

The Promise of Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now I wonder if you would turn to Galatians 3 on page 178 near the back of the Bible. Nora has blown our cover. It is no use pretending to you that this is an easy passage.

It's not. One of my good friends came out of the nine o'clock service and greeted me at the door with the honest words that went entirely over my head. So we need God's help, especially in this passage.

We need God's help whenever we turn to the Bible, but it's made a little bit more obvious. Galatians 3, and we're going to look at 15 to 22. And one of the things that gives away the fact that it's so difficult is in verse 15, Paul stops for just a moment and says, let me give you a human example.

In other words, he's very aware that what he's been saying is deep and wide, that his readers are having trouble keeping up. And so he pauses for a brilliant illustration, which I'm going to get to in just a minute.

But before we get to it, I just want to point out in passing, that church is not meant to be a place where you leave your brain at the door. If you have left your brain at the door, you can collect it on the way out.

[1 : 1 0] But that's not meant to be the way it is. We ought to expect parts of the Bible to be difficult, hard, demanding, taking more than all the brain power that we have.

In fact, even the simplest parts are beyond us in a way. One of the lovely things about having a baptism service is it's a reminder to us that at the heart of the Christian faith, the real core of the Christian faith is so simple, a child can grasp it.

What makes the Christian faith difficult is not so much the intellectual gymnastics, but that it confronts us and challenges us and that we need to come and the way that we listen is with a humble heart and listening is with a spirit of wanting to love the truth.

And as we work through this book, the Galatians are growing more dear to us week by week, aren't they? You know, they had received the Christian message from the Apostle Paul that went like this, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are saved, second, third, now obey the law.

And a new group of false teachers had come in and said, no, no, that's wrong. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, then obey the law, then you'll be saved. And the Apostle Paul says it's not a calculation error, that's not just getting things in the wrong order.

[2 : 3 0] What that does is it produces a different religion. And if you remember in the first five verses of Galatians 3, the Apostle says, he reminds them in verse 2, they had received the Holy Spirit by faith.

Verse 3, they began with the Holy Spirit by faith. Verse 5, God had supplied the Holy Spirit by faith. Everything that God had done to start their lives with the receiving of the Holy Spirit had been done by faith.

Why on earth would we begin to think that we grow in a different way? That we grow by being obedient through works of the law? And in verses 6 to 14, the Apostle brilliantly pulls the rug out from under the false teachers.

He takes us back into the Old Testament, 2,000 years before the time of Christ, perhaps, to the time of Abraham. And he says, Abraham, the founder of Israel, he was not saved by his obedience to the law, he was saved by the promise of God.

I didn't make this up, he's saying. The New Testament isn't plan B. This has been the way that God has related to us ever since the start. And last week, if you were here, you remember, he contrasts two ways of living, relying on the law and our obedience, or relying on the promise.

[3 : 53] Resting on the law or resting on the promise. And now in 15 to 22, he has one point to make, one further point, and then he stops and takes two questions from the floor.

And his one big point is in verses 15 to 18, and that is about the promise and how different it is from the law. If you look, just cast your eyes down there. You see promise verse 16, promise verse 17, promise verse 18, and he uses a human example that perfectly demonstrates that relating to each other by law and relating to each other by promise are entirely different.

Are you with me so far? Put your hand up if this is going over your head. No, I won't do it. Let me try and bring the human illustration up to date.

You're sitting at home one day, things have not been going very well for you, financially, in every other way, and the doorbell rings. And you go to the door and you look through the little hole and there's a guy standing there with a suit on.

So he's obviously not collecting for anything. And he politely asks you your name and then he asks for your ID. And when he gives you your ID, he proceeds to tell you that you had an unknown uncle, Uncle Bob.

[5 : 09] And Uncle Bob had worked like a slave all his life and had become fabulously successful and had recently died and left the entire inheritance of a hundred million dollars to you.

A hundred million? I just pulled that out of the air. That's a lot of money still, isn't it? Yes, okay. Now, some of you say no? Now, what do you do to receive that?

Well, you've got to believe the guy, haven't you? There are two different ways of receiving money. Either you work for it and earn it, like poor Uncle Bob did, or you receive it as an inheritance.

It either comes by a promise agreement or a law agreement. It doesn't come both. Uncle Bob doesn't say, you've got to work for a hundred years before you're going to get this. It's all yours. All you've got to do is believe it.

You don't have to obey anything or fulfill any conditions. And it's exactly the same with the righteousness of God. It comes to us as a gift through promise, as an inheritance.

[6 : 15] It's his to give. And he offers it to us, not by our obeying the commandments, not through exchange of labor and work, but through promise.

And he summarizes in verse 18, he says, for if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise, but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Abraham is crucial. And through this chapter, the apostle has been quoting from Genesis 15. And I want to take you back to Genesis 15 to show you a stunning passage and demonstrate why promise and law can't work together.

Just keep your finger in Galatians 3 and go all the way back to the start of the Bible to Genesis 15, which is on page 11. This is the chapter that Paul is quoting in Galatians.

Genesis 15 on page 11 in the right-hand column. I'm going to start at verse 7. God said to Abraham, I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.

[7 : 22] That was his promise. But Abraham said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I'll possess it? How can I trust your promise? The Lord said to him, bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle dove and a young pigeon.

And Abraham bought all these, cut them in two, laid each half over against the other, but didn't cut the birds in two. And when the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away till evening.

What on earth is going on? This is a covenant-making ceremony. In those days, you didn't go to your lawyer, sign the forms and get duplicates made.

When two kings made a covenant together, a solemn oath, they had a ceremony. And they would cut a series of animals in half and lay the halves out. And as they took the oaths of covenant, they would seal the covenant by walking down in the middle of the animals.

And what they were saying was this, I'm taking on myself the responsibility to implement this covenant. And if I fail to implement this covenant, if I fail to fulfill this covenant, be it to me like to these animals.

[8 : 37] May it happen to me as it happens to these animals if I do not uphold my side of the covenant. So what happens? Verse 12.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And lo, a dread and a great darkness fell upon him. The Lord said to Abram, Know of a surety, your descendants will be sojourners in a land that's not theirs.

They'll be slaves there. They'll be oppressed 400 years. I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

You shall be buried at a good age, and they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. Now, listen. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces, the animals.

And on that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your descendants I will give the land, etc., etc. Here's the question. Who walks between the animals? It's not Abram.

[9 : 49] It's God. And God walks through the animals, not once, but twice. You see, Abram's lying there with dread and deep darkness upon him, and instead, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch, both of them symbols of God, move between the animals.

And God is saying, I will take to myself the penalty for this oath. If I do not fulfill this covenant, God is saying, I will be killed.

And if you don't fulfill the covenant, God is saying, I will be killed. Don't you find that stunning? You see, salvation is not an employment contract where we give God something and He gives something back to us if we fulfill certain conditions.

It's not a cooperative agreement. It is provided by God from first to last by promise. God is saying, even if I have to be killed, I will make sure this covenant is fulfilled.

I'll make sure from my side, and I will make sure from your side. And of course, that is exactly what happened, isn't it? Two thousand years later, in Jerusalem, another deep darkness fell.

[11 : 09] As Jesus hung on the cross, as He is forsaken for us, you know what that is? That is God fulfilling the covenant to Abraham. It is God taking on Himself the oath that we broke.

I think it was one of the archbishops of Canterbury who said that the only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin from which we need to be forgiven. You see, when it comes to salvation, all you and I need is nothing.

But the problem is that so few of us have nothing and so few are saved. And if we go back to Galatians chapter 3, that is what Paul is talking about.

If you turn back to that chapter, you can see in verse 16 and 17, the Apostle is saying that when God made a covenant with Abraham, he had Jesus Christ in mind.

When God promised Abraham, all the families of the earth are going to be blessed through you. He was speaking beyond this one man. He was making a cosmic promise.

[12 : 23] And it shows to us how the Bible centers on the person of Jesus Christ. It's only through the death of Jesus that this blessing to all the families of the earth will come.

And that's why, brothers and sisters, the Old Testament's not a museum piece. It's not something of historical interest. It remains God's living testimony and living word to his son, Jesus Christ, as does the New Testament.

But here is the point. The blessing of salvation, the blessing of life in the Spirit, it's an inheritance. And it comes to us by promise, not by law.

That's the point. So what the Apostle does now is he stops for two very obvious questions, verse 19, and then in verse 21. And verse 19, the obvious question is, why the law?

If salvation is by promise, why on earth did God give the law? I mean, if God made this promise to Abraham, which is 430 years before Moses came, why does God give the law to Moses?

[13 : 30] If it can't save us, if he's already given the promise, why the law? Let me read verses 19, 20. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions.

Till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary. Now, an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is that clear? I discovered somewhat encouragingly this week that there are over 300 different interpretations of verse 20.

And I'm going to tell you the right one. Actually, one of the lovely things about the book of Galatians, it's like a spotlight, and it shines on our view of the world and our view of God, and it shows up the holes and the cracks and the dusty corners which need fixing up, really.

A number of good Bible commentators say, well, we should just take the law out of the Bible. But, of course, the apostle loves the law, doesn't he? We know from the book of Romans that he delights in the law, and we know from the Old Testament that one of the works of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is to enable us, enables God to write his law in our hearts.

[14 : 50] What Paul says here is this. The law is a brilliant gift because it shows us how much we need the saving promise.

Without the law, we wouldn't understand how profoundly we need God's saving grace. Let me go back to Uncle Bob. Now, just imagine that part of the fortune that you inherited from Uncle Bob includes a medical centre full of specialists.

You feel fine. You have felt fine for a long time. But you're one of those unfortunate people that lives in a country that has to pay for medical services. I'm moving on.

But you've never been able to afford a full check-up. So you go to the doctors and they do a vast battery of tests on you. And at the end of the tests, one of the doctors comes over to you and says, look, it's very good that you came in.

It's very bad. If you'd waited a few more weeks, it would have been too late. And treatment is going to cost you \$85,000. It's not a very good illustration. But the point is this.

[15 : 57] The law from God is a diagnostic tool. It demonstrates how lethal our problem is. It shows the magnitude of our condition.

You see, it diagnoses what's wrong with us. See, before God gave the law to Moses, murder and adultery and stealing and lying, they were still wrong. But we did not know that they were sins against God.

Now that the law has come, when I do those things, I'm not just doing them against you. But when I do those things, I am defying the God who made me.

So you see, the law can never give me righteousness. But what it does is it strips away all my pretense of righteousness and points me to the Saviour. It points me to my need for salvation.

That's why it's absolutely essential in the plan of God. It reveals our need. It directs us to Christ. Okay. Question number one. What's question number two?

[16 : 58] Verse 21. Is the law then against the promises of God? Now it's here you're going to have to work with me for just a few minutes.

I think we would have to say that without the Christian gospel, without this gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we would have to say, yes, the law is opposed to the promise.

Yes, law is opposed to grace. Let me give you an illustration. There's a popular view of Christianity around today. It teaches this. It teaches that Jesus was a first century prophet who taught a radical message of love.

He was a reformer and a revolutionary. And he sought to establish a church of love with the message that God radically accepts everyone. It doesn't matter what you do. And then people say, along came this villain Paul and others.

And they corrupted the simple message of love. And instead of just accepting everyone as loved by God, they set up this religion of law where God has absolute standards and unless you live up to the standards, we're all going to get zotted in the end.

[18 : 07] You see, behind that idea is this, that law is fundamentally opposed to promise and you cannot bring the two things together in religion.

And I think in many ways, underneath the current crisis in the West, both politically and religiously and culturally, is this distinction.

On the one side are those who say, love is absolute. And what is wrong is that people are not free. And the way that people become free is they just get radically accepted as they are and not judged.

If you judge people, then you're an oppressor. And on the other side in our culture is a growing voice that says, no, law is absolute. What's wrong with people is that they're bad.

And what we need are more laws and better laws that will correct behaviour or else we'll all go to hell. And the church of love says, yes, we believe in right and wrong, sort of, but God is love so it doesn't really count.

[19 : 17] And the church of law says, yeah, God is love. Up to a certain point. But you've got to believe what I believe and do what I do because God is very hard to please and he's very touchy. And I think those two views are at war in our culture, in our politics, in our judiciary, in our economics, and in our churches.

And I'll tell you why. It is because it is humanly impossible to hold those two things together. And I think that's what makes this passage so challenging for us.

It puts to us the question, is law opposed promise? And we have to say, yes, it is. There are two different ways of thinking about living, about each other.

And the apostle Paul says, in Jesus Christ, they come together. The Christian gospel holds two things together that no other religion does.

No other religion is able to. At the heart of the Christian faith is this profound contradiction. And I think the clue to understanding this is in verse 20.

[20 : 27] As you see, it says, an intermediary implies more than one. Now, Moses came, the law came through Moses. And then Paul says, but God is one. That's right.

The source of the law, the source of the promise, is God. And in God, in the one God, we have the perfect combination of justice and mercy, of holiness and goodness.

And I want to demonstrate this to you, so I'm going to take you to one more passage as we draw to a conclusion. If you'd turn back to Exodus 34 for just a moment, please. We'll start.

That's on page 78. We're going to start in chapter 33 at verse 18. This is Moses with God at Sinai. Moses said to the Lord, Lord, I pray thee, show me thy glory.

And God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you my name, the Lord. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy.

[21 : 46] But he said, you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live. And the Lord said, behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock, and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by.

And then I'll take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face you shall not see. Understand what's going on? Moses says to the Lord, show me your glory. And God says, I will show you all my goodness.

And then to protect him, he puts him in the cleft of the rock. And in chapter 34, verse 5, we pick up the story, and we read this. The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Now, friends, here is all the goodness of God and it seems to us a contradiction, doesn't it? He says, I am a God of steadfast love and compassion.

[23 : 17] If you could just get a glimpse of my love, it would break your heart in two. And he says, but I will not clear the guilty. He says, I will forgive, but every sin must be punished.

And I don't think we can understand this without the help of the Holy Spirit, that God is the perfect combination of love and wrath, of promise and law, of holiness and compassion.

And you cannot see the glory of God and you cannot see the goodness of God unless you see both together. If you have a God of law without love, you have no glory.

If you have a God of love without law, you have no glory. It is in the Bible, it is in the God of the Bible where these two come together.

And this morning, when we baptised the children and we signed them with the sign of the cross, to recognition that the heart of the Christian faith is the perfect demonstration of both love and law, of heartbreaking compassion as well as justice, God, in the cross of Jesus Christ, reveals his utter moral goodness and the sweetness of his kindness to us.

[24 : 40] It was out of love that Jesus gave himself on the cross. It was out of kindness. He did for us what we did not deserve. He did for us out of his sheer compassion.

And yet in the cross, love and justice meet, righteousness and peace kiss one another. And as Jesus dies on the cross, the curse of the covenant of our disobedience is laid on him.

He is abandoned. He pays for our sin because God will not turn a blind eye to sin. He will not clear the guilty. which means either I pay for my sin or I allow Jesus to pay for my sin.

That is where he redeemed me. That's where he bought me. That is where he became sin and he became a curse so that I might be righteousness and I might be the blessing.

And he turns and he offers this to us as an inheritance, as a gift. And all we need to do is to reach out our hands and receive it. That's what faith does. It doesn't begin to work for it.

[25 : 44] It doesn't begin to think we can pay it off. There's no hoop to jump over. It is the gift of God. And I think as we begin to place our faith in Christ and as we continue in our lives to do this, because it is the God of Abraham to whom we're relating, it makes us into better parents and better neighbours and better citizens.

And we find, we gradually find it possible to hold together truth and love. See, we find this very difficult, don't we? Either we're indulgent to ourselves and harsh towards others, or we're harsh to ourselves and indulgent towards others.

But through faith in Jesus Christ, we're drawn up to be like him and as we become like him, we become people who are able to hold together truth and love and holiness and grace and moral conviction and gentleness.

And we say to each other, it's not that we are either sinful or righteous, but we are radically sinful and radically righteous at the very same time. That's the message.

Amen.