

Text: Galatians 3:15-18 – The Permanency of Grace

Exegetical Big Idea: God's covenant of grace with Abraham came before the Mosaic Law. Therefore the Mosaic Law plays no part in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises.

Homiletical Big Idea: **God's grace, comes by God's promise, through God's unchanging Word**

Fallen Condition Focus: We change our minds all the time. It is no wonder it is tempting for us to consider that God is the same way. Yes he has promised grace through Abraham...but certainly he has changed his mind so that we must work for it, right?

Background:

For a few chapters now, Paul has been arguing against a false teaching that has entered the church in Galatia. You'll remember that the majority of the people in the church were gentile Christians. They were confronted with the truth of the gospel, which is faith in Jesus' grace that saves them from their sin and reconciles them to God. They accepted this gospel with joy, but then received some visitors that aimed to "correct" their understanding of the gospel. These visitors were in fact however damaging the gospel in that they insisted that the gentile Christians needed to obey the Mosaic Law in order to be accepted by God.

Paul continues his defence of the true gospel in these verses today, and makes an argument from the biblical timeline that God's blessing and inheritance (including for the gentiles) has always been by grace, and since God is unchanging, it always will be.

Intro:

I used to be firm in my opinion that our household should be a pet free household. I say "used" to be, because a few months ago something changed. I remember the day. It was after church one Sunday and we were looking for something that we could do together as a family. But we couldn't think of anything. I made a comment that I had to run to Canadian Tire to pick something up, and that if anyone wanted to come with me we could make a stop at somewhere special on the way home. Well one of our kids immediately assumed that we would stop at the pet store and get a puppy.

I can tell you, we didn't get a puppy that day. But, my wife looked at me and said "well, maybe we could get a fish?" At that moment I was defeated. I simply could not say "no" now. So we all piled in the van and headed to the pet store. At the pet store we quickly made the realization that buying a fish was not as simple as it sounds. Apparently, certain fish need bubbling things to add oxygen to the water, and precise temperature control. Not to mention you can't just feed a fish for a week and leave it. Fish are complicated. Well while I was talking to the pet store employee about fish, the kids went over and were looking at the hamsters. Turns out, hamsters are a lot less work. They're also cheaper. You can also feed them and leave them for a week if you need to go away. A Hamster it is.

But, there's more. The pet store had 2 hamsters that day, and they were sisters. There was no way my kids were going to let us leave that store with only one sister.

I went from no pets, to a fish, to two hamsters. How did that happen! The simple answer is because I'm human, and humans change their minds. I can be influenced. I can get new information that makes me

reconsider. I can be proved wrong. I can be worn down from pleading. I can make rash decisions based on emotions.

God isn't like that! God cannot change by anything outside of him pressuring him, and cannot change by anything *inside* of him like emotions. When God says something or makes a promise, it stands.

Praise God that he is unchanging! If God were a god who changed his mind on things, we'd be doomed.

Paul reminds the Galatians that God promised undeserved grace to Abraham, and nothing can change that promise. Not only that, but as we have seen and will continue to see today, this undeserved and unearned grace of God is given by faith in him.

If that's the case, then we have the same hope that Abraham and the Galatian church had. Namely, that:

**God's grace, comes by God's promise, through God's unchanging Word**

#### **V. 15 – God is not like us that he should change his mind.**

Once again, it's important to realize that we are building off of what Paul has just said in the previous verses. He has made the argument that all of God's goodness and blessing and right-standing with him comes through faith in his grace. Paul has just argued that nobody is justified before God on the basis of the law. He's given Scriptural evidence of this. He's given experiential evidence of this. He's now going to give a biblical timeless piece of evidence to show this as well.

He begins by giving a human example. In verse 15 Paul gives the example of a covenant. He says that once a covenant has been ratified, nobody can add to it or nullify it. What Paul is doing here is simply giving us a human example that we can relate to, to show us that if it is true on a human level, it is infinitely more true with God himself. There is some disagreement among scholars as to exactly what type of covenant Paul is talking about here. Paul may be talking about something like a will, which takes effect only once a person dies. It's possible, since we do know that certain contracts can in fact be changed.

Regardless of what type of covenant contract Paul is talking about, the main point of his argument is clear, namely, that there comes a point in a contract that it is signed and sealed and can no longer be changed. We understand this. Think of a mortgage. Once you signed that piece of paper, your mortgage rate was locked in for a number of years. Your payment schedule was locked in. Your amount was locked in. Or think about it in terms of a final will and testament. Those terms, though they can be changed as long as the person is alive, once that person dies there is no more changing the will. People may be unhappy with what the will says, but there is no changing it.

[One of the most airtight and unbreakable contracts that we have as a human species is that of the age-old pinky swear. It involves the intertwining of pinky fingers for the purpose of signing and sealing an agreement between two parties. It is simply unbreakable. Suppose for a moment I am in a really good mood this morning and before church started I said to my kids "kids, after church we are going to go get ice cream". They would probably be excited! But they may still be a bit hesitant to believe me, since right after church is not usually the time for ice cream. They might employ the pinky swear. They may say "dad, do you pinky swear we're going to go get ice cream?" And then I reach out my pinky and shake

on it with one of their pinkies. It is at that moment, that our contract is ratified. They know at that point that the contract is complete, and there is no changing or nullifying it.]

This is the point that Paul is making from human experience. And if we understand this to be true of humans, how much more so with God.

God employs his divine pinky swear with Abraham in Genesis 15. You'll remember when God instructs Abraham to take some animals and cut them in half and make an isle with them. This is how they ratified, or made covenants with each other in the ancient near East. In fact in the Bible, the language used is not actually to "make" a covenant, but to "cut" a covenant, referring to the process that is happening here in Genesis 15. So Abraham does as he's instructed and cuts these animals.

Now usually, both people who are making the covenant walk through the animals. They do this as a way of saying "if I don't keep my side of the agreement, may I become like these animals". So Abraham and God are ready to walk through the animals. But then something happens. God makes Abraham fall into a deep sleep. When Abraham is sleeping, God alone goes through the animals. Why? Because this covenant is different. This covenant doesn't have two people who need to keep their own sides, it only has one. God is saying to Abraham "I will keep my promises to you, but since you aren't walking through, you don't have anything to keep!" This covenant looks more like a gift than an agreement doesn't it. That's because it is a gift. We call it a covenant of grace.

Abraham has no side to keep, since he didn't walk through the pieces.

If this is me, and I enter into a covenant with someone, I'm making sure they keep up their end of the bargain. And I'm making sure there's a clause in our agreement that if you don't keep up your end, our agreement is done. But that's not how God works. And that's the crazy part. God knows Abraham better than Abraham knows himself. God knows that Abraham is going to sin. God makes this covenant, ratifies it in the most extreme way *knowing* that Abraham is a sinner and unholy.

Praise God that he's not like us and changes his mind. Have you ever considered that it's the same with you? God saved you and loved you in Christ, poured out his loving kindness and grace upon you, even knowing that you were going to sin against him again and again.

### **God's grace, comes by God's promise, through God's unchanging Word**

#### **V. 16 – God's promise of grace has been fulfilled in Christ alone.**

But what exactly does God promise? He cuts his covenant with Abraham, so we know that God promises *something*, but what exactly does he promise? Well in Genesis 14 we read what God promises, and it is really 4 things. He promises first that Abraham's name will be great. Secondly, that Abraham will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the beach. Thirdly, that God will give divine blessing to Abraham in that those who bless Abraham will be blessed and those who curse Abraham will be cursed. And finally, that the whole world will be blessed through Abraham. So these were the promises, but they weren't only given to Abraham, they were also given to Abraham's offspring. But what Paul says next is a little confusing.

Paul writes in verse 16 that the word "offspring" only refers to a single offspring! But how can this be? Paul has written earlier that we who have faith in Jesus are sons and daughters of Abraham. Is Paul

playing with grammar here and twisting the Old Testament to prove a point? Not at all! What Paul does is actually quite ingenious and very true to the text.

And it makes perfect sense when we think about it logically. If the promises we just talked about were to Abraham's offsprings, we need to ask "which ones"? Remember that Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. But the promises were not to Ishmael, only to Isaac! So it's not *all* of Abraham's offspring.

No, the promises given to Abraham are not given to many offspring, but just one. Jesus. Jesus is the offspring that fulfills these promises to Abraham. Abraham never saw the conclusion to these promises. He only saw them from afar. But Jesus fulfills them. His name is infinitely great. Jesus' descendants (his people) are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Those who bless Jesus are blessed in the heavenly realms with all spiritual blessings, and those who curse Jesus are eternally cursed. And finally, the world is indeed blessed through Jesus with the invitation of the gospel.

Jesus is the only one who fulfills those promises!

How, the obvious question is "but where do we come in?" And that's a very good question. How can Paul say these promises are not fulfilled in us as Abraham's sons and daughters since he just finished writing that those who come to God in faith are true sons and daughters of Abraham?

Here we are reminded of that amazing doctrine called union with Christ. Paul will address this specifically later, but here we have a hint of it.

[Have you ever been a "plus one" at a wedding? Nobody makes a speech for you. Nobody gives you a toast. You don't get to participate in the first dance. Nobody is taking photos of you. It's not really about you at all is it, but...you get to participate in the party! You get to eat the meal and have some cake. You get to groove on the dance floor. You get a party favour.]

Our hearts don't like to hear that it's not about it...but it's not! It's a humbling thing to hear that God was not thinking about Jason when he made the promises to Abraham and his offspring. He was thinking about Christ! But, by believing in the gospel of Jesus, I participate in the blessings. So that, in Christ I am part of Abraham's offspring.

So then, this excludes all other paths to being blessed by God. If the only person that the promises of God are fulfilled in is Christ, then if you are not in Christ, you don't get them!

It is in fact in Christ alone where our hope is found.

### **God's grace, comes by God's promise, through God's unchanging Word**

#### **V. 17-18 – The Christian's hope depends on God being trustworthy.**

With all that said, Paul gives his point in verse 17. He writes "...The law, which came 430 years *afterwards*, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void."

If indeed the covenant was ratified in Genesis 15, and the promises given were fulfilled and satisfied in Christ, what does the law of God add? The answer, nothing. In fact, they *cannot* add anything or nullify anything because if they did, God would be a liar!

[Let's go back to the ice cream example. Let's say after I pinky swore to my kids that we were getting ice cream, they decided to misbehave. Let's say I got so angry and frustrated that I said to them that we

were no longer getting ice cream because of their behaviour. What do you think they're going to say to me? They will remind me that I gave them a promise. They will remind me that I never gave them stipulations to that promise. I never told them that ice cream was dependant on behaviour. If I all of a sudden add something to my pinky swear, I'm breaking my pinky swear. They would be right in calling me out for that.]

Paul is saying the same thing! The law came 430 years after God cut his covenant with Abraham. God cannot change his original covenant. Or else he's be a liar! Just like I would be if I added stipulations of behaviour to my kids getting ice cream.

So then, the Mosaic Law must be separate from the covenant God made with Abraham.

Knowing that God cannot break his promises, he writes in verse 18 that if indeed our "inheritance" comes by our behaviour in the law, then it can't at the same time come by promise of grace. But, Paul has been so clear that it *does* in fact come by faith in God's promise!

If your inheritance comes from the law, then you're still waiting and looking for it. And by the way it will never come, because God's blessing, or as Paul puts it here "our inheritance" does not come from your obedience to the law. You're looking for something that is not there.

[I remember as a kid digging holes in my backyard. My hope is that I was going to find some kind of long lost buried treasure. I usually wouldn't get too far before my parents stopped me, but in those moments before I was stopped, I was sure I was going to unearth some long lost pirate treasure. Problem was of course, that there was never any hope of their being treasure in my backyard!]

If you're looking for your "treasure" from God by keeping his law and impressing him, you're looking for something that's not there. Paul is clear in verse 18 that our inheritance comes by God's unchanging promise, fulfilled in Christ.

Which means, the time of fulfilment is here already, *in* Christ, though not in full. We call this the "already but not yet". If you have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, you are *in* Christ and *in* him have received your inheritance. And one day, you will receive it in full.

God has given Jesus the name that is above every name, and you get to share in that glory.

Through the gospel, we become part of people belonging to God. Over and over again in Scripture God promises that "he will be their God, and they will be his people". We get to experience that in its fullness without the hindrance of sin as we actually are in the presence of God.

All of this though, depends on God being trustworthy. If he's not trustworthy and can change his mind, how do I know my sins are forgiven? How do I know Jesus gives me his righteousness? How do I know God lives in me? How do I know that he holds all things in his sovereignty? How do I know that my inheritance is secured for me in heaven?

But if he is, then every promise that God has ever made is true, and I can depend on it.

That's called faith, and that's what Paul has been urging us all along!

**God's grace, comes by God's promise, through God's unchanging Word**