

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

#### **“Thou SHALT!” vs. “I PROMISE”**

(Galatians 3:15-26)

Study #6

#### Introduction: Binding covenants...

Today, most of us are familiar with the word “covenant.”

When you move into a neighborhood, you may be required to agree to a neighborhood “covenant,” stipulating everything from what colors you may paint your home, to what color roofing you may install, to what kind of out-buildings you may erect, to the general appearance of your lawn.

People make a “covenant” detailing what will happen to their estate after their death. We call this a “Last Will and Testament”, but the document is a covenant, obligating the heirs to follow the deceased wishes to a “T”.

Brides and grooms enter into a covenant on the day of their wedding. Their “I dos” and “I wills” are covenant promises that they will treat each other in certain ways and that they will not treat each other in certain other ways.

There are other covenants relationships in our culture (such as real estate deals), as there have been various covenants in most cultures throughout history. Many of us here today have entered into a covenant of one form or another, at one time or another.

Today we discover that, because of our faith in Jesus Christ, God Almighty has entered into a covenant with us and that He has bound Himself to conditions and to promises about how He will deal with us.

As we explore this covenant together, we’ll see what an incredible thing it is to be able to deal with God on the basis of His awesome “I promise!”

The apostle Paul turns our thoughts to covenant relationships in Galatians 3:15.

#### Law and Promise: The Ultimate Contrast (vv. 15-22)

#### **Law Doesn’t CHANGE the Promise of God (vv. 15-18)**

*The nature of a covenant/will (v. 15)*

***[3:15] 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.***

You may have had the experience, as I have, of dealing with the Last Will and Testament of a loved one who has died. My father died in 2002, leaving behind a will that directed how his estate should be handled.

In the years before his death, Dad changed his will on several occasions - and that is a perfectly acceptable thing to do.

But his death signaled “No more changes!” At death, his will was set in stone and nothing could change the “covenant” he had set down between himself and his heirs.

For several thousand years, in both the eastern and western worlds, it has been an accepted practice that individuals give direction about how to deal with their worldly goods after their death.

My father did that, as did his father before him. And, in the ancient Roman world, wills were drawn up pretty much as they are today.

And, just as is true in 2009, so it was true in the ancient world: After the person’s death, no changes are allowed! Death puts an end to the possibility of alterations to the will/covenant.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Heb. 9:15-17 for the same thought.

Can't you just imagine how chaotic things would be if it were NOT this way when everyone gathers for the reading of the will?

- One second cousin twice removed would share his conviction that all surviving relatives should get an equal share of the estate.
- One of the two daughters believes that the will should be altered to say that she receives all the fine china settings.
- The oldest of three sons suggests an amendment that the first-born should receive double portions of all stocks and bonds.

It can't happen that way. We are bound by law to respect the wishes of the deceased that were made while he was still living.

And the point of Paul bringing up the whole matter of a human will/covenant is simply this: If a covenant made by man is unalterable, how much more is GOD'S COVENANT set in stone!

*The promise to Abraham (v. 16)*

**[3:16] Now the promises<sup>2</sup> (i.e. - the promises of God) were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds,"<sup>3</sup> as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.**

At issue, of course, is the promise God made to Abraham that he would receive a land and would have a son. That promise is made repeatedly in the book of Genesis.

At different times, either of these themes was stressed. And, while the words we read here in verse 16 were taken from Genesis 22, after Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, the promises were actually made in Genesis 12, 13, 15, 18, and 22!<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is as though Paul was looking at all of the statements and re-statements of the covenant to Abraham, and lumping them together as "the promise" since they all emphasized different aspects of the same truths (Gen. 12, 13, 15 twice, 22)

<sup>3</sup> Notice that Paul makes a major theological point from the use of a singular vs. a plural noun, which says worlds about our view of the inspiration of Scripture - even down to grammatical minutiae!

<sup>4</sup> God made covenant promises to Abraham on several different occasions over a span of twenty five plus years. The first statement of the covenant is found in Genesis 12, recording words spoken to Abraham while he was living in Chaldea (Babylon), after which he left for Canaan. The second time was in Genesis 13.

All the promises God made to Abraham were true. He would be a blessing; he would have a son; his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. Some of them were not fulfilled in his own lifetime, but they either were - or they will yet! - be fulfilled.<sup>5</sup>

God gave all of these wonderful promises to Abraham. He couched them in terms of a covenant. And Abraham believed that God would fulfill His promises. That FAITH on Abraham's part was precious to God

It was so precious that when God saw that Abraham trusted God to make good on His promises, He justified/saved Abraham on the basis of his faith. Again, Abraham was saved by faith alone in the goodness of God to fulfill His promise.

Now remember, this letter we are studying, Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, was written to believers in Jesus who had fallen into the trap of LEGALISM.

So what does the theme of legalism have to do with the way God dealt with Abraham?

Well, it seems that the Galatians had a hearing problem - and many believers since have been similarly afflicted with a selective hearing loss.

Rather than listen to the tender and empowering way God dealt with Abraham, the father of the faithful, they were listening instead to the way God spoke to Moses, the great lawgiver.

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Here, immediately after he had given the best parts of the land of Canaan to his nephew, Lot (Sodom and Gomorrah), God promised Abraham that his descendants would enjoy all the land. The third promise is found in the first part of chapter 15, right after he had voiced despair of ever having physical offspring with his wife, Sarah. In the midst of his despair, God took him outside his tent to see the stars, and promised him seed as numerous as the stars of heaven - from his own body. The final re-statement of the Promise to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 22, after he had shown himself willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on a stone altar on Mt. Moriah. At this time, Abraham was again promised seed as innumerable as the stars of heaven and the sand of the seashore.

<sup>5</sup> And, because of the way Paul writes, it is clear that Genesis 22 was looking for the **ultimate** fulfillment of the promise - not through Isaac, his son. Nor through his grandson, Jacob, or his great-grandson Judah - but through Jesus!

They were tuning in to harsh message of “*Thou shalt! Thou shalt NOT!*” and were ignoring God’s gentle, energizing “*I promise.*”

The choice before Christians in the first and the twenty-first centuries is simple. Will we listen to and be empowered by the awesome “*I promise!*” of God or labor under the terrible load of “*Thou shalt!*”?

Keep listening. Paul goes on to remind us of some biblical chronology that we all really need to know.

*The promise is not nullified by a later Law (vv. 17-18)*

***[3:17] What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later,<sup>6</sup> does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. [18] For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted<sup>7</sup> it to Abraham by means of a promise.***

#### Promise: God’s Standard Operating Procedure

According to Paul, PROMISE is God’s Standard Operating Procedure. OK - we Christians don’t have a hard time accepting that.

What may be come as a bit of a shock, though is his assertion that Promise has always been God’s Standard Operating Procedure, even back in Old Testament times, even when Moses’ Law was in effect!

The Mosaic Law was given to God’s people to regulate their lives during a particular time in the Jewish nation’s history.

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<sup>6</sup> What Paul appears to be saying (but which doesn’t seem to exactly fit with the chronology of Genesis) is that from the giving of the covenant to Abraham (Gen. 15) until the giving of the Law of Moses (Ex. 20) was 430 years. A careful reading of Genesis would indicate that it was longer than that. One commentator suggests that the 430 years refers to the time of God’s confirmation of His promise to Jacob until the giving of the Law at Sinai, but this is speculation. John Stott notes that 430 years was the actual duration of the bondage in Egypt (Ex. 12:41), and assumes that Paul meant to reference the main chronological event between Abraham and Moses - the Egyptian captivity. This is my own position.

<sup>7</sup> “Granted” emphasizes the gracious, non-commercial character of the gift - no strings attached.

They received it while they were wandering in the wilderness and it was intended to rule their lives during their stay in the land of Canaan.

Now the Mosaic Law was what we call a *bilateral* covenant. It required that both parties - God and the people - keep their end of the bargain. If either of them didn’t abide by the stipulations laid out in the covenant, the covenant could be nullified.

As we know, the Jews DID NOT abide by the requirements of the Law, which is what led God to oust them from the land of Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, the Abrahamic Covenant is what we refer to as a *unilateral* covenant. The fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham were solely dependent on the One making the covenant: God. And the actual making of the covenant is recorded immediately after Abraham was justified by faith, back in Genesis (chapter 15).

#### The making of the covenant with Abraham

After Abraham was justified by his faith in God’s promises, God spoke to him.

He commanded Abraham to bring appropriate sacrifices (calf, goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon. Abraham was to prepare them for a covenant-making ceremony, according to the custom of covenant-making in those days.<sup>9</sup>

He cut the animals in two and laid the halves opposite each other, leaving a walk-way in between.

In ancient times, the way two men entering into a covenant with each other would walk between the carcasses of the sacrificed animals, signifying a blood oath to keep their promises to each other.

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<sup>8</sup> These disruptive ousters are recorded in 2 Kings. The Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC; the Babylonians defeated the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC.

<sup>9</sup> The form of this covenant ceremony is well-attested from records of the ancient near eastern culture of Abraham’s time.

Abraham prepared the animals, no doubt fully expecting to walk through the animal halves as a way of promising to God that he would keep his end of the covenant. That's when God threw Abraham a curve.

Just as darkness was falling, God put Abraham into a deep sleep and spoke to him, re-stating (again!) the things He promised He would do for Abraham.

Then, when it was completely dark, Abraham, lying on the ground and unable to get up, watched, awake but unable to move, as something like a smoking oven passed between the animal halves - alone!<sup>10</sup>

The point to catch is that God UNILATERALLY promised that He would keep the promises he was making to Abraham regardless of what Abraham did.

Abraham didn't make a covenant with God. God made a covenant with Abraham. When the covenant was ratified, Abraham was lying down, frozen in a petrified stupor!

Well then, if Promise was such a great thing, why did God give the Law? Great question!

### **The Law is not Greater than the Promise of God (vv. 19-20)**

*[3:19] 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. [20] Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.*<sup>11</sup>

The Law of Moses fulfilled a critical role in God's program. It communicated the holiness of God. It added stability to society. It brought sin to light.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the smoking oven was a theophany - i.e. - appearance of God.

<sup>11</sup> 300 varying interpretations of this verse have been catalogued!

<sup>12</sup> The Law of Moses was inferior to the Promise for a couple of reasons. For one thing, it was *mediated*. The Law followed the track of God → angels → Moses - and then → the people (Other references to the agency of angels and the Law: Dt. 33:2; Ps. 68:17; Acts 7:32, 53; Heb. 2:2). Not so the Promise. God dealt directly with Abraham when He made the promise. And, the Law was *temporary*.

BUT, there was one thing Law was never intended to do, and one purpose it could never fulfill. It could not give life! Law can't save. It can only condemn.

It is so tempting to believe that we can work our way to God by Law, rules-keeping, and good deeds. God gave the Law to prove to us that we can't.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, though, the Law doesn't contradict Promise. Law and Promise are just designed to do totally different things.

It is not as if Law was saying, "*Here is one way to be saved.*" and Promise was saying, "*Here is another way to be saved.*" Rather, they each have their roles.

### **The Law is not Contrary to the Promise of God (vv. 21-22)**

*[3:21] 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. [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.*

Think of Law and Promise as two phases of a legal proceeding. In a trial, a defendant is tried for a crime.

The purpose of the first phase of that trial is to determine the defendant's guilt or innocence. If the defendant is found guilty, the trial moves to the second phase, the punishment phase. That's how the system works.

<sup>13</sup> Listen to the words of a man who understood something about grace, a man in whose life grace resulted in a passion for holiness. The 20th century German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who was put to death by the Nazis for his part in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler ) said, "*It is only when one submits to the law that one can speak of grace...I don't think it is Christian to want to go to the New Testament too soon and too directly.*" Another early 20th century champion of the faith, J. Gresham Machen, echoes these thoughts when he said, "*A low view of Law makes a man a legalist, a high view of Law makes a man a seeker after grace.*"

With God, the two phases - guilt and punishment - are represented by Law and Promise. With respect to the first phase, there is never a hung jury. Law always finds a person guilty. Every time. Without exception.

BUT, if any person has taken the promise of God to heart, and has placed his or her trust in the Lord Jesus who died and rose again, then the punishment phase takes an interesting twist.

In that person's case, God thunders, "*Guilty, by reason of sin, rebellion and disobedience. Punishment has been PAID IN FULL by My Son. The sinner is declared SAVED and is released to My care!*"

And with that, the Judge stands up, throws off His robes, and says, "*Welcome to the family, son! Welcome to the family, my precious daughter!*"

For those who have availed themselves of the Promise of God and have placed their trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross, there is no condemnation. Only acceptance and love. That's the Christian message. No wonder we call it "Good News"!

But, what is the status and condition of the person who has yet to place his or her faith in Jesus? Listen.

### **Before Faith in Christ: Under the Ultimate "Tutor" (vv. 23-24)**

*[3:23] But before faith<sup>14</sup> came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. [24] Therefore the Law has become our tutor<sup>15</sup> to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.*

Using a word picture drawn from life in ancient Rome, Paul describes a minor child's place in society. The child was under the care of a "tutor" (Greek - *pedagogos*; *παιδαγωγος*).

<sup>14</sup> The NASB has "faith" but we should understand Paul to mean, "the Christian faith"

<sup>15</sup> Other words from this word group in Greek include "discipline" (*παιδεια*) - Heb. 12:5, 7,8,11, and "train" (*παιδευο*) - Luke 23:16.

This tutor was more than what we think of today as a tutor, who usually only spends an hour or so with a student per week. The Roman tutor was school teacher, lawgiver, and disciplinarian all rolled into one.

In a formal but impermanent relationship, the "tutor" taught manners, escorted the child (boys only!) to and from school, tested them over materials they studied, disciplined them, scolded them, shadowed them, and directed the most minute activities of their days to ensure that they grew into responsible adults.

In ancient Rome, the "tutor" served an invaluable role with youngsters. He didn't give life (he wasn't a parent) - but he was the watchdog that regulated it! He had general charge over a child until he reached maturity.

Before a child reached maturity, he had no rights and no privileges. At the appropriate age, though, the tutor - with his rules and scoldings and disciplines - was set aside, and the child was welcomed into the adult world of responsibility and privilege.

So, why has Paul mentioned the tutor here in Galatians 3? It is to tell us that the Law served as our tutor to lead us to faith in Christ.

Here's how it worked.

Every time we got out of line, the Law said, "*Gotcha!*"

- Commit adultery, and the Law righteously says, "*You are an adulterer.*"
- Covet something that your neighbor has, and the Law screams, "*Thou shalt not covet.*"
- Tell a lie, and the Law reminds us that we have sinned by bearing false witness, while the New Testament adds, "*Speak the truth in love.*"

That "tutor" - LAW - convinced us of our need for a Savior and led us to PROMISE!

And as soon as we exercised faith in the Promise (placed our faith in Jesus), we entered spiritual adulthood and were given a mature standing before God!

## **Believing In Jesus: Enjoying the Ultimate Blessings! (vv. 25-26)**

### **No Longer Under Strict Supervision (v. 25)**

*[25] But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.*

Law still shouts, “*Gotcha*” every time we sin. But, Paul says we are no longer under that tutor. What does he mean? He must mean that now that we are full-fledged adults, with all the rights and privileges pertaining to spiritual maturity, we don’t need the watchdog of the Law telling us what to do. Now, the power that regulates our behavior comes from listening to God’s, “*I promise!*”

Put yourself in a situation of having to make a clear moral choice about something.

This might involve succumbing to a temptation to become sexually involved with a partner to whom you are not married. Maybe your temptation is all about falsifying expense records to get more tax deductions than you may legitimately claim. Or, you might be tempted to NOT love someone at a heated moment or to NOT love someone who has treated you badly.

In each case, the Law of God clearly lets us know what is required - say “No” to the sexual immorality and the IRS dodge; say “Yes” to love.

In each case, it is possible to respond to Scripture’s commands on the basis of “*Thou shalt*” or on the basis of “*I promise!*”

Listening to “*Thou shalt*” leads to this kind of thinking: “*God’s rules say that I am not to become sexually involved with anyone but my husband or my wife, so I will obey God’s rules.*”

I am not downplaying the importance of obedience (and I’ll have more to say about the importance of obedience as we close), but such a mindset can easily develop into a grudging martyr complex and doesn’t exactly entice others to want what we have.

Listening to God’s Promise, though, will lead to the same action - righteous acts - but it will arise from a different motivation, and will have a completely different effect on those who observe us.

Now, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our hearts filled with gratitude for what He has done for us, we are moved by a much more powerful motivation than simply being nagged by some “tutor.”<sup>16</sup>

We are mature sons and daughters of God who are moved to sexual purity, to financial integrity, to love, to holiness - by the power of Promise!

### **Now, We Are Sons of God Through Faith (v. 26)**

*[26] For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*<sup>17</sup>

Get this. Prior to placing your faith in Christ, you were NOT a child of God. God was NOT your Father. Now, though, through faith in Jesus, you are His son or His daughter!

Becoming a son or a daughter of God is one of the highest privileges the Gospel offers.<sup>18</sup> It is an incredible blessing to be related to God as “Father.”

Certainly, this relationship speaks of His authority in our lives. But it also speaks of His affection.

The wholesome love of the most generous human father pales in comparison to the love God pours out on His children. That love was seen most powerfully when He sent His own Son, Jesus, to die for our sins. But it is also seen today in His refusal to leave us, in His provision for our needs, and in his presence with us - often unfelt, but always promised - through the darkest valley. And it will finally be seen on the other side when He welcomes us into an eternity of fullness and joy!

Living with all of this in mind is what Paul calls living according to “*I PROMISE!*”

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<sup>16</sup> This is the meaning of Jeremiah when he speaks of a New Covenant, where God’s Law is written, not on tablets of stone, but on our hearts.

<sup>17</sup> Pastor Tony Evans tells the story of being on the phone with then Governor George W. Bush while Bush was campaigning for the presidency. In the middle of this conversation Tony’s secretary signaled to him that one of his children was on the phone. Tony Evans told George Bush that he would have to put him on hold for a minute, because family was calling.

<sup>18</sup> This thought comes from J.I. Packer’s *Knowing God*.

## Conclusion:

Only you can answer this question - Is “*Thou shalt!*” or “I promise!” motivating you to do what you are doing for Jesus? Don’t answer too quickly. Think about it. Spend some time mulling your answer.

Certainly you and I are committed to the idea that Christians should lead righteous lives. We care about obeying what the Bible commands us to do. We are not indifferent to lifestyle concerns, making godly choices, and doing the right thing.

And, in that, we are in good company. The Apostle Paul was concerned for the same things. So is the Lord!

But, our concerns for obedience must go beyond a concern that we do the right thing, follow the rules. We must also address motives.

I am convinced that motives - *WHY* we do what we do - must be considered because I think God receives more glory when we do the right thing when we are responding to Promise than when we act out of response to Law.

There are Christians who are taking their cues from the message of “*Thou shalt*” and hear the Bible’s command, “*Speak the truth in love*” - and go on to say true things in a pleasant way to their friends. But there is no heart to heart engagement and there is no power.

There are husbands who are more in tune with “*Thou shalt*” who read, “*Husbands, love your wives*” and respond by cleaning up the kitchen and helping with household chores - but the help is absent enthusiastic, soul to soul investment.

There are wives who are living on the basis of “*Thou shalt*” who read, “*Wives, be subject to your own husbands*” and respond by relating to their husbands in a way that is outwardly submissive, but is mostly grudging and mechanical.

God is interested in more than pleasant exchanges between friends, helpful husbands, and mechanically submissive wives. And the road to “MORE” is marked by “Promise!”

Here is this same man who knows his responsibility to “*speak the truth in love.*” But, focused on God’s promise, “*I will never leave you or forsake you*” he walks up to his friend, and despite his fears, and (perhaps with tears in his eyes), tells that friend something he needs to hear, but which might result in outright rejection.

Here is the same husband who is listening to God’s promise, “*I promise to forgive your sins.*” He remembers the cold, harsh treatment he received from his wife recently, and is enabled because of his focus on God’s promise to enthusiastically love her.

Here is the same wife, listening to God’s promise, “*I promise that I am for you*” now joyously giving herself to her fatally flawed husband, desperately wanting to see her strength used by God in his life.

There is something better than mechanical obedience to the commands of Scripture on the basis of that being the right thing to do!

IT IS BETTER to be overwhelmed by gratitude for what Christ has done, and to have our obedience be an outworking of that gratitude.

IT IS BETTER to obey, trusting that our Father knows exactly how to reward us for obedience, even if that reward comes after this life is over.

Obedience from hearts overflowing with gratitude comes about as a result of listening to the right message. Which message are you listening to? The message of “*Thou shalt!*”? or the liberating message of “*I Promise!*”?

It makes all the difference IN the world and TO the world!