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<http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>

Personal Study of the Bible-77
Galatians 3:18 –Abrahamic unilateral vs. Mosaic bilateral covenants

Read Galatians 3:18. This verse shows the stark contrast between the bilateral promises (“inheritance”) of God that are based on the Mosaic Law/Covenant and the unilateral promises based on the Abrahamic covenant. A covenant is a means of establishing a relationship (not naturally existing), which is sanctioned by an oath sworn in a ceremony of ratification.

The two covenant relationships, Abrahamic and Mosaic, are different in both form and function. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God places Himself under oath, bound by His own irrevocable promises to Abraham and his posterity. However, in the Mosaic Covenant, Israel takes the oaths and the obligation of obedience to the covenant stipulations. In the former, it all depends upon God’s character and grace whereas in the latter it depends upon the Israelites.

It is important to understand that the writers of the New Testament assumed that their readers understood the Old Testament. Failure to understand the Old Testament references always translates to difficulty getting a *full* view of objective truth in the Word of God. Without an understanding of the Old Testament background, the believer will use his own modern framework, which may or may not include a doctrinal background. While we do need to understand doctrinal categories and background to grasp the New Testament truths, it is easy to misapply those doctrines unless one is grounded in the context, which means grounded in the Old Testament allusions. This is why it is important to read your Bible regularly to develop a full and accurate Biblical worldview.

Read the following passages for better understanding (even if you know these passages, reviewing them will bring them to new light based on what you have learned since your last reading of them) of the Old Testament background of the Mosaic Law. First, note some of the incidents immediately preceding the giving of the Mosaic Law in Exodus 19:1; 15:22-25; 17:1-7. Second, consider God’s summoning of Israel to a special relationship with Him, described by three phrases: a special possession among all peoples, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Exod. 19:3-8). Third, observe the three day period of consecration of the people as they waited for Moses to come down from the mountain (Exod. 19:9-18).

Israel was to be set apart from all other nations for God’s service just as priests were set apart from other men. As priests they had to have a quality of life commensurate with the holiness of their covenant God. Israel accepts the invitation to enter into covenant with ’Ehyeh with the solemn declaration : “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8). In Exodus 20:1-7 the covenant demands are set forth, and in 24:3-8 the covenant is ratified with a solemn ceremony. The oath is reaffirmed and given sanction by the sacrifice and sprinkling of blood, a reminder of the life-and-death importance of the covenant. In sum, Israel takes the oath and in so doing took the obligation of obedience of the covenant stipulations.

As noted above, the Abrahamic Covenant is different in form and function. The Abrahamic Covenant was based on solely God's grace, read Genesis 12:1-3. As a matter of fact, God condescends to place Himself symbolically under a curse in order to affirm to Abraham the certainty of His promises, read Genesis 15:7-17. This is the thrust of Paul's point in Galatians 3:6-18: God's unilateral grace promises to Abraham was never abrogated by the giving of the bilateral Mosaic Law some 400 years later.

One of the most important principles in this section is the distinction between the unilateral nature of grace (Abrahamic Covenant) and the bilateral nature of the Mosaic Covenant. If God's grace depended upon us as well as Him (bilateral relationship), the grace of God is negated—or in Paul's language, 'it wipes out the very nature of a grace promise.' In sum, grace and human works are mutually exclusive; there is no intermediate position between them.

In Galatians 3:18 when Paul says that God "gave" the promise to Abraham, He uses the perfect tense of the verb "to give," which points to the permanent nature of God's grace. Grace is free. There are no strings attached to grace. Furthermore, man can never improve on God's grace promise. God is always glorified by what He does in grace, not by what man does by his own efforts. No one deserves the matchless grace of God. It all depends upon God, not us. While there are several levels of understanding and applying this grace, on any level it is the most beautiful thing in the universe. With all of this in mind, what, then, was the purpose of bringing in the Mosaic Law after His grace promise to and through Abraham? This is what Paul discusses in the next section.

*In 'Ehyeh,
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