

Studies in Galatians (10/22)

The Promise and the Law.

Galatians 3:15-22

Since we considered only certain features in the text studied last week, we shall include it in the portion for this week, so that the intimate connection may be preserved. We have therefore the following as

The Scripture Lesson

“Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Tho it be but a man’s covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise. Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid; for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.” Gal. 3:15–22.

The things in this text that were considered last week were the following: The promise was made to Abraham; the promise concerns an inheritance; that inheritance is the whole world—the earth made new; an inheritance without a curse is the promise of the Spirit; the Lord redeems men from the curse in order that they may dwell forever in an earth redeemed from the curse; the covenant and the promise are the same thing; that covenant has been confirmed; it was confirmed in Christ, to Abraham, by the oath of God, and that oath is our hope and comfort till the present day. With this outline of what has already been passed over, we can proceed with our study.

An Unchangeable Covenant.—God is not a man, but it is sometimes allowable to use human things in illustrating the divine. God is not a man, that He should lie or change. Man is changeable, yet even a man’s covenant, if it once be confirmed, can not be disannulled or added to. No change whatever can be made in it. How much more, then, must this be the case with God’s covenant? “Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it, that men should fear before Him.” Eccl. 3:14. “When God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself. . . . For men verily swear by the greater; and an oath for confirmation is to

them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation." Heb. 6:13-18. The covenant, we have already seen, is the promise to Abraham, and that was confirmed by God's oath, and made as unchangeable as His character.

Abraham and Christ.—"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy Seed, which is Christ." It can not be too strongly impressed upon the minds of men that Christ is the Seed of Abraham, and that the covenant was confirmed in Him. There would be no difficulty whatever about the question of Israel if this one fact were remembered. *Christ is the Seed of Abraham, and there is no other*; for "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy Seed, which is Christ." Abraham and Christ are inseparably linked together. "To Abraham and his seed were the promises made," how many soever they were. Nothing was made to Abraham that could be obtained in any other way than through Christ; and Christ never comes into the possession of anything that does not belong to Abraham. This is plainly stated in the text.

We will not stop to parley over the matter of "literal seed" and the "spiritual seed." Christ is spiritual, that we know, for no one can call Him Lord, except by the Spirit; but He is also very literal: "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me, and see." We are glad to know that the literal can also be spiritual; were it not so, then we would be yet in our sins. But to *Abraham and his Seed* were the promises made. The Seed must be as literal as Abraham, even tho He be spiritual; and Christ "took on Him the seed of Abraham." It is enough for us at present to hold to the fact that Abraham and Christ are equally concerned in this promised inheritance, which is spiritual because the Spirit is the first-fruits of it. If we are of faith, then we are the children of Abraham and sharers in the blessing.

The Law Can Not Make the Covenant Void.—Do not forget as we proceed that the covenant and the promise are the same thing, and that it conveys land, even the whole earth made new, to Abraham and his seed; and remember also that, since only righteousness is to dwell in the new heavens and the new earth promised to Abraham and his seed, the promise includes the making righteous of all who believe. This is done in Christ, in whom the promise is confirmed. The argument of verses 17 and 18 is therefore this: Since perfect righteousness was assured by the covenant made with Abraham, which was also confirmed in Christ, it is impossible that the law, which was spoken 430 years later, could introduce any new feature. The inheritance was given to Abraham by promise, but if after 430 years it should transpire that now the inheritance must be gained in some other way, then the promise would be of no effect, and the covenant would be made void. But that would involve the overthrow of God's government, and the ending of His existence; for He pledged

His own existence to *give* Abraham and his seed the inheritance and the righteousness necessary for it. "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." Rom. 4:13.

What Is the Use of the Law?—This is the question that the apostle Paul asks in verse 19, both for the purpose of anticipating the objections of the antinomians, and also that he may the more emphatically show the place of the law in the Gospel. The question is a very natural one. Since the inheritance is wholly by promise, and a covenant confirmed can not be changed, nothing can be taken from it, and nothing added to it, why did the law come in four hundred and thirty years afterward? "Wherefore then serveth the law?" "Why then the law?" What business has it here? What part does it act?

The Question Answered.—"It was added because of transgressions." Let it be understood that "the entering of the law" at Sinai was not the beginning of its existence. The law of God existed in the days of Abraham, and was kept by him. Gen. 26:5. God proved the children of Israel as to whether they would keep His law or not more than a month before the law was spoken upon Sinai. Ex. 16:1-4, 27, 28.

"It Was Added."—The word here rendered "added" is the same as that rendered "spoken" in Heb. 12:19: "They that heard entreated that the word should not be *spoken* to them any more." It is the same word that occurs in the Septuagint rendering of Deut. 5:22, where we read that God spoke the Ten Commandments with a great voice; "and He added no more." So we may read the answer to the question, "Wherefore then the law?" thus: "It was spoken because of transgressions."

Because of Transgressions.—"Moreover the law entered, that the offense might abound." Rom. 5:20. In other words, "that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." Rom. 7:13. It was given under circumstances of the most awful majesty, as a warning to the children of Israel that by their unbelief they were in danger of losing the promised inheritance. They did not, like Abraham, believe the Lord; and "whatsoever is not of faith is sin." But the inheritance was promised "through the righteousness of faith," so that the unbelieving Jews could not receive it. The law was therefore spoken to them to convince them that they had not the righteousness that was necessary for the possession of the inheritance; for, altho righteousness does not come by the law, it must be witnessed by the law. Rom. 3:21. In short, the law was given to show them that they had not faith, and so were not children of Abraham, and were therefore in a fair way to lose the inheritance. God would have put His law into their hearts, even as He put it into Abraham's heart, if they had believed; but when they disbelieved, yet still professed to be heirs of the promise, it was necessary to show them in the most marked manner that their unbelief was sin. The law was

spoken because of transgression, or, what is the same thing, because of the unbelief of the people.

In the Hand of a Mediator.—For the present we may pass by the question of time involved in the phrase, “till the Seed should come, to whom the promise was made,” since our present study is the relation of the law to the promise. The law was given to the people from Sinai “in the hand of a Mediator.” Who was this Mediator?—There can be only one answer: “There is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” 1 Tim. 2:5. “Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one.” God is one, the people are the other, and Christ Jesus is the Mediator. Just as surely as God is one party to the transaction, Christ must be the Mediator, for there is no other mediator between God and men. “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Acts 4:12.

Christ’s Work as Mediator.—Man has wandered from God and rebelled against Him. “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Our iniquities have separated between us and Him. Isa. 59:1, 2. “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” Rom. 8:7. Christ came that He might destroy the enmity and reconcile us to God; for He is our peace. Eph. 2:14-16. Through Him we have access to God. Rom. 5:1, 2; Eph. 2:18. In Him the carnal mind, the rebellious mind, is taken away, and the mind of the Spirit given in its stead, “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” Rom. 8:3, 4. Christ’s work is to save that which was lost, to restore that which was broken, to reunite that which was separated. His name is “God with us;” and so with Him dwelling in us we are made “partakers of the divine nature.” 2 Peter 1:4.

The Law Not against the Promise.—“Is the law then against the promises of God?”—Not by any means. Far from it. If it were, it would not be in the hands of a Mediator, Christ; for all the promises of God are in Him. 2 Cor. 1:20. So we find the law and the promise combined in Christ. We may know that the law was not and is not against the promises of God, from the fact that God gave both the promise and the law. We know also that the giving of the law introduced no new element into the covenant, since, having been confirmed, nothing could be added to or taken from the covenant. But the law is not useless, else God would not have given it. It is not a matter of indifference whether we keep it or not, for God commands it. But, all the same, it is not against the promise, and brings no new element in. Why?—Simply because the law is in the promise. The promise of the Spirit includes this: “I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts.” Heb. 8:10. And this is what God indicated had been done for Abraham, when “He gave him the covenant of circumcision.” Read Rom. 4:11; 2:25-29; Phil. 3:3.

The Law Magnifies the Promise.—The law, as already seen, is not against the promise, because it is in the promise. The promise that Abraham and his seed should inherit the world, was “through the righteousness of faith.” But the law is righteousness, as God says: “Harken unto Me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law.” Isa. 51:7. So, then, the righteousness which the law demands is the only righteousness that can inherit the promised land, but it is obtained, not by the works of the law, but by faith. The righteousness of the law is not attained by human efforts to do the law, but by faith. See Rom. 9:30-32. Therefore, the greater the righteousness which the law demands, the greater is seen to be the promise of God; for He has promised to give it to all who believe. Yea, He has sworn it. When, therefore, the law was spoken from Sinai, “out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice,” accompanied by the sounding of the trump of God, and with the whole earth quaking at the presence of the Lord and all His holy angels, thus indicating the inconceivable greatness and majesty of the law of God, it was, to every one who remembered the oath of God, but a revelation of the wondrous greatness of God’s promise; for all the righteousness which the law demands, He has sworn to give to every one who trusts Him.

Conviction of Sin and of Righteousness.—Jesus said of the Comforter, “When He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” John 14:8. Of Himself He said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Mark 2:17. “They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick.” A man must feel his need before he will accept help; he must know his disease before he can apply the remedy. Even so the promise of righteousness will be utterly unheeded by one who does not realize that he is a sinner. The first part of the comforting work of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is to convince men of sin. So “the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.” “By the law is the knowledge of sin.” Rom. 3:20. He who knows that he is a sinner is in the way to acknowledge it; and “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9. Thus the law is in the hands of the Spirit an active agent in inducing men to accept the fullness of the promise. No one hates the man who has saved his life by pointing out to him an unknown peril; on the contrary, such an one is regarded as a friend, and is always remembered with gratitude. Even so will the law be regarded by the one who has been prompted by its warning voice to flee from the wrath to come. He will ever say, with the psalmist, “I hate vain thoughts, but Thy law do I love.”

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