

***The New Covenant in Christ's Blood***  
*Galatians 3:15-22*

After the message today we will be celebrating the Lord's Table. When we celebrate the Lord's Table we "remember" the body and blood of the Lord. Interestingly, at the Passover meal in which Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Table, He raised the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." The cup symbolizes the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

Today's passage (Galatians 3:15-22) really prepares us to appreciate this remembrance of the new covenant in Christ's blood. This passage explains that the relationship we now have with God through faith in Jesus is the blessing that God promised to Abraham. What we've received in the new covenant through the body and blood of Christ is vastly superior to anything the Law could have delivered. If this sounds similar to what we discussed last week in Galatians 3:6-14, it is; there's quite a bit of repetition in Galatians. Today's passage flows continues Paul's argument in the previous paragraph.

Specifically, Paul explains in Galatians 3:15-22 the relationship between the covenant given to Abraham and the Law (also known as the old covenant).

***God's promise/covenant to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ – not in the Law (the old covenant). (Galatians 3:15-18)*** Verse 15 sets up Paul's argument that follows. In this verse Paul is makes a simple point about human covenants (or testaments):

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.

That's why you should "read the fine print" before you sign a document. Once a covenant (a legally-binding agreement) has been ratified, no one "sets it aside or adds conditions to it." Once you sign a contract (for a house or a cell phone plan or whatever), you have to live with it. You can't just change it after the fact. Paul is going to argue that just as such covenants between humans are binding, covenants that God makes with humans are also binding. Paul is eager to point out that the covenant God made with Abraham wasn't set aside by the Law; neither did the Law add to it. In verse 16 Paul refers to the covenant God made with Abraham as "the promises":

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.

Last week we talked about the promises God made to Abraham. God had promised Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). As time went on, this promise became increasingly more specific. In Genesis 22:18, for example, the promise was restated as, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. . ." Paul makes what seems to us as a rather obscure point – namely, that the term "seed" is singular, not plural ("seed" and not "seeds"). His point is that the promise to Abraham was focused on one specific seed/offspring, namely Christ. In retrospect, we understand that the promise (and therefore the

covenant) that God made to Abraham was only fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, nothing that happened between the giving of the covenant promise and its fulfillment “set it aside or altered it.” What happened between the giving and the fulfillment of the promise? The Law.

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.

Paul has already established that once a covenant is ratified, it can't be altered after the fact. Since the Law was 430 years after the fact, it in no way altered the covenant God made with Abraham. The Law didn't nullify the promise that the Gentiles would be blessed in Abraham through faith. Paul restates this same point in verse 18:

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.

God wouldn't break His own promise/covenant by saying, “You no longer receive the blessings of Abraham (i.e., the inheritance) through faith. . . you now receive it by keeping the Law. . .” No, God made a promise to Abraham that He would keep: the Gentiles would be blessed with Abraham, the believer, through faith (3:14).

One implication of Paul's argument involves the historical and theological integrity of the message we've believed (and that we share). The message that you can enter into a relationship with God through faith alone is a message that has been evident since the days of Abraham - for 4,500 years! Most of us struggle with doubts at different times. You may even wonder, “Is all of this real or have we just convinced each other that it's true?” Paul's perspective gives us renewed confidence because this message has been consistent for 4,500 years. As we mentioned last week, living after the cross and resurrection we experience the blessing of Abraham in all its fullness. People have experienced the same salvation across cultures and generations, in times of prosperity and in times of hardship. The theological integrity of the message down through the ages should give us great confidence.

This is something to remember when we celebrate the Lord's Table. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember that God has been faithful to His promise to Abraham.

***What then was the function of the Law? The Law exposed sin and therefore the need for Christ. (3:19-22)*** This whole discussion begs the question, “If the Law didn't alter or replace the covenant made with Abraham, what was its function? Why was it added?”

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.

Paul says three things about the Law in this verse. First, Paul says that the Law “was added because of transgressions.” I believe Paul is saying here that the Law was added in order to reveal certain types of behavior as sinful. Paul made the same point about the Law in Romans 3:20 where he wrote, “. . .through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” The Law articulated

what behaviors were sinful. Some of the specific regulations simply set the Jewish people apart from everybody else: dietary restrictions, not wearing clothes made of two kinds of fabric, etc. Other regulations reflected the deeper moral structure of the universe: do not kill, do not lie, love your neighbor as yourself, etc. In either case, once the Law was given, you had an objective way of deciding whether or not something was sin.

It's like the law that went into effect here in Manhattan on July 1<sup>st</sup> of last year: if you have your cell phone to your ear while driving around town, you have transgressed the law; you're a sinner as far as the city goes. Before that law went into effect driving around town talking on your phone may have been distracting and dangerous, but it wasn't a transgression of any law. But now it is.

In a similar way, before the Jewish Law was given it was wrong (even sinful) to make and worship idols. But it wasn't until God gave Moses the ten commandments that you had a specific commandments that said, "You shall not make for yourself an idol. . . you shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God. . ." The Law was added to expose that behavior such as idolatry is sinful.

Second, the Law was "ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator." It isn't clear from the OT, but the NT asserts (Acts 7:38, 53; Hebrews 2:2, and here) that an angel communicated with Moses on Mt. Sinai when he received the Law. Paul is pointing out that the Law wasn't given directly to the Jewish people; it was communicated by God to angels who communicated to Moses who communicated to the people. By contrast, God made a covenant directly with Abraham – without mediators. The implication is that the covenant made with Abraham is superior to the one made with Moses.

The third thing we are told about the Law in this verse is that the Law was in effect only "until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made." The Law was enacted for the Jewish people only for a limited period of time. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Law is now obsolete. There is still great value in studying the Law; after all, "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). But we are not required to keep the specific regulations given in the Law.

Periodically (like this past week) somebody writes a letter to the editor that says something to the effect that if you really believe the Bible you won't eat lobster or shrimp and you won't wear polyester (presumably as a violation of Leviticus 19:9). We would say, "No, if you *really* believe the Bible, you'll accept that it says that such regulations are no longer binding on those who trust in Jesus."

Verse 20 seems to be supporting the second point about the Law that Paul has made:

20 Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.

There are many different interpretations of this verse (Lightfoot claims that there are 250 . . . which I find hard to believe; see Boice, p. 465). That being the case, it's a good thing that the

meaning of this passage doesn't hinge on our understanding of this verse. If I had to choose an interpretation, I'd see Paul as making a statement about the inferiority of the Law. The Law was a mediated covenant between two parties – God and the Jewish people. If they didn't obey the Law, they would pay a heavy price. The promise to Abraham was a unilateral covenant made only by God (“whereas God is only one.”). Even though Abraham's obedience was important, God unilaterally agreed to bless Abraham.

In verse 21 Paul makes a point we've seen several times in Galatians:

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.

Paul would never suggest that God would enact two covenants that contradicted each other. His point is that the Law was never intended to impart life. To the contrary, Paul writes in verse 22:

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.

The Scriptures (i.e., the Law) declare “that the whole world is a prisoner of sin” (NIV). Because of the demands that the Jewish people found in the Law, they had to admit that they were sinful. In Romans 2:14-16 Paul argued that even the Gentiles (who didn't have the Law), in effect, had the Law written on their hearts. Their conscience would instinctively tell them whether they were doing right or wrong. Consequently, even Gentiles find themselves “prisoners of sin.” Just because they weren't living under the Law didn't mean they weren't sinful. No, our consciences force each of us to admit that we've sinned. That knowledge of sin exposes our need for forgiveness – which is found in Jesus.

This year for Lent (the weeks leading up to Easter) we have been doing a corporate confession on Sunday mornings. This confession allows us to express to God that we know we've sinned. I appreciate how this confession invites me to express to God the depths of my sin – which I'd rather not think about and rather not admit. It should humble us to the core to stand and say along with others, “We have willfully sinned against You – in thought, word, and deed, in which we've done and what we've left undone. . .” We've been “self-indulgent,” inconsistent in our faith, we've not loved our neighbors as we should, etc. Basically we're saying, “Guilty as charged.”

But we're not making this confession with a spirit of self-condemnation or defeat. We make this confession in light of the promise made to Abraham – the promise of life and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The sins we are confessing have been paid for by the blood of Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can pursue faithfulness and obedience in deeper, more substantive ways.

Paul's point in verse 22 is that we realize that we are prisoners of sin *so that we might believe in Jesus Christ and receive the life and fullness promised to Abraham.* That's really what we remember at the Lord's Table. The bread represents Jesus' body which was broken for us. The cup represents that His blood brought about a new covenant – a new relationship with God.

What the old covenant was helpless to do – impart life – Jesus did by dying on the cross. That’s what we remember at the Lord’s Table.

Let’s stand and join together in our *corporate confession*. Then we’ll remember the body and blood of Christ through the Lord’s Table. If you are a believer in Jesus – regardless of your denominational background or church affiliation – we invite you to join us in this remembrance. Please hold the bread, and then we’ll eat together. Please hold the cup, and then we’ll drink together.

*Lenten Confession.*

*Lord’s Table.*