

Lesson 6

"The Priority of the Promise"

When man makes a will, once it is ratified no feature of it can be altered either by adding to it or subtracting from it (Gal. 3:15). God made out His will and *promised* Abraham and his special "Descendant" the new earth in righteousness, and then "*confirmed*" it by the sacrifice of Christ (Gal. 3:17). [1] When God passed through the sacrificial victim, He swore to Abraham by His very life and throne to fulfill every promise He made (Gen. 15:17, 18). God's *promise* and *oath* doubly ratified the unchangeable nature of His covenant given to Abraham (Heb. 6:15-18).

According to Galatians this means there is only One person who has ever been promised eternal life and that is Christ. God didn't say the promise was to Abraham's "descendants," plural; but to his "Descendant," singular, who is Christ (Gal. 3:16). Christ is the Saviour of the world and He put everyone into Himself when He died on the cross.

God would have all men to be saved in Christ and all the legal issues have been cleared up for that to occur, but no man would be happy to walk through the Pearly Gates merely on a legal basis unless His heart was fully reconciled to God. If He hated Christ he'd look for the nearest exit (Prov. 8:36). How do we learn to love Christ? He said, "Abide in me" (John 15:4). Jesus says, Stay where I put you.

The messianic Jews in Galatia contended that God revealed a new feature at Mt. Sinai in addition to His promise to Abraham. "We" must believe in the Messiah and obey the Law which God spoke to our ancestors 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17). What was going on in Galatia was a repetition of what happened at Mt. Sinai when Israel made their old covenant promise to God to do everything just right. Ancient Israel made a "bargain" or "contract" with God.

It happened like this. God said, "If ye will obey [listen to] my voice indeed, and keep [cherish] my covenant" you will be my "peculiar treasure" on the earth (Ex. 18:5). [2] Abraham listened to God's everlasting covenant and responded with a hearty "Amen" of faith and God forgave his sin and made him righteous (Gen. 15:6). The righteousness of the unwritten law was included in God's covenant. But Abraham's children responded to God's covenant with their own pledge: "All that the LORD hath spoken *we* will do" (Ex. 19:8). Their self-motivation for entering into a "relationship" with God was abundantly clear in their old covenant promise. [3]

The Apostle Paul was the first Jew aside from Jesus to recognize the problem of the old covenant in the Israelite church and the up-and-down nature of all its historical revivals and reformations (Gal. 4:23-25). It's our problem too. "The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; ... What you need to understand is the true force of the will ... the power of decision, or of choice. ... The power of choice God has given to men." [4]

If the entrance of God's law coming 430 years after Abraham alters His covenant, then God's government would be overthrown. What was God's purpose for emphasizing the law at Mt. Sinai? "It was added [spoken] because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19). [5] At Sinai the people had self-righteously proclaimed their power to keep the law and did not realize their need of Christ. It was the great sin of self-sufficiency on their part. "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound" (Rom. 5:20). Their old covenant necessitated the "spoken" law written on tables of stone. It was never in God's original plan since He didn't have to do that for Abraham. God simply wrote His law upon Abraham's heart and mind (Heb. 10:16, 17).

Mighty doors swing on small hinges and it was on the issue of the "added" law in Galatians 3:19 that proved the hindrance for "many" to receive "the most precious message" of the uplifted Saviour during the era of the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference and following. Writing to Uriah Smith in 1896, Ellen White stated that in Galatians 3:19-24, "the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law." "An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E. J.] Waggoner and [A. T.] Jones." [6]

The leading scholars of the 1888 era were Uriah Smith, D. M. Canright, and George I. Butler. They all understood the "added law" as the ceremonial law of Moses which was done away with at the cross. They took this position because the evangelicals of their day used Galatians 3:19 as evidence that the "added law" was the ten commandments which were introduced at Mt. Sinai and abolished when Jesus died. The leading brethren believed that Jones and Waggoner's proposal of the moral law in Galatians 3 would undermine the denomination's position on the seventh-day Sabbath and the immutability of God's law.

Rather than limiting the duration of the moral law until the first advent of Christ Paul writes that it endures "... till the seed should come to whom the promise was made. ..." (Gal. 3:19). The law continues its function of revealing the knowledge of sin and driving the sinner to the Saviour until Abraham's Descendant "shall possess the gate of His

enemies" (Gen. 22:17). Christ's enemies as well as Satan are removed at the second coming (Rev. 19:11-21).

The law was contained in unwritten form in the promises that God made to Abraham. Abraham received the righteousness of the law by faith in Christ. His genuine faith manifested itself in obedience to all the commandments of God (Gen. 26:5). When Abraham had Christ he had the living law, but without Christ the law is powerless and cannot convey any life whatsoever to the sinner. All the law can bring is condemnation and death. The law describes what righteousness, love and acceptable behavior is, but it cannot produce it. Thank God the law is given to us "in the hand of a Mediator" (Gal. 2:19).

--*Paul E. Penno*