



Galatians 3:15-18

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Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

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.

The other day was September 11th, and of course, that fact came up in my confirmation class that day with the kids at school. And I started to feel pretty old when I realized that none of my confirmation students had even been born by the ten-year anniversary of the attack! So, I gave a brief history lesson. Not really an *actual* history lesson, but I did talk about that day for a few minutes with the students, and I think they were *moderately* interested, but they certainly weren't as interested in the events of that day as I was, having watched that day unfold live as it all happened.

History is like that. I think many of us are very interested in history, but there's something about *living* through historical events that makes it much more personal, whereas if you didn't live through something, it just doesn't hold the same fascination. And so, we often read about the events of history with sort of a *detached* interest; it didn't happen to us, it's just ancient history.

Well, the Apostle Paul gives a bit of a history lesson today in our section from his letter to the Galatians. It's a history of the giving of the law, a history of God's gospel promises. It is *History*, the story of God's grace towards the human race. The thing about *this* story is that even though it all happened long ago, it is all still very personal to each of you. And so, our theme today is:

History is Yourstory

There was a lot of "love your neighbor as yourself" in our other Scripture lessons today. And of course, Jesus says, ***"Do this, and you will live... Go, and do likewise."*** (Luke 10:28, 37) So, as long as we do that, love our neighbor as ourselves, then we're good to go, right? Then we get to heaven! That was a rhetorical question, obviously. We all know the answer is, "Of course not!" Even if we *could* truly love our neighbors as ourselves, that still wouldn't be sufficient to guarantee a spot in heaven.

But it can be a serious temptation for us to think along those terms. Here's how it happens: you're struggling with a certain sin that you just can't seem to overcome. You feel this immense weight of guilt as the brunt of God's Law bears down upon you. You know what God expects of you, and yet you keep failing again and again, and you become certain that God must be sorely disappointed when He thinks about you. Then Communion Sunday comes, and you become concerned that you shouldn't be going to the table at all, since you are a terrible hypocrite. You start bartering with God in your prayers. You promise Him that you will do better, this is the last time! You *want* to be in God's favor, but how *could* you be when you keep struggling with this one particular sin? You've got to stop! If you could effectively do that, if you could kick that terrible sin, *then* you could finally feel comfortable going to Communion, *then* maybe you wouldn't feel this crushing despair and fear when you turn to the Lord in prayer.

And of course, if you've ever found yourself in that situation, then you know that it just doesn't work out that way. It doesn't work out that way, because *that* is not the answer to sin. That is *not* the path to heaven. All those mental gymnastics are just an example of how we can fall into the thinking that *my* salvation depends in some way, some *small* way, on what *I* do, how *I* live, how *I* follow God's law.

That was the same issue facing the Galatian congregation that occasioned this letter from the Apostle Paul's pen. There was a group of Jewish converts called the "Judaizers," who *believed* in Jesus but were very mixed up on the purpose of God's Law. And they went up to Galatia and told the Gentile Christians there, **"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** (Acts 15:1) They knew that Jesus had died for their sins, and they did not deny that, but their teaching was that you still had to do *something*, namely circumcision, if you hoped to go to heaven.

And so, Paul gives them all this history lesson, and it's **History**—the narrative of how God saves His people from their sins. First, Paul starts with a simple truth that is just as true today as it was back then. **"Even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified."** Once a contract has been signed, it cannot be changed after the fact. It's legal and binding. No one can say, "Well, it says here in the will that your dad left you the farm, but you're actually going to have to pay market price for it." No, a contract, a will cannot be altered in any way.

And so, here's the history lesson—an agreement had been struck. God had given a promise, the promise to save His people from their sins. Paul mentions the promise given to Abraham *specifically*, but God had made the same promise again and again throughout history. First to Adam and Eve, how the seed of the woman would crush Satan's head, separating—with enmity—Satan from the sinful mankind he thought he had won. (cf. Genesis 3:15) From them it passed down to Abraham, that he would become a great nation and that through his Descendant all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Genesis 12:3) This promise of a Descendant who would save was then handed off to Isaac (cf. Genesis 26:4) and then to Jacob (Genesis 28:14) and eventually to Judah from whom **"the scepter [would] not depart... nor the ruler's staff from between his feet... and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."** (Genesis 49:10) That promise would continue to work its way down through the generations until it came to King David with the promise of a Descendant after him whose throne would be established forever. (cf. 2 Samuel 7:13)

And here's Paul's point: God had struck this agreement and given these promises *long before* He ever declared His law to Moses. In fact, the events on Mt. Sinai came 430 years *after* God had first made these promises to Abraham. That was the contract that God had bound Himself to, to save His people from their sins. The giving of the law afterwards did not alter in any way the original agreement! God hadn't changed His mind and said, "Yes, my promise back then was that *I* would save *you*, but now *you're* actually going to have to save yourselves by doing everything I tell you to do."

No, it was a promise of grace, given to people who did not deserve it and could not deserve it. Adam and Eve had decided to listen to Satan rather than to God. Abraham tried to take God's promise into his own hands, having a child with the servant, Hagar. Isaac attempted to circumvent God's promises to Jacob and wanted to hand down the blessing to Esau. Jacob felt he couldn't rely on God to keep His promise and felt compelled to steal that blessing. David was an adulterer and a murderer!

And yet, God gave *these* people His promise to save, which shows us that this contract between God and man was not based upon man's ability to keep up his end of the bargain. It was a covenant of grace; God would love with a faithful love and would forgive the sins of sinners.

But now the Judaizers were telling the Galatians that *actually*, "You have to do something. You can't just rely on God's grace." And I can understand their hangup. Put yourself in their shoes and imagine going every week to the synagogue where they hear the law all the time. "You've got to keep this." "You've got to honor this." "You've got to obey this." "This is what sets you aside as God's people."

And so, Paul writes to them and says, "No!" What sets you aside as God's people is that you are heirs of a promise that you did not make. A promise that was given thousands of years before you were born. Even those first hearers of St. Paul; this promise was given 2,100 years before they ever set foot on the earth. So how could *they* be responsible for the promise's fulfillment?

How can *you* be responsible for its fulfillment? No, you are caught up in a history that is much bigger than you. And you've got to understand that. It's the story of salvation, but it's **History**, not yours. It isn't based on what you do. It's based on what *He* did. And it's yours not based on any reason at all that you can point to that you deserve it, but because *you* were loved from before the foundations of the world, and He made a promise to you. And God will never break that promise.

We're used to love being transactional and conditional. "I'll love you forever as long as you do this." "I'll love you forever as long as you treat me this way." We go to altars and promise, "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health," and we say that we're going to be pictures of the union of Christ and His bride the Church, but *most* of the time when people make those promises, they really only mean, "For *better*... and in *wealth*... and in *health*." And when the trials come, they say something which is truly horrible, "We just fell out of love." Which means that the *promise* to love is somehow conditional, is somehow temporary and can go away.

But that's not God's love, and that's not the way God makes a promise. The promise that He made to Abraham was kept 2100 years later, and now 2000 years after that *still* is delivered to the Children, to you and to me, heirs of the promise. Delivered to the Children who did nothing to create the promise, who did nothing to put Christ on the cross—God did that all by His own will. We can't even say our own sins put Him on the cross, even though sometimes we say that; *God* really did that. But He did pay for those sins there.

You are involved in the story of somebody who knew what it would cost to love you and was willing to pay that, even if it meant the cross. Somebody who knew what it would mean to care for you and was willing to do that, no matter what the price.

This is what the Galatians were so foolish in giving up. Paul had opened this chapter saying, "**O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?**" (Galatians 3:1) How could they want to run from God's grace into the arms of the Law? How could they turn from that love and think, "No, I'd rather do something myself! I'd rather earn it!" How could *you* respond to the free forgiveness that God offers you in the Lord's Supper with His body and blood shed for you on the cross and say, "I've got to deserve it first." How can we try to haggle with God, making promises to Him that we can't keep, as if He is withholding of His love and can be so easily fooled and manipulated?

We've heard the message of grace over and over and over again. But because we so quickly forget, we so quickly let it fall from our minds, and we once again focus on the law which is all around us, and we get caught up in the idea that we are somehow responsible for our salvation. We even define ourselves by what we do! When somebody asks who you are, don't we usually describe what *we* do? "I'm a farmer." "I'm a pastor."

How about we define ourselves not by what *we* do, but rather like this: "I'm a beloved Child of God." That's really who you are. And that's a statement of the most wonderful truth that could ever be uttered. You are a Child of God because God loves you and in love has made very special promises to you: to forgive your sins—to remember them no more—and to, finally, shepherd your soul to heaven where you will dwell with Him forever. Nothing can steal these promises from you. For God has reached out to you through the waters of Baptism and embraced you in these promises and made **History** of the salvation of the world part of **Yourstory**. Or rather, more appropriately, He has made *you* a part of **History**.

So, if you find ever yourselves burdened by the weight of guilt; if you just can't shake the feeling that God is upset with you, or that you could understand Him wanting other people to be saved but can't imagine He'd ever want the same for you—it's time for another history lesson. Look back on what God had promised to do for you and then consider how Jesus kept those promises. See that unconditional love on display on the cross of Calvary and then recognize why it is that God has invited you to His Supper, or why He has invited you to pray to Him. It is so that you can take those sins which afflict you so much, bring them to Him in repentance, and be forgiven of all of them.

And may God grant that we use His law in this way—not to figure out strategies for trying to "make it up to God,"—but rather using it to take full stock of our sins so that we might hand them over to the only solution, Jesus Christ our Savior, all the while trusting in His loving promises. May God grant it to us in Jesus' saving name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.