

March 30, 2014  
Community Baptist Church  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Galatians  
643 South Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study Galatians 3:15-20.

1. What promises did Paul refer to when he said they were made to Abraham and to his offspring?
2. What difference does it make if the word *offspring* is plural or singular?
3. Why did God add the law?
4. Who is the *offspring* who was to come, and what difference would his coming make?

### WHY DO WE NEED GOD'S LAW? **Galatians 3:15-20**

The gist of Paul's argument to the Christians in Galatia is that God will never declare anyone justified because they have been able to keep His law. Okay, if no one will ever gain justification by keeping God's law, what's the point of God's law? Or we wonder, if Jesus Christ fulfilled the law, why is it still hanging around bothering us? If Christ took the curse of the law for us, why didn't God get rid of it?

Some people think that God did get rid of the law when Jesus Christ came to fulfill it. They do not take to heart Christ's instruction when He said that He did not come to destroy the law but to bring it to completion. People like that claim that God has declared them to be justified, but they live contrary to the character of God's law.

So what is the balance? Does the law have a purpose in twenty-first century living? If keeping it is impossible, why did God give it? Is it possible that living by faith and living by the law are just two different ways of getting to heaven?

### **God's Law Does Not Void His Promise (vv.15-18).**

"Let me illustrate," Paul said to the Christians in Galatia. He chose a human example, with which they were familiar, with which we too are familiar, in order to explain the problem created by yielding to the desire to keep the law to gain salvation (vv.15-16). The teacher illustrated how a covenant cannot be changed once it is ratified. *To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified (v.15).*

In the previous five verses, Paul appealed to four different passages of the Old Testament to prove that God intends for people who are justified to live by faith. Now Paul appeals to an example from everyday life—covenants cannot be annulled or changed on a whim. It is important to note that as Paul began this illustration, he addressed the Christians as "brothers." That is a common designation we still use today to refer to fellow-Christians, a term that also includes "sisters." In this case, the "brothers" are the same people Paul earlier called "non-thinking Galatians" (3:1). What a great reminder that in human relationships there will always be movement from one extreme to the other. Because someone needs to admonish us for making foolish decisions does not mean they no longer love us as brothers. Yet a selfish, immature, non-Spirit led, professing Christian almost always takes umbrage at a sincere brother like Paul calling them "non-thinking." Self-centered people will always be put off by Christians like Paul.

In reference to his illustration, Paul argued, "even though it is just a human covenant" as contrasted with the covenants that God makes. His point is that though our common covenants carry only human authority still such a covenant cannot be changed once it has been ratified. This conclusion rightly causes us to ask a probing question. Can we not make changes to "wills" or covenants? The citizens of the Roman Empire in Paul's day certainly changed

covenants. So we are not sure what kind of covenant Paul had in mind here. One commentator (E. Brammel) points out that there was a unique kind of covenant (a Jewish inheritance law) in the Jewish community in which once the two parties agreed to the terms and it was ratified, neither party could change it. It appears that such a covenant was at issue in Jesus' story of the prodigal son where the father gave the rebellious son his inheritance and thereafter even the father could not change the terms of the covenant.

Whatever the example might be, Paul's argument is that once we ratify a covenant, it doesn't change. Therefore (and this is the thrust of the matter), the promises God gave to Abraham will not change. *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ* (v.16). One of those promises God gave Abraham is "the just shall live by faith," which promise Paul had just unpacked (3:10-14). But it seems obvious that Paul had a different promise from God in mind here. Notice that he spoke of "*promises*" in the plural. Therefore, he is drawing his conclusions on the basis of the promise that God would bless the entire world through Abraham's seed. God repeated this promise, which would explain the plural form. Also, within the one promise there are various aspects of the promise.

While God's promise is multi-faceted, it has to do with only one *Seed*. Paul emphasized the fact that God's promise to Abraham was about Abraham's *Seed* not *seeds* as the original promise would seem to indicate. The Greek term *seed* like the Hebrew term *seed* has the same form whether singular or plural. It is much like the English term *seed* can be used to refer to one of your children or all of your children.

So Abraham's *Seed* actually has ramifications all the way back to the beginning of creation and the first promise of Christ. When God leveled the curse against sin, He also issued the first promise of Christ in the term *Seed*. God said, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring [plural or singular?]; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel*" (Genesis 3:15). The singular pronouns *He* and *His* explain for us that the word *offspring* or *seed* is indeed singular. Therefore, it is fitting for Paul to conclude to the Corinthian Christians regarding that

Seed Jesus Christ: *For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory* (2 Corinthians 1:20).

From the moment sin entered God's perfect creation, it was obvious that all the promises of redemption would be built on and find fulfillment in Christ, the *Seed* of Abraham and the *Seed* of Mary. Specifically that promise came down to the cross. The finished work of Christ on the cross where He would pay the redemption price for sinners was determined in eternity before time, before creation, before Satan or Adam or sin. Our names were written in the book of life before creation on the basis of the Sacrificed Lamb's work. John heard the angel explain, *And all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain* (Revelation 13:8).

Therefore, every sinner saved before the cross looked forward in faith to the promise of Abraham's *Seed*, and every sinner saved since the cross looks back in faith to the finished work of the promised *Seed* of Abraham. That was God's covenant with Abraham and nothing can annul it or change it. Not even another of God's covenants—like the law—can change God's promise to Abraham.

In verses seventeen and eighteen, Paul applied the truth the example illustrated. God's law does not change God's promises. *This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void* (v.17). God gave a universal, eternal promise to Abraham. God did that when He called Abraham to trust Him and follow Him. He promised, "*I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3). Again after Abraham obeyed God by being willing to sacrifice Isaac God promised, "*And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice*" (Genesis 22:18).

The promise focused on the coming of Christ, the Lamb God Himself provides to pay the redemption price for sin. It was in the setting where God repeated this promise that Abraham concluded, "*God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*" *So they went both of them together* (Genesis 22:8). No wonder,

*Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided” (Genesis 22:14).* Obviously, Abraham saw through the glass darkly that God would provide the sacrifice for sins on Mt. Moriah (Jerusalem), and that Lamb would be from Abraham’s lineage (seed). Abraham trusted God’s promise and God declared him justified.

Then 430 years later God gave the law through Moses. The law contains many rules and stipulations that help God’s creation understand His holy character. God gave the law to the new nation He formed. It was the nation that God promised would grow out of Abraham’s *seed* (plural), when He told him, *“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God”* (Genesis 17:7-8).

The false teachers in Paul’s day taught that salvation by faith in Christ’s finished work on the cross is brought to completion by keeping some of the details of that law that God gave through Moses 430 after He declared Abraham “justified” because of his faith. Obviously that idea creates a problem. How can that work, since the attempt to achieve justification by keeping the law changes God’s promise? That is what Paul concluded. *For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise* (v.18).

Keeping the law and trusting God’s promise are mutually incompatible means by which to receive the *inheritance*. The inheritance for the nation of Israel was the Promised Land, and the eternal King—Christ. Paul has already narrowed down the inheritance in this argument to be Christ and all the blessing that comes with Christ. God gave that inheritance to Abraham (and by extension to us also) by a promise. The verb gave means, “having already graciously given.” It is a very beneficial act that God has done in the past which has continuing results in our lives. In other words, receiving the inheritance of salvation in Christ is due to the promise of everlasting life that God already gave. The promise is

completed and cannot be changed or annulled. Our responsibility is to trust what God has already given to us.

Okay, that is really wonderful. But, we do pause to wonder about the purpose of the law then.

### **Since We Have God’s Promise, Why Do We Need His Law (vv.19-20).**

God gave the law because of sin. In fact our father’s transgression required law. *Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions* (v.19a). That is an expected question after what Paul has just taught about God’s promise in Christ. So is it true, as many of our peers believe, that the law is out of date or no longer valid? What is the purpose of the law anyway? If salvation has always been by faith, not by doing works of the law, and if Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, why do we need the law?

Paul answered those questions in this verse. God added the law because of “stepping over God’s boundaries.” That is what “transgression” means. Does it matter if God’s created beings do not live according to His person or character? According to the law, “Yes.” How do you know where God’s boundaries are? The law defines them. How do you know what God’s standard is? The law tells us. What constitutes sin? Read the law. Or as someone argued the other day, “Living together out of wedlock is not the same as adultery.” Better check the law on that one.

God added the law so that everyone will know that he or she is transgressed God’s parameters. God gave the law not only so that we can identify transgression (consider the simplicity of the Big 10), but also so that we can know the depth or extremity of our offense against our Holy Creator. God set down very detailed rules that no one can keep consistently. He did not do that because He is unkind or because He is unfair. He loves us so much that He desires for us to understand, on a small scale, how unrighteous we really are. The law of Moses is simply a detailed expression of God’s moral law that is as eternal as He is.

That law, which preceded God’s promise to Abraham, is always intended to demonstrate how sinful we are. Martin Luther concluded,

“The chief and proper use of the law is its provocative function, actually to increase transgressions, to make a terrible situation even more desperate, and thus to reveal to human beings their sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.” God added the law to serve as a magnifying glass.

Why would God give us something that is condemning but not redemptive? It is in force because the law must remain in place until the offspring comes. *Until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made* (v.19b). What does that mean? God’s law is not bad or even deficient to accomplish what God intended for it to accomplish, that is, conviction of sin. But the law is unable to accomplish the promise of eternal life. Only the “Seed” (offspring) is able to carry out what the promise promised. The redemption of creation rises or falls on the coming of Christ to fulfill the demands of the law. The whole creation, sitting in need of redemption, waited for the promised Christ to fulfill the promise of God. Now because of Christ’s work, the promise of eternal life is available to all who will believe Him and guaranteed to all who do believe. John put it like this, *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). Grace and truth (the elements of God’s promise) are superior to law.

Finally, Paul argued that even the giving of the promise is superior to the giving of the law. God established His law through an intermediary. He put it in place through angels and . . . someone (?) (v.19c). As Paul put it, *and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary* (v.19c). In some way that is not at all clear to us—angels participated in the giving of the law. Stephen pointed out that an angel spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:38), though the story in Exodus 19 doesn’t mention such activity specifically. The writer to the Hebrew Christians mentioned angels in connection with giving the law by writing, *For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution* (Hebrews 2:2).

Apparently, based on these statements, angels were involved in giving the law to Moses who himself stood between the people and God. He was the intermediary Paul referred to here. The intermediary was like an attorney in our culture who stands between the judge and

the plaintiff. For Moses to serve in that capacity was God’s choice and plan. However, regarding the promise God gave to Abraham about Christ’s work in redemption, it was different.

With the Abraham promise, there was no intermediary because God is one. *Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one* (v.20). As in the case of Moses, there was at the very least, God who gave the law, Moses who received the law, and then in turn gave it to the people. That was definitely what Paul called *more than one*. In the case of God’s promise to Abraham, God worked as one. God Himself gave the promise to Abraham, which is also the promise to every sinner that we find blessing in Christ the *Seed*. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit work as one to bring us eternal life. The “One” is superior to the law mediated through Moses.

Why choose second best? There are folks in life who truly believe that cheaper is better. I am not one of those people. I always try to get the best I can get with the money I have to spend. Which is not the same as spending more than I have to get the best. Sadly, it is also true in the matter of salvation that the majority of people pick a second-rate facsimile of the genuine promise. Most people prefer to grasp after a salvation that depends on their works of keeping the law, their ability to pray more, believe harder, read their Bible enough, and do nice things to other people. All of those works are good, and to be expected, BECAUSE we are saved, not as a means to become saved. Working ourselves to exhaustion in an effort to force God to love us is to choose second best or worse.