

Children of the Promise

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[0:00] Well, please open up your Bible to Galatians, and we're reading this evening from chapter 3 and verse 15 to chapter 4 and verse 6.

! That's on page 973 of the Church Bible. Galatians chapter 3 and verse 15.

Paul writes, To give a human example, brothers and sisters, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. 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? This is what I mean.

The law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God so as to make the promise void.

[1:14] For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise. But God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law?

It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. And it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not.

For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

[2:23] But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. For in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring. Heirs according to promise. I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything. But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

In the same way, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son.

[3:47] And if a son, then an heir through God. Amen. Please keep those words open before you. And let us ask, as ever, for God's gracious help.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your great plan of redemption unfolded through history, recorded for us in the scriptures.

And we thank you, Father, that in our hands, before us, in the Bible, we have your very counsel, your eternal decree written down, recorded for us to learn, to see, to take to heart, and that it is all about Jesus.

Help us, then, we pray, to draw near to him tonight, to see him as the end of the law, to see him as the one through whom we are saved, and therefore to rest our faith all the more confidently in him.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we are coming back tonight to our series in Galatians, after a very encouraging and helpful few weeks in the book of Philemon.

[5:01] And as you might have picked up from our reading, we stopped when Paul was in mid-flow. At the beginning of our reading, in verse 15, begins, to give you an example.

So, he's about to give an example of something he's just been saying, which is possibly the most important thing that could ever be said, that we come into a right relationship with God through faith in his good news, and not because of our obedience to him or our good works.

Back in chapter 2, verse 16, if you've got your Bible open, Paul gives us one of the clearest statements of that in the whole Bible. We know, he says, that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So, we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

He doesn't leave any wiggle room there, does he? To be justified in that verse means being declared to be righteous by God. We all want to be able to stand before God and hear his well done, to have his smile upon us, to be welcomed by him.

[6:33] But we know that none of us has a perfect record. We haven't met his standard. We've sinned every day. So, how can God call me righteous?

Well, Paul is saying he can never call you righteous because you've kept his commands, because you haven't. You are unrighteous. Or, we could say, you are wrongious.

But if your faith is in Jesus Christ for your right standing with God, then God does call you righteous. How? Well, as he goes on to explain, because Christ took the curse we deserve for our disobedience and unrighteousness so that we could have all the blessing that he deserves for his obedience and his righteousness.

Just see that in chapter 3, verse 13 and 14. He says there, What's he saying?

Jesus lived a righteous life for us. He died a sinner's death for us so that we could be blessed by God through him simply by putting our trust in him.

[8:07] Works of the law will never put you right with God. Only faith in Jesus can. That's what Paul's been saying. And Paul's had to defend that truth really vigorously in this letter because the Christians in the region of Galatia, which was some of the very first churches that Paul planted, are being convinced that Jesus isn't enough to properly put them right with God.

They need to keep all the commandments of the Old Testament as well. Not only his ethical and moral teaching, but also rules to do with worship and religious or ethnic identity, circumcision, food laws, boundary markers of the Old Covenant people of God, essentially they were being told that they had to become Jewish in order to become Christians.

But Paul is having none of it. He's wasted no time in saying, 1 verse 6, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. O foolish Galatians, 3 verse 1, who has bewitched ye? So this letter is not about a difference of opinion, kind of agree to disagree.

What's at stake, he says, is salvation, salvation, the glory of Jesus, the gospel message itself. And Paul is in mid-flow to convince them back to that message.

[9:47] He preached to them, they believed at the first, and they need to keep hold of if they are to be found in Christ. So let's get back into the flow.

Having picked up that thread again, works of the law will never put you right with God, only faith in Jesus can. And he's about to give us an example of how that is true.

Firstly then, he says, God gave the promise before the law. So he writes, verse 15, to give a human example, brothers and sisters, even a man-made covenant.

No one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified. So think about it, for all the thousands or the tens of thousands of laws that must govern our lives every day, from bylaws, and Scottish law, UK law, European law, international law, probably more.

You can tell me if you know. The Magna Carta is still the foundation of all law that we follow. 800 years and untold reams of legal documents have not as yet invalidated the rights and responsibilities set down in the year 1215 by King John of England.

[11:10] It was actually in the news not that long ago when the then Justice Secretary David Lammy proposed trials without juries. You might have seen people pointed out that it would have revoked a right enshrined in the Magna Carta that a person, no matter how humble, should be tried

by a jury of his peers.

So you can't just rip up the title deeds because the people who signed them are dead. A treaty has been signed, a covenant made. I don't move in such high circles as that.

But even in the church, when new agreements are reached, previous agreements don't just disappear. They have to be revoked at the General Assembly.

In May, new legislation was proposed to us to consider and at the bottom of each act was a line that said something like, this act hereby revokes act whatever, 2007 article B, subsection C, whatever. The point is, simply making new laws doesn't automatically cancel the existing one. You have to say that it does that for it to do that. new laws build on old foundations.

[12 : 24] So it is with God's covenant, says Paul. So, important question then. Which came first, the law or the gospel?

Listen to what Paul says in verse 16. Now the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. That's what we heard about earlier in Genesis 17.

It's the magna carta, if you like, of our relationship with God. I will be your God, you will be my people. The rest of verse 16 is important but confusing.

So, for now, let's skip to verse 17 to see where he's going with it. This is what I mean, he says, the law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God so as to make the promise void.

So after God made that promise to Abraham, 430 years passed before God gave his law at Mount Sinai. Now, if like me, you struggle to imagine what that period of time actually looks like, 430 years ago from now is 1596.

[13 : 42] Elizabeth I was on the throne. That is a jolly long time ago. Or you could measure that span of time in Bible pages. God made the promise on page 12 of our Bibles.

He gave the law on page 61. That's 49 pages or 53 chapters of the Bible later. Or in Bible books, God's promise comes near the start of the first book of Genesis.

the law doesn't come until halfway through the second book of Exodus. Ah, but you say, doesn't the law revoke the promise God made to Abraham?

You know, sure, Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. But surely the point of the law is that from then on they had to work for it, right? Well, you tell me in our morning series we've been deep in the law by no coincidence.

And in fact, we've spent the whole year up to this point pretty much in the book of Exodus. So if you've been there in the morning, you tell me at what point the book of Exodus or God's law says, I hereby revoke my earlier covenant with Abraham and his offspring.

[14 : 58] It would be really strange if it said that because the Lord says his whole intervention in Exodus of saving his people from slavery and bringing them to himself was in fact to keep his promise to Abraham.

Exodus 2, verse 24, God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is the inception of the rescue plan.

And so God's law, which comes as part of the rescue package, doesn't then cancel out or fundamentally change his original promise.

His promise still stands. So now let me ask you that really important question again. Which came first, the law or the gospel?

Maybe you're not as certain as you were before. but you'd still stop short of definitely saying the gospel. Even if the law didn't come for 430 years after the promise to Abraham, well, Jesus didn't come for 1400 years after that, you say.

[16 : 14] And yet, speaking of God's promise to Abraham, Paul actually has said in chapter 3, verse 8, that God preached the gospel to Abraham.

saying, and you shall all the nations be blessed. And, get ready for this, he says, in the rest of verse 16, look, the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.

It does not say to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one and to your offspring, who is Christ. Christ. We normally think, don't we, of God's promises being about Jesus, and they are.

But Paul is saying that this promise was made to Jesus, to Abraham and his offspring, Christ. His family would number more than the stars in heaven and the grain of sand.

he would inherit the earth and rule over the nations. Through him would every family of the earth be blessed. Yes, he came in time to claim his inheritance.

[17:27] And yes, even in his risen glory, he is still waiting to come into the full possession of his inheritance. inheritance. But it has been truly and properly his inheritance since God made the promise to Abraham.

We could say Christ's signature is on the original covenant document, so to speak. He is a party to the covenant. So Paul is saying, whichever way you look at it, the entire gospel came before any of the law.

and nothing in the law annuls or revokes what God promised previously to Abraham and to Christ. Now, Paul's logic might have lost you on the way.

But, one thing that I think we can take away from that straight off the shelf, even if you haven't followed any of that, hear this, God's relationship with us as his people at heart never, ever, ever changes.

It has never, ever changed. Since the very first man he ever chose to be his family, Abraham, the way he has chosen to relate to us has always, always, always been by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

[18:56] Paul's saying the coming of the Lord didn't change that. Yes, it expanded the way in which they saw God's grace. It developed the way that they expressed their trust in God's promise, but it did not change God's promise.

The way they were justified is the way we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Only they looked forward to his coming through the preaching of the gospel as we look back to his coming through the preaching of the gospel.

And so we know whatever anyone tells us that there is no new way that you've never heard of of getting right with God instead of through Jesus because it's always been Jesus.

God's never had another way and there's no old way that perhaps was the right one after all because it's only ever been Jesus. God has never had another way.

What an assurance that is for us if our trust is in Jesus tonight that the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation tells us that God declares us right with him through faith in Jesus Christ.

[20:13] There is no other gospel just as Abraham believed God in the beginning and it was counted to him as righteousness. That is Paul's example or illustration of the fact that we are not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now so far so good. Are we keeping up? Paul. Now he anticipates the obvious question.

If the law wasn't given to make us work our way into God's good books, why then the law? So that's his answer to that secondly then, which is that God gave the law to guard us until he fulfilled his promise.

Have a look at verse 19 with me. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. Paul's saying the law was given for a purpose and for a time.

Look at the time. It's until the offspring should come. Who is that? Jesus. So you might wonder then, why are we bothering to spend so much time in the Ten Commandments in our morning series only to come at night and Paul tell us it was only relevant up to Jesus?

[21:40] Well, remember what Paul's dealing with in Galatia. The guys prowling around the church are not trying to convince the Christians that they mustn't murder, but that they must be circumcised.

They must keep food laws. They're saying you have to do that. So when Paul's talking about the law here, he's not saying the Ten Commandments are out of the window, now Jesus has come. He's saying the specific application of the Ten Commandments to the life and worship of Israel, no longer define what it means to be part of his people.

So for example, if we were getting up on Sunday morning and saying, thou shalt not eat roadkill, or thou shalt not borrow someone's coat overnight, or you're risking your salvation, we'd be falling into the same trap as the Galatians.

Instead, what I hope we've been seeing is the ethical principles that lie behind that in God's moral law and the application of that in light of Jesus, which is what the New Testament does all the time.

[22:52] So those specifics back then, like circumcision, food laws, and so on, they were there only for a time until the coming of Christ. But why were they there?

What is their purpose? purpose? Or Paul says because of transgressions. Now, we could read that and think it's like mum and dad setting extra rules at home to try to correct the children's behaviour.

You know, we want them to stop fighting, and so we tell them, stop fighting. But if that were true, or mainly true, that that's why God gave the law, then we would be right to ask, verse 21, is the law then contrary to the promises of God?

Because it would suggest, would it not, that actually we are capable of cleaning ourselves up for God, if only he tells us what we need to do. But then that would contradict his promise that the righteous will live by faith in Christ, not their own works, right?

And so Paul says with confidence, verse 21, are the law and gospel contradictory? Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

[24 : 17] So if the point of the law was to correct our behaviour mainly, then yes, they would be in opposition and in conflict. But the scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So far from being a way to clean ourselves up, Paul says the law was given to imprison us under sin. So to correct that illustration, it's more like what actually happens at home when we set rules. Ezra being one doesn't understand what is right and wrong. he just does things. He has no awareness of whether it's a good or a bad thing to do. Whereas Caleb and Samuel, being a bit older, have a growing sense of what we consider to be good or bad behaviour at home. But quite often what that means in reality is that once they've been caught doing what they shouldn't, they feel bad about it and get upset. Because the rules confront them with their poor behaviour, rules which in the moment they didn't feel bad for breaking, but now that they have been caught, they do.

And yet they are largely unable to stop doing what they know is wrong, however bad it makes them feel when they get told off. Laying down the law doesn't straightforwardly reform behaviour.

[25 : 52] It mostly reminds us of our guilt. And that's why God gave the law when he did, says Paul, to confront his people every day with their inability to do the right thing, clean themselves up and reform their behaviour.

The law was there to convert their general sinfulness into actual sins by setting boundaries they couldn't stop themselves breaking and limits they couldn't stop themselves crossing.

So that they would feel their sinfulness and therefore look outside of themselves for a saviour. And we don't know what that's like, but that sense of being heavily under God was very real.

Peter says in Acts 15, as he describes those laws that kind of set the boundary for the old covenant identity of Israel, he says you're placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear, an unbearable burden, says Peter.

Paul says, verse 23, they were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. In prison, a prison guard, the law that kept God's people from ignoring their sin, which was frustrating and upsetting and unbearable, even though in God's fatherly love, it was valuable and needed and good for a church under age.

[27 : 29] You know, I can't imagine any of the prisoners who've been granted early release by the government being asked to be kept in their cell until their sentence has been fully served.

I imagine almost every prisoner is frustrated to be there and has set their hope on the day that they are due to be set free and never have to see the prison guards again.

So for God's people, the constant presence of their prison guard, the law, reminded them of their sin and served not to make them love the prison, but to long for the day of their release when they were finally set free from their sins by the promised offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

Now, given that none of us have lived under that law, where is the payout for us? No one's harassing us, thankfully, today about getting circumcised to properly be a Christian.

If anybody is suggesting to you that adding some obscure Old Testament laws into your life will make you a real Christian or make us a real church, here Paul's reminder that those things were never what made someone a real believer.

[28 : 50] And now Christ has come. They're not useful to us anymore except to illustrate the ethics of the Ten Commandments, not to direct our lives and our worship.

But taking one step out from that, there is always a risk because of our sinful hearts that in church life we adopt a different but equally damaging set of rules of our own making.

And instead of things like circumcision and food laws, we use our own set of rules to define who really belongs to the church and who doesn't. Perish the thought, brothers and sisters, that we would ever slip into thinking that knowing all the classic psalm tunes is what makes you really part

of the church.

Or that having the privilege of having grown up in Sunday school puts you in a different class to others who didn't enjoy that privilege of a Christian upbringing. Or, and this is close to the bone for me personally, speaking Gaelic, church.

We had a good assembly this year, and yet in every single session ministers and elders stood up and chose to speak in a language that they knew half the room didn't understand.

[30 : 10] As if to imply that the free church belongs to the Gaelic world, and everyone else is tagging along. I was reflecting with somebody in the week that Bon Accord has come a long way in a relatively short space of time, in stripping back the ethnic and religious markers of belonging, in a way that has genuinely opened up the gospel for many, many more people in our city and shire to hear and believe.

That is a testament to the powerful grip of the gospel on your hearts as a church family. Early on in my time here, somebody commented to me tellingly, we're not a West Coast congregation anymore.

I wonder, was there ever a risk, perhaps, that people went away from Bon Accord thinking that they had to become a West Coast Highlander in order to become a proper Christian?

I say that tongue-in-cheek, but it's not impossible, is it? It is important that that fresh gospel air keeps blowing the cobwebs of human identity, culture, and tradition away, because those things, if we take them as our identity and impose them upon the church as boundary markers, good things though they may be in themselves, do in fact serve to imprison us and stifle the gospel rather than set us all free to rest our hope in Christ and not in our own identity, backgrounds, and traditions. Friends, we do not need more guardians of tradition. Their time is finished because Christ has come. And so, whoever we are and whatever our background, we come as equals to the church to follow Jesus Christ, not to a set of human rules and boundaries.

[32 : 22] Which is where Paul finishes his final point, verse 25. Thirdly, God sent his son to redeem us from the law by inheriting his promise. Read with me from verse 25.

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith, for as many of you who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

This morning we witnessed Annabella's baptism. One of the questions we can have about that is why baptism, not circumcision. Right?

Paul has said, no circumcision, baptism. Well, one wonderful reason among many is that whereas circumcision was mainly tied to ethnic belonging to Israel, baptism isn't.

Meaning as people are baptized into the faith, we're not taking on an ethnic Jewish identity, but a Christian identity. So when the Lord Jesus said, go and make disciples of all nations, it's very important that he didn't say circumcising them as the law commands, but instead baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[33 : 41] Because that baptism marked not only that he completed the work of redemption, but that entrance into his kingdom and church was open equally to all nations, whoever they were.

So then if we are baptized disciples of Christ, then what defines us above all is not, says Paul, whether we are Jewish or Greek, slave or free, men or women even, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Those signs and seals of his covenant, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are received by faith, are all the outward markers we need to truly belong to his people and nothing more.

And those markers do not belong to any one nation or tribe or denomination or church, but to every church where Christ is preached, clothed in the gospel, and people are taught to trust in him alone for salvation.

They are non-discriminatory signs. Because now that God has sent forth his Son to redeem us from under the law by freeing us from our sins, hear these majestic words.

[35 : 01] This is verse 3 of chapter 4. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son.

Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

We in Christ are children of the promise, children of Abraham, says Paul, indeed children of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. He took our place under the law so that we could share his status as

the Son.

By the way, that's why it speaks of us men and women as sons. Back then it was sons that inherited from their father. Jesus came to claim his promised inheritance of a kingdom and a family made up of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And so Paul is saying, if we are part of his kingdom, then we are co-heirs with Christ, of his kingdom. If our faith is in him, we now share with him the status and inheritance of the Son of God. [36:17] Not only that, but we share in the relationship of the Son within the Trinity. Paul says we have the Spirit of the Son in our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

We are adopted as children of the living God, caught up in union with Christ into the eternal love that exists within the triune Godhead eternally. In a sense, that is what our baptism into Christ says. We bear the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We belong truly to the family of the one God in three persons. And by the Holy Spirit, through faith, that becomes our lived experience, the freedom of the children of God crying out to our heavenly Father.

Now that is so far, isn't it, from the teeth-gritting exercise and the kind of white-knuckle ride that so often characterizes our lives as Christians?

How many days do we go around with a heavy sense of duty? Cycles of trying harder and failing and going back to try again harder, which is actually what living under the law felt like.

[37:37] Instead of the freedom of a child of God, knowing the smile of God and the well-done of God shining down on us. Not because we have done well or earned our way into his family, but because our trust is in his Son, who has done perfectly what we haven't, and who took away our sins and rose again to give us that right standing with God forever as a child of his.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ has done it. He's done it. And we deprive ourselves of the joy and freedom of our faith when we think that we have to rely on us to get to God instead of relying on Jesus Christ to get us to God and never let us go.

And so whoever we are, however we've come, wherever we've come from, this week, a new week, let me urge you to rest in him and not in what you can do and experience afresh or for the first time the freedom and joy and blessing and smile of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit upon you.

Let's pray that that would be our experience this week. Let's pray. Father, we long to experience life as your children day by day with the spirit of your Son in our hearts crying out to you, our Father.

Lord, free us, we pray, from our self-reliance and the thought, Lord, that we have to make our own way for Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to you, our Father, except through him.

[39:37] Help us, we pray, to abide in him, to trust him not only as the beginning of our Christian walk but the middle and the end also. Sustain us, we pray, in our faith and let us live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

This we pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.