

The Church of the Servant King

www.cotsk.org

Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

(SB_Galatians_Lsn6_Chapter 3B)

We find ourselves in a section of Scripture in which Paul is addressing the issue of justification through faith and not works. It is helpful as we begin this study to outline Paul’s argument and review the context of chapter 3:15-24 that is the subject of this study.

- Justification is through faith, not works (3:1-4:7)
 - The doctrinal issue is introduced (3:1-5)
 - The doctrinal argument is developed & illustrated – the faith of Abraham vs. the Law (3:6-4:7)
 - Illustration #1 – the faith of Abraham vs. the curse of the Law (3:6-14)
 - Illustration #2 – the covenant of faith vs. the Law of works (3:15-25)
 - Illustration #3 – the heirs of faith are free vs. the heirs of the Law are in bondage (3:26-4:7)

Therefore, we continue in our analysis of Paul’s logical development of thought as he defends the doctrine of justification through faith and he attacks distortions of this vital doctrine that always include some form of effort from man. Let’s examine Paul’s illustrations #2 and #3 which he uses to defend the doctrine.

- Illustration #2 – The Covenant of Faith vs. the Law of Works (3:15-25)

15 Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man’s covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. **16** Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ. **17** What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. **18** For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. **19** Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. **20** Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. **21** Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. **22** But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.¹

The flow of Paul’s argument in these verses may be a little difficult to follow. The central point with which he is dealing is simply that when a contract is made by God with man, any subsequent relations between God and man do not nullify the contract – they only insure that the provisions of the contract will remain in tact and be fulfilled.

God entered into covenant relationship with Abraham over 400 years prior to the Mosaic Law. The promises associated with that covenant that were accepted in faith by Abraham were not later nullified by the Mosaic Law. The Law was simply designed to insure the fulfillment of the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

covenant promises. Essential to the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promise made to Abraham was the coming of the promised seed – the promised deliverer and redeemer Jesus Christ.

Let's exegete this passage in more detail – In verse 15, Paul launches his argument by establishing the basis for an analogy. In Abraham's time, an oath, covenant or contract was confirmed by a ceremony in which animals were cut into two parts along the backbone and placed in two rows, with the rows facing each other across a space between them. The parties to the oath walked between the parts and repeated their promises. The solemnity of the vow or contract was highlighted by the blood of the animal. It was as if each party was acknowledging to the other something to the effect – "May the same be done to me if I do not fulfill my obligations under the oath."

This same ceremony was enacted between God and Abraham in Genesis 15 where what is known as the Abrahamic Covenant was officially ratified. However, there was one major difference – only Yahweh passed between the two halves of the animal. This signified that He alone guaranteed the fulfillment of the promises since there could be no higher authority. His integrity could not be trumped by Abraham or any other creature. This is why the Abrahamic covenant and the three amplifications of the Abrahamic covenant (i.e. the Land or Palestinian, the Davidic, and the New) are called unilateral covenants (or sometimes "unconditional" covenants).

The author of Hebrews captures this sense of the covenant by saying, "For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU, AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU." 15 And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise." (Heb 6:13-15). Paul establishes this idea as the foundation for his illustration.

In verses 16-17, Paul makes a point to clarify the recipient of the promise. The covenant or promise God made with Abraham was not intended to be directed at Abraham's immediate descendants or "seed" thereby creating a scenario in which the fulfillment would have occurred prior to the giving of the Law. If that were the case, then the Law would have indeed inaugurated a new era of God's dealings with man. This would have indeed allowed the Law to be taken out of context – the exact problem of the Judaizers.

The covenant with Abraham was not fulfilled in the period before the giving of the law – the period between Abraham and Moses.² The promise of the "seed" (per Paul's explanation here) that was included in God's covenant with Abraham was a reference to the coming Redeemer, the Messiah Who was and is Jesus. It is through Jesus that the ultimate fulfillment of all covenant blessings will come and be administered. Consequently, God's blessing of justification by grace through faith spans the ages; and the law, whatever else one might think of it, must be seen to have served only an interim function. The Law could neither add to nor subtract from God's first and only way of salvation. Justification is by grace through faith alone in God's promised Redeemer – the promised "seed" of Abraham.

² The 430 years that Paul mentions is taken from Exodus 12:40 and is a reference to the period of time that Israel was in Egypt before the Exodus, not necessarily the period between Abraham and Moses. Paul's point is to emphasize historical sequence, not necessarily chronological accuracy. The Mosaic Law was put into effect after Abraham and even after the period of subjugation in Egypt. The Law which was put in force at the end of those centuries could not override or annul the covenant of God with Abraham.

THE FOUR SEEDS OF ABRAHAM IN SCRIPTURE³
<p>Natural Seed All physical descendants of Abraham Genesis 12:1-3, 7; et al.</p>
<p>Natural-Spiritual Seed Believing physical descendants of Abraham Isaiah 41:8; Romans 9:6, 8; Galatians 6:16</p>
<p>Spiritual Seed Believing non-physical descendants of Abraham Galatians 3:6-9, 29</p>
<p>Ultimate Seed Jesus Christ Galatians 3:16; Hebrews 2:16-17</p>

In verse 18, Paul reiterates and summarizes his point using slightly different emphasis. He highlights the fact that the Law and the promise are two antithetical principles. They can be neither co-mingled or combined. Paul uses the perfect tense of the Greek word *kecharistai* () translated “gave.” God “gave” a gift that is permanent and the act of giving has results that continue forever in the gift. This Greek word is also a derivative of the Greek word for grace (*charis*), thus emphasizing the free nature of the gift. Paul’s readers who were much more familiar with the nuances of the Greek language on a day-to-day basis would not have missed the point. The point – God saved Abraham based upon his faith in the promise, an embodiment of God’s very essence, not the Law, a performance, works-based system designed to support the ultimate fulfillment of the promise through the promised Redeemer “seed.”

Then What Was the Purpose of the Law? Paul addresses the obvious question that arises as a result of his analysis. In reality, he has already provided an answer to this question. The purpose of the Law was to insure the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant of God with Abraham. However, Paul senses the necessity to address this question in more depth.

19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. 20 Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. 21 Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. 22 But the Scripture

³ Taken from Dr. Thomas Constable, “Notes on the Book of Galatians,” www.soniclight.com

has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. **23** But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. **24** Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. **25** But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (Gal 3:19-25)

The Law was designed to clarify the issue of sin, transgression and man's need of a Redeemer until that promised Redeemer would come. In Stephen's sermon that led to his martyrdom that is recorded by Luke in Acts 7, Stephen makes the point that the law was given through angels to Moses who served as the human mediator (Acts 7:38). However, no mediator was needed in the case of God's promise to Abraham. It was a one-party, unilateral covenant that was as good as God's essence. God placed Abraham in a deep sleep and God consummated the ceremonial enactment of the covenant alone (Gen 15:12-17). Paul's point – the Law was temporary (until the Promise would come) and inferior (mediated through angels, not given directly by God).

The Law was not the source of "life." The Law was a means to insure that the source of "life" could come, fulfill the promise and provide "life." The Law enlightened men's eyes to man's sinful condition, spiritual death and need for a Redeemer. The Law (Scripture) disclosed the hopeless condition of sin and separation from the source of "life." That did not make the Law contrary to the Promise of God, only complementary to the Promise of God. If a man could do what the Law requires, then he would find life.

In verse 23, Paul says "before faith came, we were kept in custody under the Law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed." Paul is not implying here that "faith" did not exist during the period of the Law or even prior to the Law. We should read the word "faith" here as synonymous with "promise." In other words, before the "promise" (Jesus) came, we were obligated to abide by the Mosaic Law. The Law itself did not contain the Promise nor did it fulfill the Promise. The Law was mutually exclusive of the Promise. That is what Paul means by the rest of the verse – "being shut up to the faith (i.e. the 'Promise') which was later to be revealed."

In verse 24, Paul summarizes the main point once more – the Law was essentially like a tutor, a guide, to lead the Jews and Gentiles to the realization that they needed a Redeemer. In verse 25, now that the promise ("faith") has come, the tutor is no longer needed.

Summary statement from Paul's argument in Galatians 3:15-25 – Justification (the imputation of God's righteousness to a human who has no righteousness that satisfies God's righteousness) is by faith in the Promise first given to Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus – not the Law which followed the giving of the promise and which supported the promise.