

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
Pastor Stephen Felker
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Galatians 3:15-24 “How to Inherit God’s Blessings”

Intro. Do you realize that God wants to bless you? Back in v.8b we see that God promised to Abraham, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” He doesn’t want you to be under the curse mentioned in v.10. He doesn’t want to deprive you of any true blessing. He is not a cosmic killjoy. He wants to bless you. And what blessings does He promise? He wants to forgive your sin, remove the guilt, and make you righteous. In v.6 Paul says, “just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’” Then, in v.18, Paul mentioned God’s promise to Abraham of an inheritance. In a literal sense, the inheritance was the land of Palestine. But that inheritance only prefigured the true & lasting inheritance of heaven. Heb. 11:10 says, “for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Then v.16 of that chapter says, “But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country...., for He has prepared a city for them.” 1 Peter 1:4 says that we are called “to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” It is a marvelous promise that the child of God can inherit heaven for all eternity.

The question is this: How has God chosen to bless us? In this passage of Scripture Paul makes a contrast between a salvation by the gracious promise of God and a salvation conditioned upon keeping the Law. In fact, in this text, the word “promise” is used 8 times and the word “Law” is used 8 times. When God chose and called Abraham, He graciously made a number of promises to him. Humanity had long been under the curse of sin, and God wanted to bring blessing to the world through Abraham.

Do you want to know how you can receive all these promised blessings, including heaven itself? Well, I want to share with you 4 steps to receiving God’s promise of heaven, righteousness, and many other blessings. First of all,

I. RECOGNIZE THE CONDEMNATION OF SIN

If you want to be blessed by God, then the first step is to acknowledge that you have sin problem, and then allow God to deal with it. Jesus is the Savior, but who is going to ask for a Savior unless they realize the need a Savior? Who is going to call out for a life preserver if they do not know they are drowning? So in vv. 19-25 Paul discusses the role of God’s Law in leading us to acknowledge our sin problem. Notice Paul’s question in v.19, “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions....” The meaning of the word “transgression” (*parabasis*) helps us to understand the purpose of the law. It refers to a person stepping beyond a fixed limit into forbidden territory. Before the law was given, the wrongdoing of man was recognized as misconduct. But when the law was given, sin was seen to be, not merely the following of human impulses, but the violation of explicit law. Though we all admit that we have “shortcomings”, we do not readily admit that our “shortcomings” have any significant consequences. We tend to make like of our sin, or deny that we have done wrong. The Bible says, “Every man’s way seems right in his own eyes.” So there must be some external standard by which men may be convinced of their sinfulness.

Back in the days of the *horseless* carriage, there was a time when there was no law

against driving an automobile right down Main Street as fast as you could go. You could go perhaps 30 M.P.H. with that engine roaring, scaring children and horses, kicking up dust, and bystanders could say, "There ought to be a law against that!" They knew it was wrong behavior, but there was no law against it. But after a while, laws were passed to regulate speed and so forth. Then, bad behavior became transgression, and rebellion against law. Even so, God's Law did not create sin; it just revealed it. The law is like a mirror that helps us to see our "dirty faces" (James 1:22-25). It doesn't create dirt; it only reveals it. It is like a magnifying glass. It does not increase the number or size of the dirty spots that defile a garment, but it makes them stand out more clearly and reveals many more of them than one is able to see with the naked eye. But the point is that the mirror or the magnifying glass cannot remove what they reveal! That's not the purpose of the law. Someone else must cleanse us of our sin.

In 2 Kings 22:8-14, 19 we see an illustration of what the law of intended to do. During a time of decline in Israel's religious life, king Josiah ordered work to be done to the temple. In the process, they found a scroll containing the Law of God. Hilkiyah the priest gave the book to Shaphan the scribe, and he read it before King Josiah. And when the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his clothes, for he realized more clearly that he and his people had sinned against God. He feared that "great is the wrath of the LORD that is aroused against us."

Now right here in our text Paul a word picture to show the terrible condition we are in due to our sin. First, through the Law we are condemned and imprisoned because of our sin. In v.22 he says, "...the Scripture has confined all under sin..." Look at v.22a, "But the Scripture has confined all under sin..." The word "confined" (*sugkleio*) literally means "locked up together."¹ Paul gives here the picture of all of mankind rounded up and locked up together in some vast prison. Such spiritual convicts are unable to break their chains, or the prison bars. On the contrary, every sin that they commit only draws tighter their bonds. The sense of being condemned is also expressed in v.22 with the words, "under sin" (*hupo harmatia*). It means that we are guilty; and it means that we are under penalties that are sure to follow. Also, in v.23 he says, "But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law..." The word translated "kept under guard" (*phroureo*) is a good translation. It pictures a prisoner who is not only behind bars, but also is watched by a guard. The law was such a jailer, whose purpose was to keep us from escaping the consciousness of our sins and our liability to punishment. The moral law filled the hearts of the Jews with a sense of guilt and inadequacy. So it should be clear that the Law does not save us; it only condemns us to prison. Furthermore, the Scriptures are clear: we reap what we sow; as we have brewed, so shall we drink; and we shall have to lie upon the beds that we have made.

Therefore, as a first step to salvation, we must acknowledge that we have sinned, and acknowledge the serious consequences of sin. One application is this: Learning and teaching God's Law is very useful in leading a person to that step in salvation. Until we have laid to heart God's message about our own personal sinfulness, we have not arrived at the place where we can in the least understand the true meaning of His Gospel, or the true work of His Son. My experience has been that when I talk to a man about the Lord and he begins to tell me how fine he is, there is nothing I can say, there is no Gospel to preach to him. But when he beats upon his chest, saying, "Lord, I am a sinful man," then there is a Gospel message for him. Only such a person will be willing to repent of sin. When you see what sin is doing to you, how can you do otherwise? And now, let's apply this truth to our own personal lives. Let's not just say all are sinful, but *I* am sinful before God. Every person must be brought to the point of confession,

¹ The 2nd word translated "kept" (*sugkleio*) in v.23 is the same word.

“Lord God, I am a sinner, in need of a Savior.”

So the Word of God shows that all are condemned by sin, shut up in prison to await the final execution of eternal judgment. Is there a way out? The answer is “Yes!” But before we will explore the right answer, I must appeal to you to take the 2nd step in the pathway to salvation:

II. REJECT LEGALISTIC RELIGION AS THE WAY OUT

Now the form of legalistic religion that Paul was dealing with was Jewish legalism, which required strict adherence to Jewish legal requirements, such as circumcision and other Old Testament laws. Now the form of legalism will vary from group to group, but the essence is the same. It is the belief that one can be right with God and overcome sin by means of diligent human effort at keeping the laws of the religious group. The problem is that the Jews began to view the law, not as a preparation for receiving salvation from the Messiah, but as a means of salvation. And that same mistake is what the Judaizers were making. Most legalists adopt part or all of the Old Testament Law as necessary for today.

So the question is this: Does obedience to the Law provide a way out of the condemnation of sin? Absolutely not! As we have seen, the Law is what sends us to prison in the first place! Then, Paul says in v.21, “Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.” This goes with 2:21, “...for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.” There was nothing wrong with the law. But the law could not grant the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. The problem is our inability to keep the law. The problem is stated in v.10, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” And when we fail, it is unable to remove sin in any genuine way. The Law only provided pictures of the Messiah’s removal of sin.

Paul gives several reasons why the covenant of Promise is to be chosen over the covenant of Law. First, the Law was only a later addition to the covenant of promise due to the purposes we have already talked about. But it does not replace or nullify the promise of blessing already given to Abraham. He says in v.17, “And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect.” He illustrates this truth from human experience. He says in v.15, “Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.” It is a matter of common knowledge that among men a last will or testament, once it is ratified and probated, cannot be nullified or changed. Then would not this be true all the more with respect to the covenant promise which the immutable Lord God made to Abraham and his seed? The God who made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants would not invalidate that covenant by adding another specification to it, namely, obedience to law.

Paul gives a second reason in v.19b, “It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.” A temporary law cannot be greater than a permanent covenant. As you can see from v.19, the importance of the law was intended to diminish after Christ's coming. He came to fulfill the law. The sacrificial system and the rituals point to Jesus, and now that He has died on the Cross & provided salvation, those laws are no longer needed. They have fulfilled their purpose, and we must move on to better things. Illustration: We can compare the role of the law in history to the role typewriters have played in the development of word processing. The technology and idea of a typewriter was eventually developed into an electronic, faster, and far more complex computer that does word processing.

But when typing on a computer, one realizes that one is still using the old manual typewriter's technology. Further, one realizes that the computer far transcends what the typewriter was. Everything that a typewriter wanted to be when it was a little boy (and more!) is now found in the computer. This compares to the law. Everything the law wanted to be when it was young (as revealed to Moses) is found now in Christ and in life in the Spirit. When the computer age arrived, we put away our manual typewriters because they belonged to the former era. Paul's critique of the Judaizers is that they are typing on manual typewriters after computers are on the desk!² Why seek salvation from Law when the fulfillment has arrived?

Then he give a third reason in vv. 19b-20, "...and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one." The law came through Moses as a mediator, and the angels were also involved in the giving of the law. But you know, when a President wishes to communicate a message which is of supreme importance, he will unburden his heart, not through the Press Secretary, but by addressing his people directly, today my means of radio or television. That's what President Bush did Tuesday night. But whereas the law came indirectly from God to His people, the promise was made to Abraham directly by God himself, even as to a friend. Then v.20 says, "Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one." The words "but God is one" means that the promise was made without an intermediary. In the covenant of law, the people were commanded not to draw near unto God. Thus, a mediator was necessary. But in the covenant of grace God invites us to draw near to receive His blessing. Salvation in Jesus Christ comes personally from God. You do not need a human priest like Aaron or an intermediary like Moses. In the new covenant, God comes so close as to live in your heart!

Not only is the covenant of Law inferior to the covenant of promise, but they are opposite as a means of salvation. Paul says in v.18, "For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise." That is why Paul anticipated the question of v.21, "Is the law then against the promises of God?" Paul's answer is, "Certainly not!" As we see in this whole text, the Law and the Promise work to the same end: salvation and blessing. They contradict as a means of salvation, but complement each other when properly understood in terms of their role.

Oh dear friend, don't be deceived by those who say that salvation is by works. I know that is the majority opinion in the religious world, but as we have seen from the Scriptures, it is the wrong way out of the prison house of sin.

What, then, is the right way to get out? Who can lift the sin burden?

III. TURN TO CHRIST AS YOUR ONLY HOPE

I mentioned earlier, the Law was given to lock us up in our sin and condemnation. Certainly, the works of the law could not set us free. Instead, the Law locked us up with only one way of escape, namely, faith in Christ. In v.24 Paul says, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ..." During the centuries of Jewish history, the Law was preparing for the coming of Christ. The demands of the law reminded the people that they needed a Savior. The types and symbols of the sacrificial system were pictures of the coming Messiah. Both the covenant of promise and the covenant of Law pointed to Christ, and were intended by God to bring people to Christ. And since there is no other way out of this prison, the way is prepared for that great message with which Jesus opened His ministry, where he proclaims liberty to the

² From Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound (Luke 4:18). He has come into the prison-house, torn the bars away, and opened the fetters, and every man may, if he will, come out into the blessed sunshine of forgiveness and freedom!

Here Paul give a word picture to illustrate the law's role in leading us to Christ. In v.24 he compares the Law to a "pedagogue," or literally a child guide. The word referred to a trusted slave who would conduct his master's children, ages 6-16, to and from school, and might, in fact, watch over their conduct throughout the day. He was an escort and a disciplinarian. Sometimes the discipline was harsh and the child would long for the day when he would be mature enough to be free of the guardian. Even so, the Jews were not *born* through the law, but rather were brought up by the law. The law did not give life to Israel; it regulated life. The work of the guardian was preparation for the child's maturity. So the law was a preparation for the nation of Israel until Christ should come. And instead of leading us to school, the Law was designed by God to lead us to Christ.

So the apparently stern treatment which God by revelation applies to the whole mass of mankind is really the tenderest beneficence, that they may the more eagerly welcome the coming of the Deliverer. Therefore, how shallow and how unfair it is to talk about evangelical Christianity as being gloomy, stern, etc. You do not call a doctor unkind because he tells an unsuspecting patient that his disease is far advanced, but offers hope for a cure. No more should a man turn away from Christianity because it speaks plain truths.

Paul argues his point that we must turn to Christ also from the Abrahamic promise itself. In v.16 he says, "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ." Now look again to v.19, "What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made...." Paul is insisting that the singular form is especially appropriate in view of the fact that the fulfillment of the promise is realized at its deepest level only in Christ. And this promise of a coming seed goes all the way back to Gen. 3:15, where the seed of the woman, a veiled reference to the virgin birth, would one day crush the head of the serpent. Heb. 1:2 says that God "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things." And only those "in Christ" can receive the blessings of the promise. Christ is the only One who can forgive you, make you righteous, and give you an eternal inheritance. In fact, 3:29 says, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Eph. 3:6 says, "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."

It is only fitting that salvation come through Christ alone. Salvation by works minimizes the work of Christ and glorifies man. Again, 2:21 says, "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain." Salvation by Law would never be the gospel of God. But the true gospel glorifies Christ as the only way of salvation.

Look to Christ, dear friend, as your only hope. Don't look to the Church. Don't look to the priest and sacraments. Don't look to your own efforts at keeping religious or moral Law. Look to Jesus! Then, and only then, can you take the last step:

IV. RECEIVE THE PROMISED BLESSINGS BY FAITH

Someone said, "The door to the human heart can be opened only from the inside" Open the door of your heart to Jesus, and He can give the blessings of forgiveness, righteousness, freedom, and eternal life in heaven.

I say “receive” because the promised blessings are graciously given by God. In v.18b Paul says, “God gave it to Abraham by promise.” The word “gave” is from *charizomai*. That is the verb form of the word “grace.” It denotes not merely a gift, but a gift that is given out of the spontaneous generosity of the giver’s heart, with no strings tied to it. This word militates against the teaching of salvation by works.

So how do we receive the blessings of salvation? It is not by works, but by faith. Paul says in v.22, “But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Here Paul emphasizes that faith is the way of salvation with his double reference to faith and belief. Then in v.24 he says, “Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” The only way to forgiveness and freedom was the way Abraham was made righteous to begin with, by faith.

We have already seen why our faith must be directed to Christ. He is the promised seed of Abraham. All blessing is wrapped up in Him. The mention of Abraham's seed shows that the benefits of the promise were not limited to Abraham, but extended to his posterity. And who are the true sons of Abraham? Who can join Abraham in inheriting the promises? Look at v. 7, “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.” Ishmael & Esau were physical descendents of Abraham, but they did not receive the blessing, for they were not men of faith. A Jew is not a true son of Abraham if he does not believe in the Messiah.

Besides the fact that Scripture plainly commands it, let me tell you why else you should seek salvation and blessing by faith in Christ. It is a character issue in reference to God. As we have seen, salvation is based on promises made to Abraham, to his promises Seed, the Messiah, and all who believe in Him. Salvation is not based on your performance, but God’s promise. The question is, “Are you going to trust God to keep his promises? Do you doubt that He will keep His promise?” Surely you would not call God a liar! Surely you can trust God, who, as Titus 1:2 says, cannot lie.

Conclusion: We have been locked up under the condemnation of sin. There is only one way out, and that is by faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In v.18 Paul mentions the promised inheritance to Abraham and His Seed, and to all who believe in the Messiah. The New Testament makes it plain that the ultimate fulfillment of the promised inheritance is heaven. The Bible teaches that there are three heavens. First of all, there is the atmospheric heaven, which is immediately above us; where the birds fly, then there are the planetary heavens; where the sun and the moon and the stars live day in and day out. And then there is what the Bible calls "the third heaven." Paul said in 2 Cor. 12, "he was caught up by the spirit into the third heaven." This is where God lives. Someone has said that we see the first heaven by day. We see the second heaven by night. We see the third heaven by faith. The only way you can live forever in a place called heaven is to put your faith in Jesus. Do it today!

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians & Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tape on this text; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944, 1973). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).