God's Word is Life

GALATIANS: FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Session Two: PROMISE BEFORE LAW

Texts: Galatians 3; Genesis 15:1–6

Central Theme

God gives the inheritance through a promise. The law cannot create the life it demands, and it cannot cancel what God has promised in Christ.

We nevertheless keep trying to turn the Christian life into something we can secure by our own efforts. We may confess that grace begins it while assuming that the rest depends upon us.

Paul brings us back to the beginning:

How did you receive the Spirit?

The answer matters for every day that follows.

1. CHRIST CRUCIFIED BEFORE YOUR EYES

Paul opens chapter 3 by recalling the proclamation of Christ crucified. The Galatians had heard the cross set before them in the Gospel.

He does not send them in search of a more advanced spiritual experience. He recalls the word through which Christ had already come to them.

There are times when we assume that a familiar promise has become inadequate because our trouble has become more complicated. Surely something additional is required now.

Paul returns to the crucified Christ. The cross has not become less sufficient because the people who need it have become more confused. The Gospel is not a beginning we eventually outgrow.

2. DID YOU RECEIVE THE SPIRIT BY WORKS

The question in 3:2 is direct. Did they receive the Spirit by doing what the law required, or through hearing with faith?

Paul asks them to remember how this life came to them. The Spirit was not a reward handed over after a successful examination. They heard the Gospel.

This matters when we feel spiritually empty. Our instinct is to inspect ourselves for what has gone missing. Paul turns our ears toward the promise.

We do not possess a private reserve of spiritual life that must somehow be replenished from within. God continues to give through his word. We remain hearers because we remain people who need to receive.

3. HAVING BEGUN WITH THE SPIRIT

Then comes the sharper question. Having begun with the Spirit, are they now going to complete the work through the flesh?

The flesh here includes the religious self that wants to take over. It is quite willing to thank God for the beginning, provided it can claim responsibility for the successful conclusion.

We may recognize that arrangement in ourselves. Grace admitted us. Now our spiritual progress must justify the decision.

Paul refuses the transfer. The God who gives life has not retired from the task of sustaining it.

Our continuing need for mercy does not mean that the Christian life has failed. It means that we have not ceased to live from Christ.

4. ABRAHAM HEARD A PROMISE

Paul brings Abraham into the conversation. In Genesis 15, Abraham faces a future he cannot produce. God promises, and Abraham believes God.

The emphasis belongs on the speaker of the promise. Abraham's faith is not a remarkable inner quality that persuades God to become generous. He has a word to rely upon because God has spoken it.

We often say that faith means believing despite the evidence. Here we can say something more definite: faith takes God at his promise when it has no achievement of its own to offer as security.

Abraham does not hold the future in his hands. The God who promises holds Abraham.

5. THE PROMISE REACHES THE NATIONS

In 3:6–9, Paul insists that Abraham's blessing concerns the nations. Gentile believers are not late arrivals who must accept an inferior place in the family.

The promise reaches them through Christ.

This is an argument from Israel's Scriptures, made by a Jewish apostle. It should not become an excuse for Christians to congratulate themselves at Jewish expense. Paul is confronting an attempt to make law-observance necessary for the Gentiles' inheritance.

The question for us is whether we will let the promise create the fellowship it announces. God's generosity is often easier to praise before we discover whom it places beside us.

6. THE LAW DOES NOT ASK WHETHER WE TRIED

At 3:10–12, the law confronts us with its demand. We would prefer a more accommodating question: Did you mean well? Did you improve? Were you better than some of the other people involved?

The command to love the neighbor does not ask whether our resentment was understandable. It asks for love.

This is why our defenses eventually fail. We can explain ourselves for a very long time without becoming righteous. Explanation can help another person understand what happened. It cannot turn the injury into an act of love.

The law exposes that difference. We need more than a sympathetic account of our intentions.

7. CHRIST TAKES THE CURSE

Paul does not leave us alone with the verdict. In 3:13, Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

The cross stands where the accusation has brought us. Christ has entered the judgment from which we cannot explain our way out.

God's mercy does not require us to pretend that sin has done no damage. It reaches us precisely where that damage is real and our innocence cannot be defended.

The blessing comes through the crucified Christ. That is why the troubled conscience can stop looking for an unnoticed merit that might finally turn the argument in its favor. Its hope has been given outside that argument.

8. THE LAW CANNOT REWRITE THE PROMISE

Paul's reasoning in 3:15–18 concerns the order of God's dealings. The promise to Abraham comes before the law at Sinai. The later law cannot cancel the earlier promise and turn the inheritance into wages.

Think of what happens when a gift is followed by conditions nobody mentioned at the beginning. The recipient must now wonder whether the giver meant what was said.

Paul will not have God treated as an unreliable giver. The inheritance remains attached to the promise.

Our failure is real. So is the law's accusation. Neither gives us permission to rewrite Christ's gift as an unfinished agreement awaiting our contribution.

9. WHY THEN THE LAW

Paul asks the question in 3:19. If the inheritance comes by promise, what is the law doing?

It has a task in relation to transgression. Paul describes confinement and custody until Christ. The law brings sin into the open and closes off the illusion that we can establish our own righteousness.

But it cannot give life. That is the decisive point in 3:21.

An accurate diagnosis can be necessary and merciful. It does not, by itself, heal the patient. In the same way, the demand for love can expose the failure of love without creating the love it requires.

God must give what the command cannot produce.

10. BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST

At the end of the chapter, Paul speaks of baptism. Those baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

We spend much of life trying to find something in which we can appear before others without shame. Sometimes it is competence. Sometimes it is our good intentions. Sometimes we have worn a failure for so long that we cannot imagine being known by anything else.

Paul gives us a different word about who we are.

You belong to Christ.

Baptism places that promise where we can return to it. Our standing is not suspended upon the mood of the morning or the success of yesterday's efforts. Christ is our righteousness.

11. HEIRS ACCORDING TO PROMISE

Galatians 3:28–29 describes a fellowship in which ethnic identity, social standing, and sex do not establish different levels of access to Christ's inheritance.

The distinctions in our lives have not magically disappeared. Their power to determine whose place before God is secure has been broken.

That has consequences for the church's life. We cannot confess a common baptism while quietly making some members feel that their belonging is less complete.

Paul ends with heirs. An inheritance is received because of a relationship established by the giver. It is not a salary paid to the person who has managed to become sufficiently useful.

God gives what he promises.

CLOSING

When have you treated the Christian life as something God began but you must complete?

What can the law tell you truthfully about yourself? What can it never give you?

How does baptism answer the question of where you stand with God?

And what would change in a congregation if its members received one another first as heirs of the same promise?

Return to the promise before you turn toward the next task. Your work has a place. Your neighbor needs it. But your inheritance is already in the hands of the faithful giver.