

Blessings

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the book of Galatians? We are looking at chapter 3, verses 6-22.

! So, let me invite you to turn there with me. That's page 914 in the Pew Bible. Now, as we come to our passage today, you'll see that in our ESV Pew Bibles, and maybe this is even going to be the case on the screens above, verse 6 is translated or sort of taken as the continuation of a rhetorical question that begins in verse 5. So, the ESV connects verse 6 to verse 5. Do you see that there? Now, that is a perfectly legitimate translation. There's nothing wrong with that, but in the Greek manuscripts, there actually isn't any punctuation, so we have to make some interpretive decisions. Another perfectly legitimate way to translate verse 6 is not to see it as a question, but as the beginning of a new sentence that continues into verse 7. And maybe if you've read the NIV or the NRSV, you'll see that that's how they translate that. Now, the meaning of the passage doesn't really change no matter which way you take it, but as Matt and I have studied this passage, we think it's a little smoother to translate verse 6 with verse 7.

And that is all to say why we are starting in verse 6 today. So, as you look at the ESV, just imagine that verse 5 ends with a question mark and verse 6 starts a new sentence. All right. Let me go ahead and read this passage for us. Galatians 3, 6 through 22.

Just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness, know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

[1:43] And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, in you shall all the nations be blessed. So then those who are of faith are blessed, along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

Now, it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteous shall live by faith. But the law is not of faith, rather the one who does them shall live by them.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

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. 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.

[3:10] 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.

For if the inheritance comes by law, it no longer comes by promise, but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law?

It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. And it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now, an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

[4:14] All right, let's pray. Father, we ask for your help not just to understand, what this passage is saying, but also to experience in our hearts the good news and the freedom that this passage proclaims, so that we might live in the freedom and the blessing that this passage proclaims, on the basis of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all your blessings come to us.

In His name we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, all right. Well, as we've seen over the past six weeks in our series in Galatians, Paul has been arguing the radical, liberating message that our acceptance with God, our right standing before God, our confidence and assurance before God, our Creator and the Judge of all things, the basis on which God declares us righteous, that is fully accepted by Him, that comes not from works that we do in obedience to the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, last week, Paul advanced an argument in favor of this proclamation of the gospel. He advanced an argument from the Galatians' own experience. He asked them, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

The answer, of course, was that the Spirit's work in their midst, the Spirit's work of conversion, of peace, of unity, of holiness, yes, even of miracles, didn't happen because they'd gone back and started keeping the law.

It had happened because they believed what they heard about Christ crucified. So He could appeal to their own experience that the full acceptance of God came through faith.

[6:00] But now, in our text today, Paul advances an argument, not from experience, but from Scripture. What does the Scripture have to say about this good news that Paul and all the other apostles in unity proclaim?

What is it that God's Word actually teaches? And now, before we dive into that, I think the fact that Paul here turns to Scripture and the fact that he spends so much more time arguing from Scripture is in itself a good point for us to consider.

You see, for Paul, an argument of Old Testament Scripture support. Well, consider first, Paul says, Abraham's blessing.

Abraham's blessing. Now, it is most likely that the teachers who were agitating the Galatians' churches and whom Paul's kind of refuting in this letter, it's likely that they were saying that in order to be sure of God's blessing of salvation, in order to be included in the rich inheritance of God's salvation, you had to be a member of Abraham's family.

After all, God said in Genesis that His blessing would come to Abraham's offspring. Right? And these teachers probably went on to say that the way you get into Abraham's family is by circumcision, and the way you stay in Abraham's family is by keeping the law.

[7:30] So, in response to all this, Paul also goes back to Abraham. What do we learn from Abraham after all?

Paul asks, how did Abraham come to be accepted by God as righteous? That is, on what basis did God give His full acceptance and favor to Abraham?

And therefore, how does someone today really become a child of Abraham? Well, Paul says Genesis 15 is clear. What does it say?

Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now, notice, it doesn't say Abraham merely believed in God, right?

As in, Abraham sort of knew that God existed. Abraham didn't merely believe certain facts about God to be true. No, it says Abraham believed God.

[8:32] That is, Abraham trusted the promise God had made to him, trusted that God would do what God said He would do. And in Abraham's case, he trusted that God would cause he and Sarah to have a child in their old age, even though, humanly speaking, it was impossible.

And when Abraham believed God, Genesis says on that basis, God treated him as if he was totally righteous.

Now, think about how radical that is. Abraham, obviously, if you read the story of Genesis, wasn't totally morally righteous in himself, right?

He had lots of doubts, didn't he? He had lots of moral failures. Do you remember what happened when Abraham, during a famine, goes down to Egypt, right?

He gets really scared. So he tells his wife, Sarah, hey, let's tell a half-truth and tell everyone you're my sister. That way they won't kill me and steal you from me, right?

[9:41] And God actually thinks that's a really bad idea. And you read Genesis and God sort of delivers Abraham out of that. And then, a little bit later, what does Abraham do? He does the exact same thing again.

He's stuck in a pattern of habitual sin, right? You know, is Abraham a morally flawless character? Is he in and of himself a righteous person?

No. He's full of flaws and doubts and fears, just like you and me. But rather than treating Abraham according to what his works deserved, God looked upon Abraham's trust in his promise, and on that basis, considered him as if he was completely righteous.

And was this just special treatment for Abraham? Did God sort of make an exception for Abraham? Did God think, well, you know, just this once, Abraham can be justified by faith in my promise, but you know, everyone else is going to have to earn it.

No. What Paul sees and what he shows is that Abraham wasn't an exception because God had already said in Scripture, in you, Abraham, shall all the nations be blessed.

[11:08] In other words, the blessing of God would come to everyone in the exact same way as it came to Abraham, not by works that we do, but by trusting the God who keeps his promise.

Now, I imagine not many of us today think a whole lot about Abraham, right? Most of us probably don't lose a lot of sleep over wondering whether we are or are not a child of Abraham, right?

When you woke up this morning, you didn't sort of suddenly have an existential moment of crisis and think, am I a son of Abraham? No, you're like, make some coffee, I'm tired, or whatever it was, right?

Right? But consider what Paul is saying at the heart of what he's saying here. Most of us, aren't we?

Most of us are living for a blessing of some kind. And, you know, I don't mean blessing in some sort of cheesy, materialistic, financial way, right?

[12:20] We're living for a deeper blessing than that. And blessing in the Bible means favor, acceptance, belonging, being known, being loved, having someone for you.

And that's what all of our souls are longing for. And we can seek this deep acceptance and belonging through any number of means, can't we?

In the accolades of a professional circle, in the arms of a lover, in a tight-knit group of friends. But the real blessing that you seek cannot ultimately be found there, as good as those things may be. The real blessing that we seek can't be found there, and that's why those things never really satisfy for long, because it's a deeper blessing that we're built for. You see, when God created humans, what was the first thing that God did?

He blessed us. He spoke a blessing over us. Humans were created to operate under the favor of God, the loving acceptance of our Creator, like flowers opening up to the sun.

[13:48] Our lives were meant to flourish with the face of God shining upon us. But the way back into this favor, the way back into this blessing and this belonging, this righteousness before God, isn't through striving or through earning.

What we see in Abraham, it's that it is offered to all who believe God's promise. And we know that that promise has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

So, you see, you don't have to chase the fleeting blessings of money or love or profession. The good news is that you can have the blessing that lasts forever.

Your life can open up in the created flourishing you were meant to have through God's promise. So, Paul's first scriptural argument is about blessing.

It's about Abraham's blessing, that those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. His second argument, then, is about the law's curse.

[15:08] The law's curse. Again, the false teachers in Galatia probably made the claim that the way to be righteous and get God's blessing was to keep the law, right? I mean, on the surface, that obviously sounds right, doesn't it?

After all, in practically every other area of life, that's how it operates, doesn't it? I work up to a certain standard and then I receive a certain reward. If I want to get into a good college, I have to earn good grades, right?

If I want to play a sport, I have to earn my place on the team. If I want to get a promotion at work, I have to earn more clients and more money for the company. I get out what I put in. But is that how it works with God?

Do we have to rely on our works in the same way? Well, what does the Scripture say? Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27, 26 that says, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

Have you abided by all things written in the book of the law? Have you actually done them?

[16:19] This is the question Paul's putting before his audience and us. Oh, you who would rely on works of the law. What does the law say? What does the law actually require?

It doesn't merely require a few religious observances here and there, right? It doesn't even merely require that we refrain from murder or adultery, right? It requires that we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

It requires not just that we don't murder, but that we don't harbor hatred in our hearts, that we don't speak evil of another person, that we forgive and bless those who wrong us. It requires that we do to others what we expect others to do to us.

But when we actually consider God's law, we realize that we don't abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

And that's true even of the commandments that we agree with. Even the commandments we think are good and right, we don't keep, let alone the commandments that we choose to ignore, right?

[17:36] And what does the law, what does God's law pronounce over those who don't keep it? It says it pronounces a curse. God's face is turned away.

We no longer belong in His favor. We deserve to be cast out from His presence in darkness, in judgment, in death.

So because no fallen human being can keep the law, relying on the works of the law only places us and keeps us under a curse.

Paul cites two more verses to drive home this point. Verse 11, he says, now it's evident that no one is justified before God by the law because, as the prophet Habakkuk said so many years ago, the righteous shall live, really live before God in His favor.

How? By faith. In other words, the Old Testament itself said that faith in God's promise is how the righteous will live. And then in verse 12, he clarifies, but the law is not of faith.

[18:47] Rather, the one who does them shall live by them. In other words, works and faith, trying and trusting are two totally different things.

And only one of them will put us in a right relationship with God. And it can't be works of the law. It can't be trying. Why? Because the only, the one who actually does them, who actually keeps them and obeys them, only that one will live in God's favor by means of them.

So where does this leave us? You know, we're often too quick to kind of jump over verses like these.

It's easy to say, well, I'm not relying on works of the law. Well, that may be true, but don't you see? Whether you think of God's law every day or whether you think of it not much at all, the passage that Paul quotes in verse 10 is true.

Either way, cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them. All of us stand condemned.

[20:06] A dreadful curse hangs over all of us because we have disobeyed our Creator. We have ignored His good laws and failed to keep them.

Even the moral standards that we have by means of reason or by means of conscience, even those we do not keep. And you know, if this rejection were sort of the mere rejection of a colleague or a friend, you know, if this curse that came was sort of the sentence of some merely human court, right, if that was the curse that we were facing, we could endure it, right?

We could find some other place for solace. We could find some other group of friends, some other workplace. We could move countries. things. But this is no idle word spoken by some mere human.

This is the verdict of God, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. imagine a grain of sand suspended above the ocean.

Do you see those dark waves churning, those endless depths of the sea? Do you see how fragile, how lost that falling grain of sand is in comparison?

[21:43] Any moment it would just be swallowed up. friend, that seemingly infinite distance between the immensity of the ocean and that small piece of sand, oh, that is nothing compared to the difference between God's infinite majesty and every single created thing gathered up together.

Picture earth. Now zoom out, zoom out from this planet of ours further and further. See the earth get smaller and smaller and smaller just hanging in space until it is the size of a grain of sand.

And now do you see the waves of God's majesty filling your view, making not just our little planet but all of the universe seem like nothing but a drop in the scales.

there is no escaping God. Only God's verdict matters.

To be cursed by God is to lose everything, is to be lost. Don't you see? What hope is there for us?

[23:19] Have we not spurned His blessing and deserve His curse? Have we not as humans exalted in wickedness? Have we not enjoyed our own selfishness?

have we not laughed while the oppressed suffer and worst of all? Have we not taken God's name in vain upon our lips?

And the waves of His infinite majesty continue to roll. hope is there for us?

How can this dreadful curse ever be lifted? How can the shining face of our Creator ever turn toward us again, who have sinned so willingly, so flippantly against His holy character and law?

God will give us to God to God and Paul says the answer comes not from us but from God Himself.

[24:43] God Himself provides the way. as this curse hangs over us heavy and thick the bright ray of the gospel shines forth.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law. How? By becoming a curse for us. For it is written Deuteronomy 21-23 cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree so that in Christ Jesus the blessing the blessing of Abraham might come yes even to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

When Paul writes that Christ became a curse for us what does he mean? He means that all our sin our guilt our curse is imputed to Christ.

It is legally transferred to him before the bar of God's judgment. On the cross Christ the sinless one is reckoned with all our sin for us in our place as our substitute and in exchange what does he offer as he takes our curse down into the oceans of God's wrath what do we receive in exchange?

The blessing. And what is that blessing? The blessing of being counted fully and completely righteous.

[26:32] And now there is no more curse for those who are in Christ Jesus. Only blessing. Only God's smiling face now upon us.

And is this blessing only offered to Jews who keep the law? No. It is offered to everyone in Christ Jesus.

Gentiles too. But Paul says, you know, the blessings abound. It's not just right standing with God that we receive in Christ.

It's also the promised spirit through faith. Not just a new standing, a new status with God, but a new heart, a new power, a new internal principle within us, a new internal reality that can delight in God and that loves God and others in freedom.

And through the Spirit we're able to love and rejoice in God and in others in a way that the law by itself could never produce in us. Friend, are you still relying on your moral performance to give you assurance before God?

[27:56] Are you still looking to your own efforts to gauge whether God will bless you? Christian, are you still looking to your own performance to gauge whether God is going to bless you?

Now, if you've ever been there, you know what shaky ground that is, right? You know how one day, looking to our own performance, it feels great, right?

It feels so good. You look out at other people and think, how can those idiots not be like me? Right? But the next day, it fills you with anxiety and uncertainty.

Oh, you know how it makes you compare yourself endlessly to others. You know how it makes you dread at times to even read God's Word or to pray for fear that you'll find another command you can't live up to.

You know how heavy it makes your soul to rely on works of the law. But look, friend, look again to Christ.

[29:09] Do you see how He willingly became a curse for you? All the sins that you have committed for which you do deserve judgment, He took those on Himself.

Why? Because of His great love for you. So that the dark clouds of that curse might be forever dispelled and so that the bright rays of God's favor might shine down on you forever.

You don't need to live under that curse any longer. For all who are in Christ by faith, the curse is gone and nothing but blessing remains.

The blessing won by Christ's righteousness. So these are Paul's first two scriptural arguments.

First, the blessing of God has always come through faith, even all the way back to Abraham.

It's always been through faith. And second, relying on the law only keeps us under the curse, the very curse that Christ came to redeem us from.

[30:21] Paul's third and fourth arguments in verses 15 through 22 now, having set out the blessing by promise and the curse under the law, now they have to do with the relationship between the law and the promise.

And even though these verses 15 through 22 are some of the most densely packed verses in all of Galatians, I think they're actually very practical, very good lessons for us today. In the first half of this passage, Paul tells us what the law can't do, and then in the second half of this passage, Paul tells us what the law can do.

So first, what the law can't do, this is verses 15 through 18 as Paul continues his scriptural arguments. He says, what the law can't do is annul the promise. It can't cancel it and make it void. Paul reminds us here that God's promise to Abraham came first, and that promise isn't somehow overridden or canceled by the law that God put in place 430 years later.

Now, keep that in mind, friend, as you read Scripture. When you come across God's commands in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, remember that those commands, they don't cancel or annul the promise that came first and has priority over them all.

[31:41] God's inheritance of salvation comes not by your keeping the law. It comes by God keeping His promise because you see what God demanded in the law, He fulfilled in Christ for you.

He's kept His promise in Jesus. That's Paul's point, actually, in verse 16. Some of you might have scratched your head at that one as we read it earlier. Paul's actually making a subtle point here based on the word offspring in Genesis.

He's arguing that the promise to Abraham's offspring actually wasn't fulfilled by the collective people of Israel keeping the law. He says that wasn't actually the offspring God had in mind.

In fact, the offspring God really had in mind was a single person, Jesus, who would represent His people, who would do for them on their behalf, in their place, what they themselves could never do. He would be the true Israel. He would be their righteousness. He would be their king and keep the law in its entirety.

[32:57] He would face the curse and bear the wrath of sin, and He would rise again in victory, and He would do it for all those united to Him by faith. That's what the Abrahamic promise was really all about, Paul says.

The seed of Abraham is a messianic promise fulfilled in Jesus, Israel's Messiah. Practically speaking, then, God's promise isn't fulfilled by your keeping the law, it's fulfilled by Jesus keeping the law, and now your part is to trust Him.

United, unite yourself to Him by faith, and you are united by faith in Christ to the ancient promised blessing of God that overthrows the curse of sin and restores our relationship to our Creator.

No law can annul that promise. Now, that doesn't just help us to read our Bibles properly, right? It also helps us to be filled with joyful hope.

Verse 18 says, for if the inheritance comes by law, it no longer comes by promise, but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Your inheritance, your eternal future in the new heavens and new earth are secured by His promise.

[34:19] God promised Abraham that he would have a great family and that his family would dwell in the land, but you know, that promise wasn't just about the ancient land of Canaan. Not even from the very beginning was it limited to that.

If Abraham's family would include all nations because all nations would be blessed in him, what does that mean? It must mean that all the earth would be his inheritance. And that is exactly how Jews came to understand the Abrahamic promise and exactly how the New Testament understands it.

The gospel is for all people, for the whole world. God's promise is that one day the whole world will be covered with His glory like the waters cover the sea.

His promise is that one day there will be no more sickness or sorrow or death or dying in any corner of His creation. Christ will return and God will be all in all and that is secure to you because God promised it and He is faithful.

And until that day, as His church, we pray and we partner and we labor to take this gospel to the ends of this earth and everywhere in between, still confident that God will keep His promise and God will have a people for Himself from every tribe and tongue and nation.

[35:52] You know, this is why we do missions as a church, right? Because we are confident that the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus will be fulfilled and take root in all the nations.

Whether all those nations are in Central Asia or whether all those nations are jammed right here in Little New Haven, God is going to save a people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation and we can be confident and filled with joyful hope for this age and for the age to come.

The law doesn't annul the promise. So that's what the law can't do. Last, Paul tells us what the law can do.

The law can point us back to Christ as our greatest treasure. Paul asks in verse 19, so why did God give us the law anyway? Well, the Mosaic law was given because of transgressions until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.

In other words, the Mosaic law was a temporary administration until the Messiah came. The ceremonies and festivals of the Mosaic law were never meant to be permanent. They were just a scaffolding as it were until the real work was done through Jesus the Messiah.

[37:15] And now that that true building is up, the scaffolding can come down. And the provisional nature of the law is probably what the end of verse 19 and verse 20 are getting at.

Now, we all admit that those are confusing verses. It's not entirely clear what Paul means there. But the big idea seems to be that the law was just an intermediary stage, a provisional arrangement that would eventually pass.

Ah, but you asked, but what about the moral commands of the law? What about the commands that continue into the New Testament, right, that we're supposed to keep? Well, those laws, do they not?

Just like those ceremonial laws and just like those laws that pointed to Christ through pictures and signs, don't those moral commands also point us to Jesus? Don't they also remind us that we need a Savior?

Because the laws by themselves don't have the power to give us life. The laws don't carry any power to change us or empower us to keep them. sin. The laws by themselves only remind us that we're sinners and that we need a Savior.

[38:27] They remind us that sin really is sin, but they show us that our Savior really is a great Savior and that our only hope is to be justified by faith in Him.

So the law drives us to Christ as our only hope. In verse 25, Paul will say it's like a schoolmaster that's been teaching us and training us and directing us to Jesus.

So this is what the law can do. It can help us to see again and again what a treasure we have in Christ. Now at this point you might be asking, well is there any hope for us humans to actually obey the law?

And Paul's answer to that is emphatically, yes, yes, yes. We humans can begin to live a life that reflects God's character as displayed in the moral law.

Yes, we can start to keep God's laws, but the power to do that doesn't come from the law itself, and our standing before God doesn't depend on that.

[39:35] The power to keep God's law doesn't come from the law. It comes from the Spirit living inside of us, the Spirit that Christ has poured out on those whom He has redeemed from the curse.

The Spirit of freedom, of love, of peace. Now Paul will have a lot to say about that in chapters 5 and 6, so stay tuned for when we get to those chapters in a couple of weeks, but for now we end by realizing what the law can do.

The law can point us to Christ. So when you are reading Scripture and you come across the commands of God, look to Christ.

Realize that they are telling you more about Him than they are about you. And realize that you need His blood and righteousness to make you clean, that you can't do it by yourself, but rejoice that He has taken away your curse and given you His blessing, and then rely on His Spirit within you to empower you and lead you to live a life of love, which after all is, as Paul will say, the fulfillment of the law.

Let's pray. Oh, Lord, we give You praise. You are our holy and majestic Creator.

[41:03] Triune God, nothing exists apart from Your will, from Your sustaining choice. Lord, we give You praise this morning that when we had fallen deep into the curse of our own sin, when the law had spoken over us not a blessing but a curse, we praise You that Christ has come to handle that curse for us, to step under its weighty load, to be even crushed by it, so that we could be blessed and made whole.

Oh, Lord, fill us with Your Spirit, risen Christ. Help us to live in the blessing that is now ours because You have died and risen again. Lord, and with those here this morning who are not in You through faith, turn, admit that they need a rescuer, need a Savior, and fall into Your open arms.

Lord, confident that You receive all who come to You. We pray this in Your mighty name, Jesus. Amen.