

New Covenant Theology



Comparing and Contrasting the Covenants

- Last time, we covered **Galatians 3:1-14** where:
 - Paul reminds the Galatians' that salvation is by ***faith, not law keeping.***
 - Paul then points out that the salvation of many nations (in the New Covenant) is a fulfillment of promises that God made to Abraham (in the Abrahamic Covenant).
- This week we will begin looking at **Galatians 3:15-26** which describes the relationship between ***three*** covenants:
 - The Abrahamic Covenant
 - The Law of Moses (and the Old Covenant)
 - Christ (and the New Covenant)

Galatians 3:15-25

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Galatians 3:15-25 (continued)

²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Relationship Between Three Covenants (Galatians 3:15-26)

Today's text breaks up into roughly ***two*** major sections:

- **3:15-18** – The Abrahamic Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in Christ (and the New Covenant) without any interference or help from the Law of Moses.
- **3:19-26** – The Law of Moses:
 - Came **between**
 - The Abrahamic Covenant
 - And its fulfillment in the New Covenant
 - Served a **valuable purpose**
 - **But it was temporary**

Galatians 3:15

¹⁵ 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.

- Paul begins with a “*human example*” or, as the NIV translates it: “*an example from everyday life*”.
- Scholars who have studied this passage have had difficulty identifying the historic legal practice that Paul had in mind when he gave this example.
- But ***fortunately*** for us, the ***point*** that Paul is making with this example *is* quite ***clear***, even if we’re not exactly sure how it fits in with the legal practices of his day.
- Paul will tell us what his point is in using this “*human example*” when he gets to verse 17.

Galatians 3:16

¹⁶ 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.

- We see here Paul's first use of the word "*promise(s)*" – a key word that he continues using throughout this section of the letter (vss. 17, 18, 19, 21, 22 and 29) to refer to the **content** of the Abrahamic Covenant.
- Paul points out that the word "*offspring*" (Greek: *sperma*), used throughout the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, is **singular** and argues, therefore, that it refers to **one** man, namely **Christ**, as the recipient of God's promise to Abraham.
- Later on in this text (verse 29), Paul speaks of those who **belong** to Christ as **also** being "*Abraham's offspring* [*sperma*], *heirs according to promise*"
- Paul's point here seems to be that though Abraham has many physical and spiritual offspring, Christ is the **true** offspring of Abraham in whom the promises to Abraham are **ultimately** fulfilled.

Galatians 3:17

¹⁵ 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... ¹⁷ 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.

- Here we see that the point Paul wanted us to get from his “*human example*” of a “*man-made covenant*” (in verse 15) is that the giving of the Law (and establishment of the Mosaic Covenant) did not invalidate the promise(s) given in the Abrahamic Covenant some “*430 years*” earlier.
- Jewish tradition, remember, viewed Abraham as having kept the entire Mosaic law even though that law was not given until much later.
- But Paul insists that the Law of Moses did not add to, or take away from, *anything* that God had already done in his covenant with Abraham.

Galatians 3:18

¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

- *F.F. Bruce makes the following comment concerning Paul's introduction of the word "*inheritance*" here:
 - *The inheritance has been implied in vss. 15-17: promises made with regard to a man's descendants involve the principle of inheritance.*
 - *If the inheritance of Abraham's descendants were based on law – more specifically the Mosaic law – then it would belong to the **people of the law**, i.e. the Jewish nation.*
 - *But if it were it is based on the **promise** made to Abraham, generations **before** the giving of the law, then the law cannot affect it. It belongs to the **people of faith** who, whether of Gentile or Jewish birth, are the **true children of Abraham.***

* *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Galatians, 1982, p.174*

Galatians 3:18

¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

- And indeed, as Paul says here, “*God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*”
- “*Promise*” and “*law*” are mutually exclusive categories when it comes to being accepted by God.
- And so this verse very closely resembles the arguments Paul made in **3:6-14** where he draws a ***sharp contrast*** between those “*who rely on works of the law*” and “*those who are of faith*” – and notes that “*the law is not of faith*”.
- Paul is ***radically*** opposed to any mingling of God’s promise and grace with the Mosaic law.

Galatians 3:19-22

In the next four verses, **Galatians 3:19-22**, Paul raises and answers **two** questions about the Law that might naturally arise in the mind of his readers because of the things he said up to this point about the Law:

- **Question # 1 - What, then, was the *purpose* of the law?** If the Law was only temporary and didn't save – why did God give it? (**vss. 19-20**)
- **Question # 2 - Is the law *opposed* to the promises of God?** Since the Law and the Promise are separate and distinct from one another, does this mean that the Law is somehow opposed to or in competition with the promises of God? (**vss. 21-22**)

Galatians 3:19-20

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

- In my opinion, one of the most cryptic phrases in these two verses is where Paul tells us that the law was added “*because of transgressions*”. Various interpretations have been suggested by scholars:
 - To restrain transgressions, that is, to keep a hedge around Israel, separating them from the rest of the nations
 - To arouse conviction and the need of a savior
 - To increase the sinfulness of sin by turning sins into transgressions
- Though each of these answers has an element of truth to it, I believe the last one fits best in this context.
- Particularly in light of what Paul tells us about the Law in the book of Romans:
 - *For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression* (Romans 4:15)
 - *Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more* (Romans 5:20)

Galatians 3:19-20

- **Question #1: What, then, was the purpose of the law?**
 - *It was added* – 430 years later, and is therefore clearly distinct from and not needed by the Abrahamic Covenant
 - ~~because of~~ [to multiply] *transgressions* – once the Law was given, the sins that men committed became the conscious disobedience of definite commands (cf. Rom 4:15; 5:20). By turning sins into transgressions, the Law intensified the awareness of sin, and the need for a Savior.
 - *until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made* – the Law was **temporary** – to be in effect **only until** the coming of Christ, the ultimate offspring.
 - *it was put in place through angels* – though Exodus does not mention it, apparently angels had a part in the giving of the Law (cf. Acts 7:53; Heb 2:2)
 - *by an intermediary* – a reference to Moses
 - *Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one* – Unlike the Law which required intermediaries (the angels and Moses), the covenant with Abraham was given **directly** by God.

Questions

- Do you feel like you have a pretty good understanding of the things we covered so far in Galatians 3:15-20?
- If not, are there some specific things that I can try to clear up for you?