



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 3:15-22

Spring 2021

"The Promise"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Seth. That's a good verse to introduce our text this morning which is Galatians 3, verses 15 through 22. As I read through it, I think it's a somewhat complicated passage; in that Paul is arguing for the promise that was given to Abraham as still being in force—which is to say that salvation is all of grace through faith alone. That will be what we need to think as we follow through Paul's argument here,

¹⁵ Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. ¹⁶ Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. ¹⁷ What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

¹⁹ Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰ Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. ²¹ Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would

indeed have been based on law. ²² But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Galatians 3: 15-22

(Message) We hear often that, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes." Benjamin Franklin wrote that in a letter in 1789; so that statement has been with us a long time. And it's a clever way of saying that there are no guarantees in life. And there's some truth in that; whether unexpected changes, employment unexpectedly ends, health unexpectedly fails; life is full of uncertainties. But it is not true that nothing can be said to be certain.

God's promises are certain. They are all guarantees that will never change because God doesn't change. So His Word is reliable, "Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday and today and forever.", Hebrews 13, verse 8. That truth is the basis of Paul's text here, in Galatians chapter 3, verses 15 through 22, where he teaches that God's promise of salvation is dependable because God is unchangeable. Paul has been teaching that 'Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.' He has established that from both the Word of God and the Galatians' own experience.

But Paul's opponents were not ready to admit that. They would argue that the giving of the Law changed the terms of salvation and added a new requirement. So Paul answers that. First from the policy of human wills or human covenants, human agreements, to show that promises can't be broken. So if men keep their word, then certainly God will keep His. And secondly, he answers by explaining the function of the Law. It was given, not to overturn the promise, but to assist the promise by exposing sin and leading people to Christ.

But he begins his proof of the priority—the superiority of 'the promise' to 'the Law' with an illustration from human relationships and the way that men make agreements. Once it's been ratified, once it's been settled with a handshake or a signature, it is binding. Paul says in verse 15, "...no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it."

Paul may be referring to the Greek practice of drawing up a last will and testament, which once it was finished and deposited in the public records office of the city, no one could change it, not even the testator—that is the one who made up the will.

But whatever the specific legal arrangement Paul had in mind, a will or a covenant between two parties, the general principle is plain and universal—once a contract is made and an agreement is reached, one of the parties involved can't then come back at a later date and change the arrangements of it. The contract or covenant is legally binding.

Paul's point is simply that the promise of justification through faith made to Abraham is permanent. If the human contract or covenant can't be added to or voided after the two parties agree upon it, then certainly God will not cancel His covenant and promise made to Abraham. In fact, the certainty that God will keep His promise is clearly indicated by the way in which He made the covenant with Abraham. It's recorded in Genesis 15.

He did it in a ceremony that was very common in the ancient Near East. The LORD instructed Abraham to kill some animals, to cut them in two, and then place them in rows so that there was a path in between them. It was the custom that when men made covenants, they would do this. And then they would walk together between the slain animals as an expression of their promise to keep the agreement. So this is what God instructed Abraham to do.

But when the LORD came, He alone passed through the animals. He did not allow Abraham to go through them with Him. And what it showed is, it was a unilateral covenant that He made with Abraham—which is to say it was a one-sided covenant, an unconditional covenant in which God signified that He alone stood behind the promise, and He would not fail to fulfill it.

So if sinful men can't change an agreement, a will or covenant, and are expected to honor their oaths, then we can be sure that God will not violate His promise—He will keep it. And the promise was not only given to Abraham, but also to his offspring.

As Paul points out in verse 16, "to his seed". Now that doesn't refer directly to the multitudes of Abraham's descendants but to one person in particular—to Christ. That's how Paul explains it. He's referring to Genesis 22, verse 18, where God said to Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed..." Paul interprets that word 'seed', of Christ, based on the observation that it is singular, not plural. "He does not say," Paul writes, " 'And to seeds,' as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, 'And to your seed,' that is Christ." (vs16).

Now in fact, the word *seed* in both Hebrew and Greek is a collective term. What that means is, it is singular in form, grammatically, but it can also refer to a plurality. Our word, for example, 'offspring', is the same. It's like that. It can refer to one or to many. Paul, of course, knew that. He wasn't making a mistake here. He knew *seed* could mean the people of Israel. In fact, he uses it that way in the Book of Romans, to refer to the nation Israel, and to its people. But he knew that 'seed' or 'offspring' was also used in the Old Testament as a singular noun for one person—for a definite descendant. And he knew that it had to be singular here, and had to refer to Christ, because only He could fulfill the promise that God made—of blessing all of the nations of the earth.

So it is Christ who is the heir to the promise given to Abraham. And the only way for people to participate in that great promise and have the blessings of that covenant, is to be joined to Christ. And the way to be joined to Christ is through faith—is to believe in Him. That's how we take hold of Him; that's how we enter Him.

So, those who have the promise of Abraham are not those who keep the Law, (which no one does, as Paul has pointed out), but it's those who are of faith. Paul said that earlier in verse 7, "...it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." Faith is what characterized Abraham—a man who believed, and "...it was reckoned to him unto righteousness." (Gal 3:6).

But the Law did not change that. It can't change that. It was a late addition. Paul points that out in verse 17, where he says that, "the Law came four hundred and thirty years later." The promise had been in force for nearly 500 years—long before the Law was established; which proves the superiority, the priority, of the covenant with

Abraham over the Law of Moses. If salvation were now by law-keeping, the promise to Abraham would be invalid because the Law and the promise are opposites. They don't mix. The Law and promise cancel each other out.

John Stott put it this way. He wrote, "In the promise to Abraham, God said I will, I will, I will. But in the Law of Moses God said, thou shalt, thou shalt not." You can't have it both ways. Either God is the guarantee of the promise—or we are the guarantee of the promise. But if it has changed, if God has replaced the promise with the Law, then He completely changed the agreement—which means God went back on His Word. That's impossible! God is faithful to His Word.

That's Paul's meaning at the end of verse 18, "...but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise." God *granted* the inheritance. He gave it to Abraham. That word *granted* really makes Paul's point. The idea of this word *granted* is, 'given freely'. Salvation is a free gift—and a permanent gift. He has given it and it is still in effect. That's the point of the grammar, the tense that Paul uses there. He gave it, and it is still given. Nothing has changed.

There's some truth to the statement, 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain.' There are no guarantees. People break promises, and circumstances change. The unexpected happens. But that is not so with God. Everything is certain in our relationship with Him. He gives guarantees that are reliable. Circumstances change but His promises never do, His character never does. Isaiah wrote, "All flesh is grass." "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." (Isa 40:6,8).

[Isaiah had a beautiful illustration of that before his eyes every spring. Living in Jerusalem, which is a rocky place—those hills around it are rocky and barren so much of the year—but after the rains of winter, spring is a beautiful time all over the land; for the grass grows and the flowers come up. In fact years ago, (I don't know if it's still this way), school children in Jerusalem would get out for a half a day, and they would go with their

teacher to look at the wildflowers. There are colors there that I've never seen before and to...everywhere.

But then, the hot winds come off the desert, and before long the grass and the flowers are gone—withered; blasted away by the heat and the wind.]

So, Isaiah saw that and saw how temporal things are—how transient they are. But he says, 'The Word of God is not like that at all. It's as beautiful as the grass and the flowers, far more beautiful, and it stands forever.' That's true of the Gospel, which is the Word of God. It has always been by grace alone through faith alone, always—from Genesis 3:15 to John 3:16. And by implication God's guarantees are true for everything. All of His promises are firm. After all, if He will do the greatest things, if He will give us salvation, if He will give us eternal life—well, He will bless us with all of the lesser things. If we can count on Him to deliver us from eternal destruction, then we can certainly count on Him to deliver us from the temporal trials of life.

We all tend to worry about the future. That's typical of all of us to do that. In one way or another we worry about something. We worry about pandemics—about our health. We worry about the economy, about the market—is it going to go up or down? We worry about our employment.

Yet, God is faithful. Isaiah said in chapter 40, that great chapter that I just read from, that God "...sits above the circle of the earth..." (vs22). It's a great picture of the LORD God as absolutely sovereign over this world—in fact, over this entire universe.

However you want to envision the universe, with multiverses, as some theoretical physicists are speculating now, it doesn't matter—it's all one great universe. And as great as it is, it's like a "speck of dust to Him", (vs15), because He is infinite and eternal; and it is temporal and limited. —And He controls it all. He controls it and all of the circumstances of it—all of them! So we're absolutely secure.

In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus said, 'Do not be anxious for your life.' And then He recommends looking at nature because nature is filled with examples of this. And one of the examples is the birds of the air. We don't give much thought to the birds of the air,

but he says, 'Look at them, how God provides for them every day. Always provides for them.' And then He says the rhetorical question, "Are you not worth much more than they?" (vs26b). 'He provides for the birds, He's going to provide for you.'

So Paul asks, in Romans 8, verse 32, 'That if God sacrificed His own Son for our salvation, and in doing so gained that salvation for us at such great cost to Him, well won't He "with Him", (*with His Son*), "freely give us all things?" 'He's given you the greatest, won't He give you the less?' Of course He will. Certainly, He will. God is faithful to His promises—in spite of us. His faithfulness is grounded in Himself. It's not grounded in us. It's not grounded in circumstances. It's grounded in God alone and He cannot deny Himself.

This was an oath that He made to Abraham. He promised him a future inheritance, eternal life. And that promise involved a redeemer, involved Jesus Christ. And Abraham received that through faith. What Paul has demonstrated then, is that the Law cannot invalidate the promise. The promise was established first, and the Law cannot overturn that. God cannot break His Word.

That raises a question, one that Paul was anticipating, which he states in verse 19, "Why then the Law?" If the Law has not added new conditions to the promise, if salvation is apart from law-keeping, and we receive the inheritance—the promise of eternal life as a free gift, then why did God give the Law? God doesn't do meaningless things. But Paul's teaching on faith suggests that the Law was meaningless. So how do we explain that?

We know that can't be so, that God would do a meaningless thing. So that question is asked, (Paul knew this would be on the minds of some), 'Why then the Law?' And Paul answers that the Law had a very important purpose. 'No, it wasn't meaningless, it had a function. "It was added", he says, "because of transgressions." It was given for the purpose of exposing sin in order to make it known.

Paul explains that function of the Law in the Book of Romans, and wrote in Romans chapter 3, verse 20 that, "...through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin." We

learn about sin through the Law, through this righteous, perfect standard of God's character, revealed in the Law of Moses. And then in Romans chapter 5, verse 20 he stated that "The Law came in that the transgression might increase." Not only exposes it, it causes it to increase.

In other words, the Law actually had a provocative purpose—it not only exposes sin; it makes sin obvious. It actually stirs it up. It causes it to increase. It gives strength to sin. It is the principle of the forbidden fruit, 'We can't have it, and so we want it—because we can't have it.' The Law provokes that kind of response. It did in Paul. Paul thought he was keeping the Law, but then he had the tenth commandment, 'Don't covet! Don't desire your neighbor's house.' And he started to covet. Well, that's what the Law does. That's what it produces. And the result of it: it reveals the sin that is in us, that we might have not known was in us...but there it is.

Now the Law isn't sin. It doesn't make us sin. It doesn't create sin. Sin is there lying dormant, so to speak, and the Law brings it to life. It wakes it up within us, like a sleeping serpent. It stirs it up. Think of our condition as being like a glass of water that has been on a table for a few days, maybe on your nightstand, and over time it collects dust. But the dust settles on the bottom and the water, perhaps as the sunshine goes through the glass, looks pure—it looks clean and looks drinkable. But put a spoon in the glass and stir the water, and the dirt swirls—the water gets cloudy and it's seen to be what it really is. It's filthy, and it's undrinkable.

That's what the Law does. It doesn't create sin. The sin is there, lying at the bottom of our hearts. The Law stirs it up for a purpose, and that is so that we know our condition. It reveals who we really are. And we need that, because "The heart", as Jeremiah wrote in Jeremiah 17, verse 9, "is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick; Who can understand it?"

Psychiatrists and psychologists need to know that verse. —That's the nature of man. Our heart is so wicked we can't understand it. It is so sick we can't begin to understand why we are the way we are. No one will understand the nature of man and understand the nature of our hearts apart from the revelation of God—and that's the

specific purpose of the Law of God—to let us know, to make it known. It reveals our condition. And in revealing our condition, it reveals our need. The Law does have an important purpose, an essential purpose; it reveals sin.

But it has its limitations. It reveals sin, but it doesn't remove sin. Only the Gospel can do that, meaning only the person and the work of Jesus Christ can do that.

And so Paul says the Law "was added." (vs19). It was brought in next to the promise until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. The seed is Christ. And the Law was for the purpose of preparing Israel for its coming Messiah by showing Israel its need of the coming Messiah, who is the Savior.

So the Law's purpose was preparatory and temporary. It was given only until the Seed would come. Once He came, the Law had served its purpose, (Paul will develop that later in the chapter.) In fact, the inferiority of the Law to the promise is seen from the way the Law was given and administered. Paul wrote, The Law "was ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator."(vs19). The mediator was Moses. Israel received the Law from him, and he received it from angels, indirectly, from God.

But the promise was not given in that way. There was no mediator between Abraham and God. The promise came directly from God. The Law is not on that level, not on the same level with the promise.

Paul explains the significance of that in verse 20. He says, "Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only one*." This is not an easy verse. The Bishop Lightfoot wrote over a century, more than that ago, that there are up to 250 or 300 interpretations of it. So we'll go through them one by one. *[Laughter]* I suppose there are even more than that since he wrote that, but I'll give you what I think is the right interpretation. Which is, 'The promise is greater than the Law because it is unconditional, while the Law is conditional.' The promise depends upon God's faithfulness. The Law depended upon Israel's obedience. Man will always fail. God never will, so the promise is superior.

Now this contrast that I make there is seen here in the verse between the Law and the promise, and that's indicated by the fact that the Law had a mediator, Moses. Which indicates that the covenant God made at Sinai was a contract between two parties. A mediator implies two parties, two persons, or two groups of people. And the mediator is the go-between. And the two in this contract were God and Israel. And Moses was in between them, carrying out this contract.

The success of a contract, again, depends upon obedience to the terms of the contract by both parties. And that means Israel had to obey the Law perfectly in order to receive the blessings of the agreement. The promise, on the other hand, didn't have a mediator. "God is *only* one", Paul says. It wasn't an agreement reached between two parties. God and Abraham didn't make a bargain. God stood alone in this arrangement and made a promise. And the promise depends completely on Him. It depends completely on His faithfulness—not Abraham's. As He said, "I will". Not, "Thou shalt". So the promise is greater because it cannot fail. It is the content of an unconditional covenant.

But this raises another question. Is the Law bad? Is it contrary to the promise? And are the two opposed to one another? And Paul answers that in verse 21. He says, "May it never be!" It's a very strong way of making a denial. Some have interpreted it as "God forbid"! The Law and the promise could never be in conflict with one another since both come from God.

The problem is not the Law—it's man. Paul writes, "For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law." (vs21). If men could keep the Law, then they would be righteous and they would have life by their own doing, by their own obedience to the Law, the standard that was given. Then there'd be no need for a Savior. We can save ourselves, if...if we can keep the Law. But no man can do that. It's not the Law's fault. It's not a failure of the Law that man can't keep it.

As Paul wrote in Romans chapter 7, in verse 12, "...the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." The problem is...man isn't. But that was the reason the Law was given, to show us that; to expose our spiritually bankrupt condition and the hopelessness of all of our efforts at keeping the Law.

People who strive to meet God's standard by keeping the Law are like Sisyphus. He's a character in a Greek myth who was forever condemned to roll a huge rock up a mountain. The problem was, once he got it up the mountain, it would roll back down. So he'd have to do it again, and do it again. That's how he spend eternity. He was condemned to fruitless labor and despair. —And that is the man under the Law. The Law that man can't keep. The Law can't be kept. Righteousness can't be achieved. All of the heavy lifting that one might do with the greatest intentions is fruitless labor.

And that is by design. The Law was intended to exhaust a person who tried to keep it. People have to roll that rock up. —And then, when it reaches the top, it rolls back down. That's the experience of law-keeping. It never ends. It never reaches success. It causes the person doing it to reach exhaustion and despair.

As I said, that's done by design. That's the purpose. The Law doesn't give hope because the Law doesn't give life. Just the opposite. It condemns. It's like a judge and jail. That's how Paul describes it in our last verse, in verse 22, "But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin". It imprisons us.

This word used of people being 'shut up in something' is used of being trapped in a city, and it's used of fish being caught or closed up in a net. That's what the Law does. The Law 'catches the confident'. Those who think that they can earn God's acceptance by law-keeping find instead that they're rolling a rock up and down a mountain, and it never ends. It never succeeds. They find that, worse than that, they are in prison—and in fact they're on death row. And the Law doesn't provide an escape. At each point that person tries to gain God's approval by works, there's failure. The rock rolls down the mountain again. And each time, each time there's condemnation for failure until a person despairs.

I don't know that there's anything worse than despair, the feeling of utter hopelessness. No way out. That's a terrible condition. But that's a good position. The Law was given to bring people to despair, because only then will they realize that they cannot save themselves. —They need a Savior, and they turn to Him. So the Law is not contrary to the promise. It serves the promise. It was given to make things worse so that people could become better. As Luther put it, "God uses the Law to terrify us in order that we might be driven to grace. God wounds us," he said, "in order to heal. He kills in order to make alive."

There are two ways set before us—the way of works and the way of faith. The way of Law, which is one of achievement and merit—and the way of promise, which is one of gift, of free grace. God is unchanging in the way He deals with people on both of those pathways. God is inflexible in His justice because He is immutable, unchangeable, in His holiness. So the person who seeks to justify himself by his deeds is held to that, to that standard, to that impossible standard he must obey perfectly, —100 percent! As God said in verse 10, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Law to perform them.' Everything!

And so the person who thinks himself or herself to be 'good' and who 'hopes' to be accepted on that basis—if you're here and that's how you think, ask yourself this: Have you ever had a bad thought? Have you ever been selfish? Have you ever violated one of the ten commandments?

Let's make it simple. Have you just kept two commandments perfectly? Have you 'loved God with all your heart and loved your neighbor as yourself?' Salvation by works means salvation by perfect works in thought and deed, toward man and God. And if you hope to achieve that for yourself, then, as Mr. Spurgeon said, "You might well hope to drink the Atlantic dry. It's impossible." The Law 'shuts us up' to that truth and the reality that God punishes sin. He must, He's holy; He's righteous; He's just; He must punish sin. Now that, too, is an unchangeable truth. That is a guarantee. God is immutable in His

justice. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews said, "Our God is a consuming fire." (Heb 12:29). "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb 10:31).

But the living God is also a merciful God, and He blesses faith. And to those who see their utter failure through the Law and turn to Christ for escape, God grants them forgiveness and life. God is unchanging in His love and grace to all who look to Him, who look to His Son, who abandon all of their self-efforts and simply look to the cross for salvation—and cling to that through faith.

Well, may God help you to do that, if you have not believed in Jesus Christ. He died in the place of sinners. He bore the penalty in our place, and give salvation freely to all who believe.

One of the great hymns of the faith, one of my favorite hymns is *Rock of Ages* by Augustus Toplady. He put the matter so well when he wrote,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die."

By the grace of God, do that. Come to Him, trust in Him, and live forever.

May God help you to do that, and help all of us to live in light of His sovereign, good grace to us. Let's pray.

Father, we do thank You for that. We thank You that You've given the Law. You gave it to Israel, You codified it there at Sinai. But even men who didn't have that Law had Your righteousness written on their hearts by virtue of the fact that they were in the

image of God, and either way were condemned. If we have a system we've thought up of our own, out of a sense of ought, of what's right and wrong, we fail in that. Law exposes our weakness, failure—our lack of merit. We thank You for it.

We thank You that you sent Your Son to do what the Law could not do, remove sin and guilt—and give us life. Thank You for Him.

And as we consider that, in the moments before observing the Lord's Supper, we pray that You would bless us, and prepare our hearts for that. We pray these things in Christ's name.

Amen.

(End of Audio)