

0315  
Unbreakable  
Galatians 3:15-18  
Sunday, January 15, 2023

### Text

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

### Prayer

### Introduction

I think of the great figures of American history. And the many great things they did.

George Washington was a college president and had been a delegate from Virginia at the continental congress.

If he'd just stopped there, that's already a pretty pretty impressive life. At least, by worldly standards.

But then, those weren't the most significant things he did. He was the commanding general of the continental army during the Revolutionary War and then served as our first president.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was also a college president, but that was after serving as our 34th president and the most significant thing he did in his

lifetime: he was the commander of allied forces during the Second World War.

It's a pretty impressive life when you become the president, and that's not even your greatest accomplishment.

Thomas Jefferson founded a college: the University of Virginia. He was also governor of Virginia, he wrote the Declaration of Independence, he was our first Secretary of State, he was a vice president, and finally, he was a president.

In the Bible, I think about the life of Abraham.

I think of all of the substantial aspects of his life. The great things the Lord did through him.

He was the man God had chosen with whom to make a covenant.

And because of that covenant, the Lord made him a great nation. And because of the covenant, the Lord had given him the promise of land and of offspring.

He's the physical descendant of ethnic Israel.

In Genesis 15, Abraham becomes our example of faith. As the Lord is making his great promises to Abraham, Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness.

The New Testament uses that faith as the example by which anyone can be declared righteous through faith in Christ.

He's the one to whom the covenant sign of circumcision was given.

And those aren't the only important things he did.

Abraham is an important Old Testament example of hospitality as he hosts three angelic visitors in Genesis 18.

He displays great faith in action when he shows willingness to sacrifice his promised son Isaac in Genesis 22.

And there are a lot more examples to which I could point.

Paul talks a lot about Abraham in Galatians 3.

And with all of the important things associated with Abraham, as we've been studying Paul's letter to the Galatians, we've primarily focused on his faith.

### Context

But in today's section Paul is talking about the binding force of God's covenant with Abraham.

By the way, I use this word covenant a lot. A Biblical covenant is a formal agreement between two parties who make various covenant commitments to each other. In the Bible, covenant language most often gets used to describe the covenants that God makes with his people and the new covenant which was ushered in by Christ when he died on the cross for our sins.

Before we get to our passage today, let's take just a couple of moments and talk about the Lord's covenant with Abraham.

In Genesis 12, the Lord first calls Abraham and makes a series of great promises to him.

Quoting from Genesis 12:2-3:

**I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."**

As the Lord further elaborates on these promises, it will revolve around land, offspring, and blessing.

As I said a few moments ago, in Genesis 15 we see Abraham's belief in the Lord and his promises credited to him as righteousness. Paul will pick up that example in Galatians 3:6:

**<sup>6</sup> just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?**

And faith and the covenant are linked together.

And Paul’s point is that the faith Abraham had is the same faith by which all who believe can be declared righteous.

In Genesis, we see the talk of the blessings promised to Abraham because of his faith.

In Galatians 3, Paul looks to our faith and points to how that is the basis for our receiving the blessings which were promised to Abraham.

Verses 7-9:

**<sup>7</sup> Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith**

And so what Paul is saying in these verses is that those who have faith in the gospel are united with Abraham.

It’s not because of Abraham. It’s because of Christ.

But as Abraham was set apart for God’s great promise, we become children of Abraham because of belief in that same promise.

In Judaism, they looked at themselves as literal descendants of Abraham. And that was true, from a physical perspective.

But Paul says that what matters most of all is that we are Spiritual descendants of Abraham through a shared faith.

Because it is through the gospel that the nations are blessed. And the greatest example of that blessing is that people of all backgrounds, people

from all nations, people of all races, all types of people would know the salvation that Jesus gives.

The gospel is meant for all mankind, everyone who believes. It's a worldwide message.

And when we come to faith, we enjoy the same blessing that Abraham enjoyed.

Again, not because of Abraham, not because of ourselves. But because we have a great and merciful God, and because his son went to the cross.

In last week's passage, Paul again reminded us that there were those who opposed this message of grace.

They looked to Moses and the law. And trying to earn favor with God based on the law. That will not ultimately work, because we sin and we cannot follow the law.

Last week's passage again ends with Abraham. And it's talking both about what Christ achieved in his death, and the blessing that we enjoy.

Verses 13-14:

**<sup>13</sup> 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”— <sup>14</sup>so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.**

Bridge

With that, we come to our passage this morning.

Thesis

And our main point is that the promises to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ.

And we'll be looking at three this in our passage today.

An unchangeable covenant.  
An unbreakable promise.  
And an irrevocable inheritance.

With that, we'll jump into our passage.

First point.

An unchangeable covenant

Paul begins this section with an illustration about covenants.

In verse 15, Paul says:

**<sup>15</sup> 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.**

Paul is using legal language to consider God's covenant.

If someone makes a will, that is a binding legal document.

Wills are generally difficult to challenge. To contest someone's will, you have to prove that they were not of sound mind when they made the will, or that the will was a forgery, or that the person didn't make the will of their own free will.

It's hard to prove.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, they too had similar provisions for a person to be able to bequeath their property.

Judaism also had its own laws for leaving possessions.

So this was not a foreign concept to Paul's audience. It would have been familiar to the Galatians, just as it's familiar to us. And so for that reason, it's a great illustration.

You can't just change, or amend, or nullify someone else's will. You can't just change someone's legal arrangements, because you feel like it or because it suits you better.

And what Paul is saying is that if we can't do that with a manmade agreement, with a manmade covenant, then we certainly cannot nullify a divine covenant.

### Meditation

And really, that's true for all of God's Word.

If it doesn't suit us, if it doesn't fit our preferences, we can't change it.

That's one of the things I love about this passage. The reverence it has for God's Word.

Isaiah 40:8 says:

**<sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever.**

Do you view the Bible with that same reverence?

How do you view this book?

Some look at it like it's just some fables or good moral lessons. Others want to just pull a verse here or there that suits their situation.

Or do you revere it as the eternal word of God? Because in God fulfilling this covenant through Christ, we see a continuity of the storyline of the Bible.

I think we tend to look at the Bible as a bunch of stories.

But ultimately, it's one story with many scenes.

I think of a great epic like the Lord of the Rings. You have lots of great individual moments, but it's ultimately one story leading up to one point.

Everything in the Bible revolves around God's redemption through Christ and the renewal Jesus brings in our lives and which he will bring to completion at the end of the age.

As I've already said, the covenant which the Lord had made with Abraham is not because of Abraham. It wasn't because of Abraham's goodness. And it wasn't something that even Abraham had the ability to nullify.

It was based in the character of God, and the saving work of Jesus.

In Genesis 15, after the Lord declares Abraham righteous because of his belief, we see a very interesting ceremony.

The Lord has Abraham sacrifice a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. When Abraham sacrificed the animals, he was to divide them in half.

By our standards and sensibilities, this isn't something we would ever do.

But the covenant is made by a blood sacrifice.

It is a shadow of the greater reality and the ultimate sacrifice which would happen on the cross of calvary, when Jesus Christ, the true lamb would be led to slaughter.

But back in Genesis 15, we see a picture of this sacrifice ceremony.

Genesis 15:17:

**<sup>17</sup> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.**

That fire symbolizes the presence of God.

The Lord passing between the sacrifices is God ratifying the covenant.

Genesis 15:18 says:

**On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,**

The Lord made a covenant with Abraham and nothing can overturn that. Because God has obligated himself to that covenant by his own name and by his own character.

### Meditation

The real wonder in that is why God would show this grace to a man who didn't deserve it: Abraham; to a nation who didn't deserve it: Israel; and to a world who didn't deserve it.

One thing that has never changed both in the days of Abraham, when Paul was writing, and even up to today is that the Lord has always been gracious.

The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ.

We come to our second point.

### An unbreakable promise

Verse 16:

**<sup>16</sup> 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.**

The key word to this verse is the word offspring.

Most English translations use either the word offspring or the word seed.

Now there are verses in the Old Testament when the word offspring is referring to one person.

For instance, Genesis 4:25, after Cain kills Abel:

**Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.”**

Seth is the specific offspring in that passage.

A really important verse is 2 Samuel 7:12. It’s a verse that is looking ahead to the future king of Israel. It’s a promise that’s made to King David.

**When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.**

That’s a verse which is looking forward to one offspring. Ultimately, that is fulfilled in Christ. He is the future offspring of David.

But there are also other passages in the Old Testament where the Lord speaks to Abraham about the promises to him and his offspring.

Genesis 13:14-15:

**<sup>14</sup> 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, <sup>15</sup> for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever**

So that’s the Lord talking about the Promised Land and he says:

**I will give to you and to your offspring forever**

Is that one offspring or many?

Genesis 17:8:

**I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”**

Once again, is that one offspring or many?

Grammatically, either is possible.

That's actually true in Hebrew, Greek, and English.

Robbie is my offspring. That's true. It makes sense. That's the word offspring being applied to one person.

But it's also true to say my sister and I are my father's offspring. There the word offspring is being applied to more than one person.

Same word.

Now when you look at the Genesis passages:

**I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."**

An obvious way to interpret this is that the offspring is referring to many. That it's referring to the Israelites.

And that's true.

But as with so many promises and prophecies in the Old Testament, there's a double fulfillment.

The offspring is Israel.

But the true promises of God ultimately points to the true offspring. Christ the Lord.

**<sup>16</sup> 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.**

And so Paul is pointing to Jesus as the true offspring and the true fulfillment of the divine promise to Abraham.

The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ.

We come to our third point.

### An incorruptible inheritance

In verse 17, Paul does return to the idea from the beginning of this passage. Where he is talking about how the covenant cannot be annulled.

And it's important to remember that Paul is writing Galatians in response to people who had tried to impose the Old Testament law. People who wanted to impose the law of Moses onto new Christians.

In our passage, our point has been that the promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ.

Against the detractors, Paul will argue in verse 17 that the covenant with Abraham predates the covenant with Moses and has precedent.

**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.**

Why doesn't the law annul the covenant?

Because it can't.

**no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.**

The purpose for the law was never meant to supercede the covenant with Abraham, nor was it meant to replace the covenant with Abraham.

Again, the law does plenty of important things.

I said these last week, but they bear repeating:  
The law reveals to us the holiness of God.

It reveals that the Lord desires his people to live holy and set apart lives.

The law showed Israel what God desired for being a covenant community and what was required to live in a covenant community.

The law reveals our sin in our inability to follow the law.

But the purpose of the law was never to save.

Why?

Because we already had the covenant with Abraham.

The law

Paul's point is never to bash the law.

1 Timothy 1:8, Paul says:

**we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully**

But the issue is that people wanted to use the law as a means of salvation. And that was a problem. Because the law could never do what it was never meant to do.

That's basically the point Paul will be making in the next section of Galatians 3.

The law does not replace grace.

And it was grace which was given to Abraham.

And it has always been grace by which men have been saved.

Verse 18:

**<sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.**

The law looks at what we do.

The promise looks at what Christ has done.

The law is about earning.

The promise is about receiving.

Jesus freely gives.

### Meditation

Abraham was given a promise of offspring who would be as innumerable as the stars.

It is to Christ that this promise is both fulfilled and given. It is because Jesus is the true offspring that all who believe in Christ can be the Spiritual offspring of Abraham.

As far as the land that Abraham was promised, Jesus is given the whole earth.

Colossians 1:16 says:

**by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.**

Jesus was given the whole earth in that his gospel would have a global reach. It's a gospel for the nations.

The promise included blessing.

That's true both in the blessing to the nations of the gospel.

But not only that, because Christ has blessed all who believe in him with every Spiritual blessing.

He has freely given us his grace, he has declared us holy and righteous.

He gives us new Spiritual life by which we are born again. He has given us his Holy Spirit, he adopts us as sons and daughters, he sanctifies us, he forgives us. He gives us Spiritual gifts for building up the church and

bringing glory to God. He invites us into God's presence, he prepares for us a heavenly home.

The covenant was made with Abraham.

The promise was made to his offspring.

And because the true offspring is Jesus, because he lived a perfect life, because he died on the cross, because he brings salvation, then the promises are fulfilled and unbreakable. And we have an inheritance which is irrevocable.

### Conclusion - One gospel

There are not two gospels.

There is not an Old Testament gospel and a New Testament gospel. There is not a gospel of law and a gospel of grace.

There is one gospel, and that gospel has always been and will always be salvation by grace alone through faith alone. In the Old Testament, they did not yet have Christ, but they had the promise of God. They had the future hope of a savior. And it is by Christ that they are saved.

During the ministry of Jesus, he said in John 8:56:

**<sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."**

In Matthew 13:17, Jesus says:

**truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.**

It all points to Jesus and is all about Jesus.

And perhaps the greatest text on this subject. From 1 Peter 1:

**<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was**

**indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.**

We have the truth waited for. We have the chapters of the book they never got to read.

In the Old Testament, they heard about the promised son, we have the story of his birth.

In the Old Testament, they heard about a suffering servant. We can see the story from the other side of the cross.

In the Old Testament, they heard about a coming king. We're invited to come bow down to him.

heaven

Paul begins this passage with an illustration.

Allow me to close with an illustration.

Think about heaven.

In the Old Testament, they looked forward to a savior.

They knew that the Lord was going to bring salvation and while they had prophecies and an idea of what the Lord was doing, they didn't have the full picture. They just had what the Lord had revealed.

They had a picture, but it was incomplete.

We have a lot of different things that we imagine when we think about heaven. We have various depictions in art, in movies, in our own minds.

And the Bible gives us some glimpses. But it's something we can't truly imagine. It's just a shadow of the greater reality of heaven.

With our eternal hope and future, we have more of the picture. But we too must look with hope and expectancy in trusting this good God who has always been faithful to his covenant, who has always been faithful to his promises, and who will bring to pass all that he has promised.