

The Promise of Abraham

Galatians 3:6-18

Introduction

This section opens as presented in the NRSV with “Just as.” Thus showing the clear connection between the previous discussion of the Spirit and the following discussion of Abraham. The Galatians’ experience of receiving the Spirit prior to the coming of those who pressured them to embrace Jewish identity markers was evidence that the teaching of Paul’s opponents was unfounded. Paul continued his defense by showing that the Galatians experience of salvation was prefigured in the story of Abraham and was consistent with the teaching of OT scripture. Therefore, the opponent’s interpretation was wrong.

Gentiles Blessed in Abraham: 3:6-9

The statement that Abraham believed brackets these four verses. A strong case is being made to connect faith/faithfulness with righteousness or justification rather than law. The opponents may have been using Abraham as a proof text for their position. Being a child of Abraham, the father of the promise, was understandably huge to Jews (John 8:33). It is important to understand Jewish concepts of Abraham in order to understand the importance of this argument.

Some Jews of Paul’s day believed Abraham perfectly lived the Mosaic Law even before it was written. The prayer of Manasseh is thought by some to have been written in the first or second century C.E. by a Jew who was imagining what the prayer of Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:12-13) might have said. Notice its view of Abraham.

Therefore, O Lord God of the righteous, you have not appointed repentance for the righteous, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *who have not sinned against you*, but you have appointed repentance to me a sinner.

Consider also Sirach 44:19-21 (second century B.C.E.).

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory; he kept the law of the Most High, and was taken into covenant with him: he established the covenant in his flesh and when he was tested he was found faithful. Therefore the Lord assured

him by an oath that the nations would be blessed through his posterity.

Abraham was in both a physical and spiritual sense their father. Paul's opponents could point to Genesis 17 where circumcision was a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God and say you have to be circumcised to be a true child of Abraham. According to Hayes (pg. 111), Jewish writing often linked the faith of Abraham in Genesis 15 with his obedient acceptance of circumcision. Paul responded by giving a different interpretation to two texts.

Genesis 15 is an incredible text. God told Abraham not to be afraid and then repeated the promise. Abraham's immediate response was one of trust in the promise of God. The text then states that Abraham was "reckoned as righteous." It was not because of obedience or works. It was because of Abraham's trust. The following events define what that term means. This was at least one way covenants were made in the ancient world. God had already made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12) but here God "upped the ante" on his covenant with Abraham.

Animals were sacrificed and cut in half. Traditionally, all parties involved in the covenant walked between the animal halves declaring that death would be their fate if they broke the covenant. But contrary to how a covenant was normally enacted, only God walked between the sacrificed animals indicating that the fulfillment of the covenant rested solely on the shoulders (faithfulness) of God. Being declared righteous means being placed by God in covenant relationship with him.

To the Jew, Abraham's relationship to God was not only seen in Genesis 15, but this text was often linked to Genesis 22 and the offering of Isaac. Take note the themes in the above quote from Sirach. Abraham's keeping of the law is mentioned before being taken into covenant. Abraham established the covenant of circumcision (in his flesh). Abraham was found faithful when tested (sacrifice of Isaac). This is also seen in 1 Maccabees 2:52 that states, "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested (sacrifice of Isaac), and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?"

Jews viewed Abraham as an unquestionably devout Jew who kept the Mosaic Law, even before the law was written; and who, under an extreme test (Isaac), remained faithful. It was believed he was given favored status because of his devotion

(“works”) and therefore could boast. That is how the Jew typically viewed Abraham and their own relationship with God.

Paul drew a sharp contrast in verse 7 between, as the text literally reads, “the ones from faith” and “the ones from circumcision” in 2:12. So, if someone wants to be identified with Abraham, it is made possible by trusting in God’s faithfulness, as did Abraham, and not through circumcision or law keeping.

Paul’s second text is Genesis 12:1-3 where the promised was first made and the gospel was first proclaimed. It just was not yet stated how it would be worked out. Prior to circumcision, God had stated that the Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham. Paul’s interpretation is that the blessing was justification (covenant relationship) and that it would be accessed by faith (by trusting in the faithfulness of God). Hayes translates verse 9, “So faith people are blessed with the faithful Abraham.”

Relying on Faith or Relying on Law: 3:10-14

This section opens with “for” indicating that the following discussion is further explanation of verses 6-9. Paul continued his argument by drawing a contrast between those in verse 9 who rely on faith and those in verse 10 who rely on law.

There is a word in verse 10 that is often repeated. Those who rely on law are *under* a curse. In other texts in Galatians, people are spoken of as being under the power of sin (3:22), law (3:23; 4:4,5,21; 5:18), pedagogue (3:25), guardians (4:2), and the basic principles of the world (4:3). While Paul saw living under the law as a curse, Jews of his days would have seen an invitation to Gentiles to live under the law as a blessing to their lives.

Paul then quoted from Deuteronomy 27:26 to make his point. Let us go back in an attempt to understand what Paul is saying. In Exodus 19, God extended the opportunity for Israel to become his treasured possession if they agreed to the stipulations of the covenant. The people agreed (19:8). Deuteronomy is a second giving of the law to the second generation of Israel while in the plains of Moab just prior to crossing the Jordan. Again, Israel was offered the special relationship of being the people of God and charged to keep the commandments. If the people were faithful to the covenant, they would be blessed. But, there was another part of the covenant as

well. The covenant also included curses. Deuteronomy 27:26 is the last of the curses. Israel was agreeing to accept both aspects of the Covenant.

This is a difficult text because the OT relationship between God and Israel is difficult for us to unravel. Some believe the quote from Deuteronomy 27:26, which is modified by Paul, focuses on “obey *all* the things.” This view interprets Paul as proposing that to base a relationship with God on Torah required Israel to live perfect lives less they receive the curses.

Others reject the notion that Israel had to live perfect lives to fulfill Torah. It is pointed out that Israel had been given the ability to repent, to offer sacrifices, and to be atoned for on the Day of Atonement. If perfection were required, Israel of the OT would never have received any blessings. Paul wrote of himself, “as to righteousness under the Law, blameless (Phil. 3:6). Paul certainly did not live a perfect life. The intent of Torah could be fulfilled without living perfect lives.

Paul is referring to those who “are from works of law” or those whose identity comes from works of law. Paul’s opponents derived their identity from the identity markers (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath). This is in contrast to those whose identity comes from faith (3:7).

The question was whether or not a person wants to live by trusting in the faithfulness of God or by trusting in Israel’s identity markers. Paul placed such people within the covenant of Deuteronomy that included the threat of a curse. Paul was warning the Gentiles against joining the Jewish Christians that wanted them to embrace Jewish identity markers. Who wants to live within a covenant that always holds a curse over his/her head?

Paul looked to Habakkuk 2:4, which is quoted in verse 11, as the lenses through which scripture is to be read. “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” The opponents would argue from Leviticus 18:5 which states, “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; *by doing so one shall live*: I am the LORD.” Keeping the law could bring blessings, but there were always limits to those blessings. Hayes (pg. 259-260) believes Paul understood Lev. 18 as an empty promise because of the curses that were always associated with the Law. If someone wanted the fullness of God’s blessings, it would never be through law. Blessings would come some other way. For Paul, it came

through the crucified Christ. Paul's question would then be, "Do you want to live by faith in the faithful Jesus Christ and experience God's justification (covenant relationship) or live by law and always be under the threat of a curse?"

Not only did the law include curses, law could not bring justification. Law has no power to create covenant relationship. In verse 11 the phrase "is justified" is in the passive tense. It highlights the principle that justification (covenant relationship) is something God gives to a person, not something a person does in any way by his or her self. And who is it that God blesses with covenant relationship (justification), as he did with Abraham in Genesis? It is people of faith who are blessed.

But Christ has redeemed "us" (the Jew) from that curse. In the OT days there was the practice of hanging someone on a tree after being executed in order to add insult. By the time of the NT it included impaling a person for execution or crucifixion. Israel was to take the corpse down and bury it before the next day because it would defile the land. In the Deuteronomy text it is stated that the person was under God's curse. This relates the hanging on a tree to the curse of Deuteronomy 27. "Jesus entered so fully into Israel's enslaved condition that he absorbed and exhausted the curse fully in his own innocent death (Hayes, pg. 260)." This would have been a scandalous thought to Jews that the Messiah would be crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). For a Jew it would have appeared as if Jesus had received God's curse and that he was not the Messiah. Why would anyone want to go back to something that included a curse after someone had died to remove the curse?

As a result of Jesus' redemptive death, the blessings of Abraham have been opened up for the Gentiles ("we"). The fullness of the promise of Genesis 12 is now a reality and it includes the Spirit of God. Israel's exile under a law that included curses has ended, Israel has been set free, and the Gentiles have been brought into the covenant. God's ultimate goal for humanity has come. The promises come not through law but through faith just as Paul said earlier in verses 6-9.

An Analogy: 3:15-18

Here Paul compares God's covenantal promises to a human will. We are reminded that this is a worldly example and therefore should not be taken further than

Paul does. All analogies have their limitations.

God's irrevocable will is found in Genesis 12. Playing off the grammar of the text, Paul identifies the "seed" of verse 3 specifically as Jesus. He is the one true heir of the promise and is the one through whom the world will receive their portion as heirs of the promise. This will, which spoke of Jesus as the blessing to all people, takes historical precedence over the law which came four hundred years later. That law did not annul the promise, which was given directly by God (v. 17), rather than through angels and a mediator, Moses (3:19). To superimpose the law over the promise would negate the grace of the promise. Paul ends this section with the statement that "God graced Abraham through the promise." The active tense of "graced" indicates that the promise that was enacted in the past has continuing effects into the future. Hayes (p. 265) shows a great comparison between 2:21 and 3:18.

2:21 "if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing."

3:18 "if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise"

Experiencing the blessings of our salvation is a reality when we put our trust in the faithfulness of Jesus and the promise of God. The promise, just like grace, is an action on the part of God and not of our doing. Why would someone want it any other way?

Conclusion

Abraham was the one all Jews, particularly Paul's opponents, pointed to as an example of how one obtains and maintains relationship with God and receives the blessings of the covenant. They misunderstood Abraham's relationship to the promise. Abraham did not experience the blessings of the covenant because of his meritorious works. He experienced the blessings because he was graciously chosen by God and trusted in the faithfulness of God. All, Jews and Gentiles, who experience God's Messianic blessings will do so by trusting in the faithful act of God in Christ. A Christian's identity is based on union with Christ not on keeping Jewish, or any other, identity markers. Those who wanted their identity to be based on Jewish identity markers placed themselves into a covenant that included the possibility of curses.

The promise given to Abraham spoke specifically of the one seed, Jesus. The promise was given prior to the giving of the Law at Sinai and therefore supersedes Law. The inheritance does not come through law but through promise. Righteousness (covenant relationship) is not experienced through law but through trust in the faithful act of God in Christ. Law was temporary. Now that Christ (the faithful one) has come, all distinctions that categorize people have been abolished. All who are clothed with Christ are one.

Points to Be Made

1. Jews believed Abraham was blessed because of his works.
2. Abraham was chosen by God to be given the promise, and he experienced the promise because he trusted in the faithfulness of God.
3. The “law” here is primarily addressing Jewish identity markers (circumcision, Sabbath, food laws, etc).
4. The intent of law is not to justify but to address sins.
5. Law was always intended to be temporary.
6. If a Gentile were to turn to the teaching of the false teachers, they would be putting themselves under the threat of a curse.
7. Righteousness (covenant relationship) is experienced by those whose identity is based on trust in Jesus not on trust in observing identity markers.
8. The promise predated the law and is therefore superior to the law.