sin is sin
 - d. Because sinners find it all too easy to excuse their sin as a minor thing, God gave us his law
 - 1) It reveals to everyone who knows its demands just how far short they have fallen of his righteousness
 - 2) The more closely we study its letter and spirit, the more we realize how impossible righteousness is
 - 3) This in turn leads us to recognize our need for a Savior who can do what we never could
 - 4) If we are blessed then we will find as Paul did thru the law we are put to death, see sin as utterly sinful
 4. The natural man does not want to have to depend wholly on God for salvation
 - a. His pride insists that there is something he must do, something he can do, to earn eternal life
 - b. As soon as the law shows us our sin we realize how hopeless any effort to be perfectly righteous is
 - c. In that moment the covenant faithfulness of our God to his promises to those who trust him are welcomed
 - d. The people of God from Adam to Abraham and onward have always found his grace at work thru faith
 - e. Rather than feeling cheated that we have nothing to give for our salvation, let us rejoice it has been given
 - f. And then, with a heart filled with gratitude, let us search God's Word to find what pleases him and do it