

## Galatians 3 v 15 – 29 Littlebourne 02.06.24

### Intro

In this passage, Paul is continuing and developing his teaching from the previous 14 verses. In fact, it is the theme of the whole letter to the Galatian church, so you are probably very familiar with it by now. However, let's dig into these verses and see what we find.

### Covenant v. 15 – 16

There are several covenants between God and man in Scripture; Prof. Wayne Grudem, in his Systematic Theology, gives the following definition:

*A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.*

Even between people a covenant was not a contract which could be broken or changed; once a covenant was ratified it could not be added to nor annulled. The promises to Abraham were made and ratified by God alone.

Let's have a look at that:

Gen. 12 v 1 In Haran, God promised Abram:

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing., I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse\*, **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"*

\*In a covenant relationship one was bound to come to the other's aid. Abram is helpless in this, he cannot in any way be of support to almighty God, But god is bound to come to his aid.

Note that in this promise there is universality – all families, all nations will be eligible to receive the blessing. Paul's concern in his letter to the Galatian believers, is that the gentiles among them shall know that they are included in the covenant with Abram.

Abram obeys the command to leave Haran and the years pass and he still has no son, nor a territory for his descendants to live in. So we come to:

### Gen. 15 v 1-20

I won't ask you to close your eyes because that would be risky on a Sunday afternoon! But, in your mind's eye, picture this encounter:

Abram has a vision and the word of the Lord comes to him. Abram didn't have visions very often; he didn't hear the word of the Lord every day or even every year. He lived by what God said to Him on the rare occasions he did hear Him – that's faith! It's worth noting that Abram's walk of faith was punctuated by the occasional mistake – sometimes very big ones, but God saw his faith and that's what counted.

So, Abram hears God, Who reassures him that he is protected and will be greatly rewarded by God. Obviously, Abram remembers the promise God made him, in Haran, about being the father of a dynasty. He was seventy-five then and still able to father children, even now though he is even older, he is still able to father a child, but Sarai, his wife is way beyond childbearing.

Abram brings the problem to the Lord. This is Your promise, but I haven't any children and my heir isn't even related to me.

So, God takes him out of the tent to look at the stars – just imagine how many stars Abram could see in the dark of the night where there was no light pollution at all! God reiterates his promise with knobs on!

Key verse, not just in this story, but in the whole of scripture:

'Then he believed in the LORD and He accounted it to him for righteousness.' V.6

### **The next day and God reiterates His promise of descendants and a land.**

Then Abram is instructed to bring a 3-year-old heifer, a 3-year-old female goat, a 3-year-old ram, a turtle dove and a pigeon. He slaughters them, cuts them in half, apart from the birds, and lays them out on the ground in two rows with an aisle between. I feel sure that I have heard that this was a customary procedure for 'cutting a covenant' in the middle east at that time.

Of course, the vultures turn up for a feast, but Abram drives them away. Eventually, the sun begins to set, and Abram falls into a deep sleep and a horror and great darkness falls on him. This was a fore-shadowing of the darkness and horror that would fall on his descendants when they were slaves in Egypt, but God reassures Abram that, although this will certainly happen and it will be long-term, God will bring them out of that situation far richer than they went into it. And they will indeed inherit the promised land. Why did God give Abram this experience? I suggest it was so that it could be related down through the generations and be an encouragement to the Hebrews in slavery in Egypt, centuries later.

And now, the sun sets, and, in the darkness, Abram sees what seems to be a smoking oven and a burning torch passing between the pieces of animal. It is not the two parties of the covenant who are passing between the animals, as you would expect – God and Abram ratifying the covenant between them. No, God Himself, and only God, ratifies the covenant.

Do you see? Right from the beginning the basis of a relationship with God is faith in His promises and not by any merit or work on our part.

After obediently sacrificing the animals and birds and laying them out as God indicated, Abram played no part in this.

Then, God Himself, who made the promise in Haran, ratifies it by passing through the sacrificed animals.

Gen. 17 v 1 f God repeats the promises. Although Abram did not pass through the sacrifice with the Lord, there is an expectation that he, Abraham as he is now named, and his descendants will keep the covenant by walking with the Lord and being blameless v.1 and that the males must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant.

But the important point is that the promises were made by God and the covenant was ratified by God. There is the expectation that the human parties will believe God and obey Him, but the covenant rests and stands in the faithfulness of God alone.

And it still stands.

**So, back to Gal. 3 v 16 Singular or plural offspring:**

The Hebrew word 'zera' translated as 'Offspring' (or in some old translations 'seed') can be a singular noun i.e. referring to one descendant or a collective singular referring to more than one. Paul uses it in its plural sense in Romans 4 v 18:

'In hope he (Abram) believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, 'So shall your offspring (plural) be'.

But here, in Galatians 3 v 16, Paul, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, interprets the word in the singular to indicate that all God's Old Testament promises are fulfilled in one Person – Jesus. Only in Christ will the blessings and promises of God come to the Jews and Gentiles alike.

Gal.3 v 17

*'This is what I mean: the Law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.'*

Remember, Paul is arguing against the influence of the Judaisers, who are telling Gentile believers in Jesus that they must obey the Jewish laws and traditions.

So, he makes the point that the Law, which was given about 430 years after the covenant with Abraham, does not nullify or change that earlier ratified covenant.

You cannot have it both ways:

Gal. 3 v 18      Either the inheritance is earned by keeping the Law, in which case Christ died for nothing; or it is unearned and undeserved, given freely in the covenant promise. And we see that God gave the inheritance to Abram by a promise.

Gal 3 v 19      So, what was the purpose of the Law?

- To provide a sacrificial system to deal with sin temporarily.
- To teach people more clearly what God requires & thereby restrain transgressions.
- To show that transgressions violate an explicit written law.
- To reveal sinfulness and the need for a Saviour (Rom. 3 v 20 – through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.)

Rom. 7 v 12      Paul writes, '*the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*' But because of our sinfulness, the Law could never give us life:

Rom. 8 v 3, 4    ...*God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit.'*

In other words, we never could earn righteousness and acceptance with Holy God through trying and failing to keep the Law; only by faith.

Paul quotes two key verses earlier in this chapter:

Abram believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Gen 15 v 6

The righteous shall live by his faith Hab. 2 v 4

V 23, 24          Christ was the inheritor of the Abramic covenant – The Offspring of offsprings promised to Abram. Before He came, and along with Him the new covenant– a covenant cut in

His own body and blood, mankind was stuck under the Mosaic Law which guided their behaviour, but couldn't save them. Now, as always intended, righteousness is through faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, - a free, unimaginably great gift of God's grace. Free to us, but at what a cost to Him!

V.26 *..in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.*

If we have accepted Christ Jesus as our Saviour and Lord by faith, and been baptised into Him, we are in Him and He lives in us, whether we are Jew or Gentile, male or female, whatever our social or economic standing or intelligence. It makes no difference; we are all on the same footing – offspring and heirs of the promise to Abram.

So how does that work out in our lives, now?

	<b>The Covenant-Promise</b>	
<b>To Abraham</b>	<b>Received by faith</b>	<b>To Christ The 'Offspring' and through Him to us:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A future geographical dwelling place</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A heavenly Kingdom come to earth; we are part of it, now, and will be in its fulness when Christ returns.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Descendants – a nation on earth</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A people born again of the Holy Spirit, belonging to Christ.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nomadic; dependant on God</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.' Hebrews 13 v 14</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A blessing to all nations</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Called to spread the blessing of the Good News of salvation to all people</li> </ul>

### **Finally**

This has been rather dense teaching and possibly a bit repetitive of previous weeks, so I thought we'd close with something lighter.

Before the children came a long, Philip and I helped a dear man of God, Paddy McMahon, run a Sunday School on a council estate in Peterborough. One of the songs Paddy taught these, sometimes rowdy, kids was greatly enjoyed because of the actions, though I thought it not very relevant to them. However, I think it is relevant today, so I thought I'd teach it to you.

Father Abraham has many sons

Many sons has Father Abraham,

And I am one of them and so are you.

So, let's all praise the Lord!