

Galatians

The Law versus the Promise

Galatians 3:15-22

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Scripture

Allen Dale Golding tells the story about when he and his wife were missionaries in the Philippines. They vacationed in Baguio City in the mountains of Northern Luzon. While there, they visited the St. Louis Silver School, where silversmiths are trained. They admired exquisite workmanship in the workshop and gift shop, and took home a souvenir—a pure silver money clip embellished with a distinctive design. Allen carried that clip for the next 24 years. One day it finally broke as he slipped a few bills into it. He then took the two pieces of the money clip back to the silver school in Baguio City. One workman, about Allen's age, asked if he could help him. Allen explained his predicament and laid the pieces in the workman's outstretched hand.

After examining the pieces for a minute or so, he looked up at him and said, "I designed this clip. I was the only one to make this design. I made all of these that were ever made."

Allen asked, "Can you fix it?"

He said, "I designed it. I made it. Of course I can fix it!"

You and I are spiritually broken. But thankfully, there is a solution. God designed us. He made us. And he is the only one who knows how to "fix us."

Let us learn how God provided a solution for our brokenness. Let us learn how God fixes us. Let us read Galatians 3:15-22:

¹⁵ Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. ¹⁶ The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. ¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with

the promise.¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

¹⁹ What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.²⁰ A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.²² But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. (Galatians 3:15-22)

Introduction

If history proves anything, it is that we seldom learn what it teaches. For example, the history of the Roman Empire shows us that sexual promiscuity and other forms of self-indulgence lead to the internal decay and eventual downfall of nations. Yet we continue to allow immorality to spread like a cancerous growth, hoping against hope that it will simply go away on its own.¹

History also points out that political power never operates in a religious vacuum. If Christianity doesn't fill the void, lawmakers and policy setters will find, or even create, another religion to take its place. This fact, however doesn't seem to motivate many Christians to enter the political arena or base their civil decisions on their faith.²

Similarly, the ruins of past civilizations stand as stark reminders that human beings are unable to perfect themselves regardless of their economic, political, educational, or religious

¹ See *Our Dance Has Turned to Death*, by Carl W. Wilson (Atlanta, GA: Renewal Publishing Co., 1979); and *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* by Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1979).

² See *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, by Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984).

achievements. And yet many people insist that their utopian dreams rest in their own hands.³

During the first century, the Judaizers failed to consider accurately the historical record concerning the way man can become righteous before God. They looked at the Mosaic Law, misunderstood its function, and declared that obedience to its commands would bring salvation. They ignored the fact that everyone stood condemned, not justified, under the law's perfect standard. They also disregarded the fact that prior to the law, God had made a promise to Abraham that was not dependent on his keeping a set of rules. Abraham was saved by believing in this promise, and we are saved by believing in God's fulfillment of this promise.

Lesson

Let's avoid the mistakes the Judaizers made and focus our thoughts on Paul's history lesson in Galatians 3:15-22. We will observe the solid, historical fact of justification by faith alone in contrast to the perilous fiction of justification by works.

I. The Historical Background

Before turning our attention to Galatians, we need to dig into the pages of history, beginning with the days of Abraham.

A. *Abraham*

Some two thousand years before the birth of Jesus, God appeared to Abraham and made a promise to him. This promise is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I

³ See *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism*, by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983); and *Unmasking the New Age*, by Douglas R. Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

On several occasions the Lord repeated his promise to Abraham. At one juncture the Lord spoke about Abraham’s *seed* (which the *NIV* has translated as “descendants” and “offspring”) in Genesis 22:17-18a: “I will surely bless you and make your *descendants* as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your *descendants* will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your *offspring* all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

The English words “descendants” and “offspring” come from the Hebrew word for “seed.” And the Hebrew word *seed* is singular, which is very important, as we shall see in a moment.

For now, the important point is that God’s promise to Abraham was unconditional. Abraham didn’t have to do anything to make it come about. By simply believing in God’s ability to fulfill his promise, Abraham was declared righteous by the Lord (see Genesis 15:1-6). And regardless of what Abraham thought or did, the promise was irrevocable. God made it, and he would bring it to pass.

B. Moses

Following Abraham’s death, the Lord continued to remind the patriarch’s descendants of his promise (see Genesis 26:3-4, 24; 28:13-15; 35:11-12).

Eventually, however, the Jewish people found themselves helplessly enslaved in Egypt. Having compassion on their plight, the Lord sent Moses to them and worked through him to deliver the people from oppression (see Exodus 1-15).

After the Exodus from Egypt, God revealed the law to Moses, demanding that the Jews make it their standard for living (20:1-31:18). Knowing they would not be able to keep it, the Lord

included a system of sacrifices designed to point to the One who would grant forgiveness to those who used it by faith.⁴

C. *Christ*

In his letter to the Galatian Christians, Paul argues that Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary set people free from the law's condemnation.

When we place our faith in Christ, we are unshackled from the curse of the law and given a new lease on life.

This is the thrust of Paul's argument in the preceding section in Galatians 3:10-14.

The Judaizers, as Chuck Swindoll says, "gagged on this gospel of grace."⁵ They could stand fitting Christ and faith into the plan of salvation but they could not do it without *also* including obedience to the law. In their minds the demands of the law superseded the promise made to Abraham. Perhaps Abraham was saved by faith, they thought, but with the initiation of the law came a new way to be made right before God. From that point on, salvation included rule keeping.

II. **An Expository Analysis**

Paul challenges the legalistic viewpoint in Galatians 3:15-22. He maintains that the promise to Abraham was not annulled by the law; rather, the law demonstrated the need for a promise.

A. *The Law Did Not Annul the Promise (3:15-18)*

First, the law did not annul the promise.

Paul begins his argument with an illustration drawn from everyday life. He says in verse 15: **"Brothers, let me take an ex-**

⁴ See "Salvation in the Old Testament," by John S. Feinberg, in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), 59-75.

⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Galatians: Letter of Liberation*, (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1987), 62.

ample from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.” This case is that of the covenant God made with Abraham.

Imagine that you have written a will that has been approved by a licensed probate attorney. In the will, you specify who will get what and when. Soon after your death, selected family members and friends gather together to hear your will read. Some are pleased by what they hear; others are surprised, disappointed, and even infuriated. The will can be contested, but no one can alter or annul its terms as long as it can be demonstrated that you had full control of your mental faculties when you made it.

Now if a human's will cannot be revised or revoked, how much more immutable or indestructible is a promise made by the eternal God?

The promise Paul has in mind is the one spoken to Abraham concerning his seed. Paul astutely observes in verse 16b: **“The Scripture (i.e. God) does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.”** From God's perspective, the ultimate fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham went beyond establishing the Jewish people in the Promised Land. It included blessing all the families of the earth, regardless of their national or racial heritage. And this blessing, this divine inheritance, is salvation by faith in *Christ*, no one else. Through him, anyone can become a spiritual descendent of Abraham, as Paul says in verse 29: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise.”

Now, how does all of this relate to the law? Paul says in verses 17-18: **“The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”**

Paul is saying that God's promise was unconditional; it came with no strings attached. So when the law was revealed and im-

plemented, it did not annul or change the promise. Both existed side by side, neither impinging on the other.

B. The Law Made the Promise Essential (3:19-22)

Second, the law made the promise essential.

Paul's conclusion raises two questions: one regards the law's purpose, and the other concerns the law's possible conflict with the Abrahamic promise.

1. What, then, was the purpose of the law? (3:19-20)

The first question is in verse 19a, **“What, then, was the purpose of the law?”**

If the law did not affect the promise, why was it given? We needed it, Paul says, **“. . . because of transgressions”** (v. 19b).

Before the law was given, our court of appeal for right and wrong was our own conscience (see Romans 2:14-15). And the judgments of our conscience were relatively easy to ignore or explain away.

But the law clearly defined what was moral and immoral, godly and ungodly. Sin was no longer a matter of human opinion, but a divinely established fact. Now we knew we were transgressors of God's righteous standard, not simply offenders of human law (compare Romans 3:20; 4:15; 7:7).

Put briefly, the purpose of the Mosaic Law was not to provide salvation but to convince us of our need for salvation.

If we ever doubt that we are sinners, all we have to do is look at the Old Testament law and start checking off the commands we have broken. It won't take long before we realize that we are sinners in need of the Savior.

Paul adds that the law came to the Jewish people third hand: from God to angels to Moses, the mediator to the people. See verse 19b: **“The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.”**

Verse 20 is difficult to interpret: **“A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.”** It seems that what Paul is saying is that God did not use a mediator in giving the promise of salvation to Abraham. He gave the promise of salvation directly to Abraham himself. It was unilateral and unconditional; unlike the law, which was mediated and dependent on man’s obedience.⁶

Therefore, the promise was superior to the law—the law served the promise and not vice versa.

2. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? (3:21-22)

The second question in verse 21a: **“Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?”**

Does the gospel oppose or contradict the Law of Moses? **“Absolutely not!”** says the apostle Paul, **“For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe”** (vv. 21b-22).

On a purely hypothetical level, if God had given a law by which people could be saved, then people could have been made righteous on the basis of that law.

But God never gave such a law. Instead he revealed an ethical standard that exposed people’s sin and their inability to obey the Lord completely. This law actually drove them to the promise of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

Seen in this light, the law was actually an expression of God’s grace, pointing the way to the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in Christ.

⁶ See “Galatians,” by James Montgomery Boice, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), vol. 10, 465.

III. The Practical Significance

We come now to the most important part of the study. It would be a mistake if we allowed this tightly woven historical and theological argument to remain on the pages of Scripture. Let's cut it out and apply it to our lives.

A. *The Promise of Grace Is Not Altered by the Demands of the Law*

First, the promise of grace is not altered by the demands of the law.

The law shouts at us, "Judged! Guilty! Condemned!"

The promise on the other hand proclaims, "This is the way to complete forgiveness and full reconciliation with God."

Do you realize that apart from Christ you stand convicted as a sinner and doomed to damnation? You cannot please God on your own: you can only incite his wrath. Yet this fact does not harm his plan of salvation in any way. In fact, it shows how desperately you need to drink of his redemptive grace, if you haven't already.

Do you want to move from being under the law and therefore under judgment and condemnation? You must not look to the law. You cannot fulfill the law's demands, no matter how hard you try. You must look to the promise. You must attach yourself to Christ who alone can and has met the demands the law.

B. *The Greater the Demands of Condemnation, the Sweeter the Promise of Salvation*

Second, the greater the demands of condemnation, the sweeter the promise of salvation.

You will never fully appreciate the gospel of grace until you have seen yourself against the backdrop of the law.

My favorite commentator, John Stott, says,

Not until the law has bruised and smitten us will we admit our need of the gospel to bind up our wounds. Not until the law has arrested and imprisoned us will we pine for Christ to set us free. Not until the law has condemned and killed us will we call upon Christ for justification and life. Not until the law has driven us to despair of ourselves will we ever believe in Jesus. Not until the law has humbled us even to hell will we turn to the gospel to raise us to heaven.⁷

Conclusion

Take some time this week to read the law.

Read the Ten Commandments (found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) or read any other part of God's Moral Law (such as is found in the book of Deuteronomy). Pay particular attention to its emphasis on perfection, holiness, and total obedience. See how you stack up against God's law.

Then, as the guilt and condemnation mounts, remember the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise: God's richest blessings are available to you through Jesus Christ. Put your trust in Jesus Christ. Ask him to grant you pardon, forgiveness and eternal life. Tell him that you are abandoning your efforts at working your way to heaven by your own self-righteousness and that you are submitting yourself to him and to his perfect righteousness.

When you do that, you will discover that it is the promise and not the law which brings eternal life. Amen.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 93.

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equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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