

Excursus on Covenants
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A. Overview

1. 3:6-14, Synchronic argument, showing superiority of faith over law because law brings a curse but faith brings blessing.
 - a) Law -> Curse
 - b) Faith -> Blessing
 - c) Therefore Faith >> Law

2. 3:15-4:7, Diachronic argument, showing superiority of promise/faith over law because they precede and follow it, respectively. Law is surrounded in the history of God's people by things related to faith, thus is only transient and not permanent. NB: The introduction of "promise" in this section resolves the semantic skewing introduced in 3:1-5 between faith (a mode of response, cf. works) and the law (the object of faith).
 - a) 3:15-22, Promise came before the law
 - b) 3:23-4:7, Faith comes after the law.
 - c) Therefore faith/promise dominates law/works.

3. 3:15-22 is distinctively the "promise" section in Galatians. The word occurs for the first time at the end of 3:14 by way of transition, occurs 6 times in this section, and elsewhere only at 3:29; 4:23, 28. Two parts:
 - a) 15-18, Law does not supercede promise.
 - b) 19-22, What does the law do? Two questions.

4. To understand 3:15-18, must understand covenants in the OT.

B. The OT covenants

1. What is a covenant?
 - a) Cf. "contract" today: a solemn agreement between two parties.
 - b) Typically between a lord and his vassal, giving the vassal certain rights in exchange for certain duties, and threatening sanctions if those duties are not fulfilled. In the Bible, we have covenants both between man and man, and between God and man. Our interest is in the latter.
 - c) In biblical covenants, emphasis on promises, thus Eph. 2:12, "covenants of promise."
 - d) Background of "mercy," "lovingkindness," which refers to faithfulness to a covenant.

2. There is a series of covenants between God and man in the OT. Restrict ourselves here to things called covenants expressly. There are many other promises from God to man that are not so

called.

- a) Adam? Gen. 2:15-17, Hos. 6:7 (but problematical: Gen. nowhere calls this a covenant).
- b) Noah, Gen. 9:8-17 (continues to this day)
- c) Patriarchal (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), below.
- d) Sinai (= "Law") Ex. 19:5,6; 24:7,8
- e) Levi, Num. 25:10-13., Jer. 33:17-22
- f) David, 2 Sam. 7:12-17; 23:5; Ps. 89:34,39; Jer. 33:17-22.
- g) New (ratified by the Lord Jesus by his death: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood..."; we are under it) Jer. 31:31-34

3. General observations:

- a) Note that these are not a linear series! Noah, for instance, continues to this day. Levi and David do not replace Sinai, while the New Covenant does. Will need this fact later.
- b) **Application:** God makes promises to man. Why should he? Just for our "consolation," Heb. 6:13-20, citing Gen. 22:17 w.r.t. Abraham. God gives his people the assurance not only of his eternal counsel by which he has unalterably planned and secured their salvation, but he also binds himself to their welfare in covenant.

4. More details on Patriarchal or Abrahamic covenant. Central passages:

- a) Gen. 12:1-3, initial call to leave Mesopotamia. Note elements: land, offspring ("great nation"), blessing to all the earth.
- b) Gen. 15, making the covenant.
 - 1) v.6, first reference to "believe" in the Bible. Emphasizes the nature of belief; another reason for associating the faithful with Abraham.
 - 2) 7-21, the covenant ceremony. Initiated proximately because of reference to the land. "Lord, I will believe the seed, but how about the land?"
 - a> v.18, "cut a covenant," referring to the sacrifice.
 - b> Dividing of the animals and walking through: reflects covenant curse. Sefire: "Just as this calf is cut in two, so may Matiel be cut in two, and may his nobles be cut in two." Cf. Jer. 34:8-20, renewal of Sinai, with cutting a calf.
 - c> Here only God walks between the halves! Abraham is not at risk. Unilateral. **Application:** God's elect cannot forfeit their salvation. It depends entirely on God, not at all on them. (Of course, there are many who think they are saved, who are in fact not; in their case they never were included in the covenant.)

- 3) Promise emphasizes the grant of territory, carefully specified as the physical land of Canaan.

c) Gen. 17, Establishing the covenant

- 1) 1-8, note "thee and thy seed"; repeated emphasis on land. In fact, the phrase quoted in Gal. 3:16, *kai tw spermati sou*, appears in Gen. only in reference to the land.
- 2) 9-14 introduces the "token" (v.11) (*tot, shmeion*) of the covenant, circumcision, which was causing so much trouble in Galatia. Other tokens:
 - a> Noah, rainbow (Gen. 9:12)
 - b> Sinai, sabbath (Ex. 31:13,17)
- 3) **Application:** God's people are to be distinctive, daily reminding both themselves and those around them that they are under covenant with God.

d) Gen. 22:17-18 brings the three blessings together in summary. Two things to note here.

- 1) The different things promised. We will come back to them later.
- 2) Note: "Because you have done this thing."
 - a> God had already promised each of these things! What does it depend on? Abraham's obedience, or God's promise? Answer: Heb. 11:17-19. What Abraham did was a manifestation of his faith in the promises. To disobey God at that point would have been to take fulfillment of the promise into his own hands, and thus not to trust God for it. God is saying, "Because you have believed what I promised you, you will in fact receive it."
 - b> **Application:** The way to receive God's promises is to trust him for them. If we try to take matters into our own hands, we forfeit the blessings! We must obey him, even when that obedience seems to deny us the very things he has promised us, for only then can we be sure of receiving them.

e) Same promise repeated to Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob:

- 1) 26:3,4
- 2) 28:13,14
- 3) In fact, the repetition to Jacob in 35:9-15 is probably what Paul has in mind in Gal. 3:17, because of the date. Abraham is 700 years before the law, but Jacob's life is 500-400

years before the law.

- 4) The important thing here to notice is not just that Abraham's descendents receive the promise, but that some of them do NOT. Isaac carries on the promise, but his brother Ishmael does not. Jacob carries on the promise, but his brother Esau does not. Thus the "seed" embodied in the promise is not purely physical. Rom. 9:6-13 draws this conclusion.
- 5) **Application:** Birth gives us no prior claim on God's blessings. You may be born in a Christian home; praise God for the chance you have to hear the gospel; for the deliverance from the more physical problems of sin. But you cannot assume that you are a believer just because your parents are. You must believe God's promises for yourself in order to receive them.

Good hymn: "Great is Thy Faithfulness" (or "The God of Abraham Praise")