

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

GALATIANS 3:15-22.

Brethren, I speak after the manner of men: Though it be but a man's covenant, yet when it hath been confirmed, no one maketh it void, or addeth thereto. Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. Now this I say: A covenant confirmed beforehand by God, the law, which came four hundred and thirty years after, doth not disannul, so as to make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no more of promise: but God hath granted it to Abraham by promise. What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made; and it was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one; but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law. But the scripture shut up all things under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

GOD'S TESTAMENT AND PROMISE IN CHRIST

1. This is a keen, severe epistle, one that is unintelligible to the ordinary man. Because the doctrine it contains has not hitherto been employed and enforced, it has not been understood. It is also too long and rich to be treated briefly. But it is fully explained in the complete commentary on this epistle to the Galatians, where those who will may read it. The substance of it is, that here, as in the whole epistle, Paul would earnestly constrain the Christian to distinguish between the righteousness of faith and the righteousness of works or of the Law. In order that we may note to some extent the main points Paul makes in this text, we remark that he emphasizes two things. He treats first of the doctrine that we are justified by faith alone, and he maintains this, after giving many reasons and proofs, by saying in effect:

2. In this connection you should note that no one, whether Jew or gentile, is justified by works or by the Law. For the Law was given four hundred and thirty years after the promise of a Savior had been made to Abraham (who was to be the father of all the

people of God) and the assurance that all nations should be blessed in him. It was given after it had been testified of Abraham that his faith was imputed to him for righteousness. And as he was justified and received the blessing by reason of his faith, so also his children and descendants were justified and received the blessing through the same faith in that seed for whose sake the blessing had been promised to all the world. For in his dealings with the Jews and with the whole world, God always promised his grace and the forgiveness of sins (and that means to be blessed of God) even when there was as yet no Law by which they might pretend to become righteous, and before Moses was born.

3. Therefore the Law, being given to this people only after the lapse of so long a period, could not have been given to them for justification; otherwise it would have been given earlier. Or if it had been necessary for righteousness, then Abraham and his children up to that date could not have been justified at all. Indeed God designed that the Law should be given so long after Abraham. Undoubtedly he would have been able to give it to the fathers much earlier if he had seen fit to do so. Apparently he desired thereby to teach that the Law was not given to the end that God's grace and blessing should be acquired through it, but that these come from the pure mercy of God which was promised and bestowed so long before upon Abraham and those who believed.

4. Therefore Paul concludes: How could the Law produce righteousness for those who lived before Moses, since Moses was the first through whom the Law was given; and since even before his time there were holy people and people who were saved? Whence did they derive their righteousness? Certainly not from the fact that they had offered sacrifice at Jerusalem, but from the fact that they believed the Word in which God promised to bless them through the coming seed, Christ. Hence, those also who lived afterwards could not have been justified by the Law; for they did not receive the grace of God in a different way from that in which those who went before had received it. God did not annul or revoke by the Law the promise of blessing which he had made and freely bestowed without the Law.

5. Here some might desire to show their wisdom and say to Paul: Although the fathers did not have the Law of Moses, they had the same Word of God which teaches the ten commandments and which was implanted in the human heart from the beginning of the world, whence also it is called the law of nature or the natural law; and the same law was afterwards given publicly to the Jewish people and comprehended in the ten commandments. It might also be said that Moses borrowed the ten commandments from the fathers, to which Christ testifies in John 7:22. For it is certain that the fathers from the beginning taught them and urged them upon their children and descendants. With what consistency, then, does Paul conclude that the fathers were not justified by the Law because it was not given until four hundred years after Abraham's time; as if the fathers before that time had no Law?

6. To answer this question we must observe the meaning and purpose of Paul's words; for he so speaks because of the boasting of the Jews, who placed their dependence on the Law and claimed that it was given to them that they might be God's people. They considered their attempts at keeping his Law, sufficient to procure justification. Why else did God give the Law, they said, and distinguish us from all heathen peoples, if we were not thereby to be preeminent before God and more pleasing to him than they who have it not? They made so much of this boasting that they paid no respect at all to the promise of blessing in the coming seed, given to the fathers, nor thought that faith therein was necessary to their justification. Thus they practically considered it as annulled and made void, excepting for a temporal interpretation which they put upon it – that the Messiah would come and, because of their Law and piety, give to them the dominion of the world and other great rewards.

THE JEWS GOD'S PEOPLE BY PROMISE

7. To rout such vain delusions and boasts, and to show that the Jews were not justified through the Law and did not become God's children thereby, Paul cites the fact that the holy patriarchs, their fathers, were justified neither by the Law of which they boast, because it was not yet given, nor by their own deeds, whether of the natural law or the ten commandments. God had based no promise of blessing or salvation on their works. He had promised out of pure grace to give them the blessing freely (that is, to give them grace or righteousness and all eternal blessing), through the coming seed, which had been promised also to our first parents without their merit, when by their transgression they had fallen under God's wrath and condemnation. Therefore, although the fathers had a knowledge of the Law, or God's commandments, these did not help them to become righteous before God. They had to hear and apprehend by faith the promise of God, which was based not on works but only on the coming seed. For if they had been able by means of the Law or of good works to become righteous, it would have been wholly unnecessary to give the promise of blessing in Christ.

8. Now, if Abraham and the fathers could not be justified by works, and in fact were not justified by them, no more were their children and descendants justified by the Law or by works. They were justified in no other way than by faith in the promise given to Abraham and to his seed, a promise by which not only the Jews but all the heathen (through the same faith) were blessed.

9. This truth Paul now further enforces and establishes on the basis of these two particulars – God's promise, and his free grace or gift – in opposition to the boasting of the Law and our own merit. First, he makes a declaration concerning the value and weight which every testament or promise of the last will possesses. Likewise in the fourth commandment is implied an ordinance that the last will of parents should be honored by their children and heirs.

10. In regard to this subject he asserts that the rule is, if a man's testament be confirmed (and it is confirmed by his death) no man dare alter it nor add to it nor take away from it. So the jurists declare it to be a divine law that no one should break a man's last will. How much more then should God's testament be honored intact? Now, God has made a testament, which is to be his final last will; namely, that he will bless all nations through the seed which at first he promised to the fathers. This he determined upon, and assured to Abraham, and in him to all the world – to us all. And he has confirmed it by the death of this seed, his only Son, who had to become man and die (as was typified by the sacrifice of Isaac on the part of Abraham) in order that the inheritance of the blessing and eternal life might be bestowed upon us. This is God's last will. He does not desire to make any other. Therefore, no man can or dare change it or add anything to it. Now, it is adding to it, it is breaking or revoking it – since this testament has been opened and the blessing proclaimed to all the world – if anyone claims that we must first earn that blessing through the Law, proceeding as if, without the Law, this testament, by mere virtue of its promise and will, had no force at all.

11. In short, this testament, Paul concludes, is a simple promise of blessing and sonship with God. Accordingly, there is no law which we must keep in order to merit it. Here nothing avails but the will which promises saying, I will not regard your deeds, but promise the blessing – that is, grace and eternal life – to you who are found in sin and death. This I will confirm by the death of my Son, who shall merit and obtain this inheritance for you. Now, God made this testament in the first place without the Law, and has thus confirmed it; therefore, the Law, published and confirmed long afterwards, cannot take aught from it, much less annul or revoke it. And he who declares or teaches that we are to be justified by the Law – are to obtain God's blessing by it – does nothing else but interfere with God's testament and destroy and annul his last will. This is one argument of Paul, based on the word “promise,” or “testament,” and is readily understood; for no one is so stupid that he cannot distinguish between these two – law or commandment, and promise.

12. The second argument of Paul is based on the words, “God gave it to Abraham by promise.” Here also it is easy for one who is possessed of common sense to perceive there is a marked difference between receiving something as a gift and earning it. What is earned is given because of obligation and debt, as wages, and he who receives it may boast of it, rather than he who gives it, and may insist upon his right. But when something is given for nothing and, as Paul here says, is bestowed freely – out of grace – then there can be no boasting of right or of merit on the part of the recipient. On the contrary, he must praise the goodness and kindness of his benefactor. So Paul concludes: God freely gave the blessing and the inheritance to Abraham by promise. Therefore, Abraham did not earn it by his works; nor was it given to him as a reward, much less to his children.

13. It is evident enough to even a child that what is earned by works as a reward is not identical with what is promised or bestowed gratis, out of grace and pure free will. There

is a distinction between them. God has stopped the mouth of all the world and deprived it of all occasion for boasting that it has received God's grace by reason of the Law. For he promised and bestowed that as a gift, before the Law or merit through the Law had any existence. In his dealings with his own people, with Abraham and his descendants, God promised to bless the patriarch and all his race and said nothing of any law, works or reward; he based all solely on the coming seed.

14. In the faith of this promise they lived and died – Abraham himself and his children's children – till over four hundred and thirty years had elapsed. Then only did God give the Law, institute an outward form of worship, a priesthood, etc., and direct them how to live and govern themselves. They had now become a separate people, released from foreign domination, and brought into their own land, and they needed an external form of government. It was not intended that only now and by means of these gifts they should obtain forgiveness of sins and God's blessing

15. This is the substance of the first part of this epistle. In teaching how we are to be justified before God, Paul would have us distinguish well these two points, promise and law; or again, gift and reward. If we teach that God, out of pure grace, and not because of any law or merit, bestows forgiveness of sins and eternal life, the question at once presents itself: Why is the Law given, or of what use is it? Shall we not perform any good works? Why do we teach the ten commandments at all? Paul takes up this matter and asks the question, "What then is the Law?" Then he proceeds to discuss at length what is the office and use of the Law, and shows the difference between it and the Gospel. Of this enough has been said elsewhere, in other postils.

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