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A Covenant of Faith
Galatians 3:15-18
December 28th, 2014, Jeff Germo

This is our eighth sermon in Galatians thus far, and Paul, in every text, has been saying one thing; Salvation comes by faith in Christ's finished work on the cross, not by works of the law. We do not improve our standing before God by good works, adherence to the law, or by religiosity of any kind. The life God has called us to in Christ is a walk of faith only made possible by his grace.

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Works are the outworking, or the by-product of authentic faith in Jesus.

I hope you're not getting bored with this theme because we aren't finished with it yet. Paul continues with this same line of reasoning. This must be very serious business. For Paul to go on and on with this same issue for half the letter, so far, means that he wants to make sure that we get it right.

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Living by the law or religiosity so as to gain a better standing before God is bondage. It's a treadmill. It's a wasted life.

If we think that the Christian faith is about trying to be a good person, or keeping rules, the thing that will motivate us will be whether or not someone else is looking. That kind of life keeps us looking over our shoulders wondering if we've done enough. It's a performance-based motivation. I do good things because I get something out of it. It is the wrong reason for doing good.

I've told you on a previous occasion that I used to raise Labrador Retrievers. And I told you about my first Lab, the matriarch of them all, who was named was Lady. I got her when she was six weeks old, and I was 17, and I had her until she died thirteen years later. She was a great dog. We were inseparable. I took her everywhere with me. Lady loved me, and I loved her. As a matter of fact, I think I told you this before, I once called Ruth "Lady", and she said, "That's ok, I consider it a compliment," because she knew how much I loved Lady.

And Lady loved me. In her eyes, I was the greatest.

And not only was Lady my best friend, but she would obey me without question. She obeyed me simply because she loved to please me. She didn't obey me because I gave her a treat. I didn't train her like that because I didn't want her associating a treat with obedience.

Lady didn't need that from me. She just loved to please me. She obeyed me out of relationship. I didn't have to do anything to try to manipulate her into obedience. She just obeyed – with one exception – when she was in heat. Then all of a sudden her hormones would take over and she would take on a different personality. She'd turn into an uncontrollable "demon" dog. But, other than that, her life's goal seemed to be to do whatever it took to make me happy. That is what seemed to give her joy. That is how we should love God. That is why we should obey him. Our obedience should grow out of our love for him, not because we love the law.

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Religion, or living by the law, or rule-keeping is what we do because someone else is looking, whether it's another person or God. We do good things, perform religious duties, or obey because of the "brownie points" we think we get. And it robs us of the joy of living in relationship, because our minds are always thinking about whether or not someone is looking, or what treat we are going to get for doing the right thing. And the problem is that someone is always looking. Living this way steals from us the joy of doing things simply because they are the right thing to do and it pleases our heavenly Father.

That is Paul's concern in this letter to the Galatians. He carries on the same line of reasoning that he has been on since the beginning of the letter, showing the Galatian believers that living by the law is not the way, and as a matter of fact if you attempt to live your life by the law you will miss God altogether because your focus will be on yourself and how well **you** are doing, and you are essentially saying that you don't need God. You miss out on the grace he has for you.

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Galatians 3:15–18 (ESV)

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Now, remember that the Judaizers had accused Paul of watering down the Gospel so that it was palatable for the Gentile believers. They were trying to manipulate the Gentiles into living according to the Old Testament law, as if faith in Jesus was not enough. And most of Galatians is written to help release them **from** slavery to the law, and **into** an authentic covenant relationship with God through faith in Jesus. The letter is all about freedom, and how to walk the walk of faith.

I want to give you the main points in our text right off the bat here and then we'll walk through the passage.

1. **God's promise to Abraham was irrevocable.** (v. 15)
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2. **His promise to Abraham looked forward to those who are in Christ.** (v. 16)
[6b]
3. **God's original intent was never a blind, robotic obedience to law.** (v. 17)
[6c]
4. **The goal is that our faith and trust in God's promises would grow, that we would live for God in obedience growing out of our love for him.** (v. 18)
[6d]

Paul is saying that **God's intention was never that his people would gain his acceptance by living according to the law.** His main point was that the covenant of faith that God made with Abraham was God's original design for his people. God's plan is, and has always been, that we would enter into, and carry on, a relationship with him based on faith, not law; that righteousness cannot be attained by carrying out the law perfectly, for the simple fact that we cannot do it.

Paul said, in **verse 17** that the law was not even given until 430 years after God made his covenant with Abraham in Genesis, and yet, as Paul reminded the Galatians in verse 16, Abraham was declared righteous by God, not because of the law, but because he believed that God was good for his promises. **The law was sort of an addendum to the main point, not the main point itself.**

Paul uses an illustration of a man-made covenant to prove his point. What's a covenant? A covenant is a bi-lateral agreement. Paul says that once a covenant has been made legal, by the parties who agree upon it, the terms cannot be changed. This is true even today. I looked at a website for legal advice that said this.

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Will contests are rarely successful. There are very few ways to attack a will. You cannot assert that your father disliked you and therefore his vindictive will is invalid. There must be a concrete assertion of fact to overturn a will. Your father was not of sound mind at the time of signing the will and that he was under the undue influence of a sibling or the chauffeur. There was a later, superseding will, duly executed by your father, which was stolen by the butler that you miraculously found. Probate contests make good movie plots but rarely exist or succeed in real life.¹

So, this is true today, and it was true back in the ancient Near East. A covenant, once ratified, cannot be changed or overruled.

Let's read our passage again and try to understand what is happening.

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Galatians 3:15–18 (ESV)

¹ <http://www.wise4living.org/lwill/contesting-will.html>

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To understand this passage we need to go back to Genesis 12 where Abraham is first introduced to Yahweh, the one true God who created the heavens and the earth. Abraham’s name at that point was Abram, and he was a pagan. He and his family, like the average Mesopotamian, worshiped a plurality of gods, or idols, made out of stone or wood, until Abram was pursued and called by Yahweh, the one true God.

God called Abram and told him to leave the familiarity of his homeland, the safety and security of his father’s home, his comfort zone, and go to a land that God would show him. God promised Abram that he would make his name great, that he would bless him, that he would give him land, that he would make his descendants number greater than the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea, and he said that all nations would be blessed through him.

And so, Abram, childless at 75 years of age, has a career change. He walks into the unknown with his 65 year-old childless wife, his nephew Lot, some servants, and his livestock. He was heading somewhere by faith, not knowing what lay ahead except that Yahweh told him to start walking, and that somehow, even though he and his elderly wife had no children, he would father a great nation. And along the way, over a period of about forty years or so, Abraham’s faith was tested many times.

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The question was always, are you going to trust in God, or are you going to trust in your own resources and ingenuity?

Each time we face a test, obstacle, or hardship in our lives, the question is the same. Are you going to trust God in this, or are you going to try to rescue yourself by your own ingenuity? Do you believe that God is good for his promises? In Abraham’s journey, he sometimes passed the test and sometimes he failed. There were times when he lied to get himself out of a mess. That’s not God’s way. When we lie or coerce, or manipulate, or cheat to get something it sends a very loud message that we do not trust God. That was the message that Abram sent to God by his taking matters into his own hands. The good news is that **God didn’t give up on Abram.**

When Abram got to the land of Canaan the Lord appeared to him again to reaffirm that first covenant and told him that he was going to give this land to his **offspring.**

Abram continued to travel through the land of Canaan. As time went on both he and his nephew, Lot, grew in their respective wealth. Their livestock became so plenteous that the land couldn’t support them both and as a result there was bickering between the herdsmen of Lot and the herdsmen of Abram. Abram’s faith kicked in again and he told Lot to take whatever land he wanted to, and he would take what was leftover. Lot chose what he thought was the best land, the fertile land in the Jordan Valley. Now, what Abram could have done, instead of giving Lot a choice, was take the best for himself. This was another test of faith. The question again was, will you trust in the promises of God, or will you try to rescue yourself? This time Abram chose to trust. He didn’t fight for what he thought was his rightfully his. Look what happened as a result.

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Genesis 13:14–18 (ESV)

¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

This was God’s promise to Abram, that through his offspring all nations would be blessed. The dilemma for Abram was that, humanly speaking, things looked grossly impossible. He and Sarai were elderly, well past the age where it was medically possible to have children.

Have you ever been in a situation like that? The way forward seems impossible. You know, intellectually, the promise of God that **“he will meet all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus.”** That **“all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”** That if you cast all your cares on him **“he will give you a peace that is beyond comprehension.”** And yet, you are standing at the edge of a precipice with nowhere to go. You have no idea how to get yourself out of this mess that you likely got yourself into. And you have a decision to make. Do I rescue myself, or do I wait for God? Can anyone relate?

Abraham was 75 when he first received the promise and believed God. And then he waited, and he waited, and he waited. He didn't wait for six months, or a year, or even five years. He waited for twenty-five years. And along the way he had many tests and opportunities to trust God for the impossible. And God would show up at various times to reaffirm his promise. Here's one such time.

[11]

Genesis 15:1–6 (ESV)

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”² But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”

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⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

This was Paul's main point to the Galatians. This was 430 years before the law was given to Moses. God declared that Abraham was righteous before the law was in existence. He was declared righteous, not because he kept the law, but because he believed that God was good for his promises. Abraham wasn't perfect. He stumbled along in his faith, just like you and I do. But on his journey his faith in God grew stronger as he chose to trust that God would be good for his promises.

Living by the law does not produce that kind of trust because when we live by the law it is all about us and how we are doing. As Paul said in the previous passage in Galatians;

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Galatians 3:10–12 (ESV)

¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

If you choose to attempt to justify yourself by the law, you have to keep it perfectly. That is what Paul is saying here. And nobody can do that. It's a treadmill. It's a curse. It's bondage, and a terrible way to live. I have talked with many people who have told me that they grew up in religious homes in which they were bound to do certain religious rituals, not knowing why. They only knew that it was a requirement of their religion, Christian or otherwise. And most of these people talked about it as if it was slavery because they never knew if they were doing enough.

The life that God has called us to is a life of freedom. He's called us to an exciting faith journey with Jesus in which we learn to trust him to greater degrees as we face the trials and obstacles in our lives. This way of life does not happen through adherence to the law. It happens only by a faith response to the gift freely given to us by faith in Jesus.

Abraham faced the greatest test of his life after Isaac was born. Finally, after twenty-five years of waiting they received their promised, miracle child. Several years later, likely when Isaac was a young man, God told Abraham to do the unthinkable.

[14]

Genesis 22:1–2 (ESV)

¹ *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”* ² *He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*

“What do you mean, God? You promised. This is our miracle child. You can’t take him from us. No way! You said that it would be through Isaac that you would make me into a great nation. I’m not going to do it.”

Is that what Abraham said? No, he actually didn’t argue at all. Here’s how the writer of Hebrews recounts the story.

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Hebrews 11:17–19 (ESV)

¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,* ¹⁸ *of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”* ¹⁹ *He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

You know the story. God provided a substitute sacrifice for Isaac – a ram that was caught in a thicket was to take Isaac’s place on the altar. Abraham believed that God was good for his promises, and God came through. Now, if Abraham did the planning, he likely wouldn’t have waited for 25 years to have the promise fulfilled. And he certainly wouldn’t have gone through the trauma of almost offering his son on the altar. But, unfortunately, the only way that we grow is through getting out of our comfort zones to that place where we need to trust in God. Here’s what Paul said about the faith of Abraham.

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Romans 4:20–25 (ESV)

²⁰ *No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,* ²¹ *fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* ²² *That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”* ²³ *But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,* ²⁴ *but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,* ²⁵ *who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

The promise that God gave to Abraham is just as much for us as it was for him. God is calling us to a walk of faith, not to blind, robotic adherence to law. The faith journey begins when we believe that we are made right only through the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. And it continues as we walk daily with him in faith, and at each step of the way as we come up against hard things in our lives where we are faced with the same question as Abraham; will you trust God in this, or will you trust yourself. And each time we trust God our faith grows stronger and our life makes more and more sense.

[17a]

1. **God’s promise to Abraham was irrevocable.** (v. 15)

[17b]

2. **His promise to Abraham looked forward to those who are in Christ.** (v. 16)

[17c]

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