

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-THREE)

“A GOD-MADE COVENANT”

(PART 2)

GALATIANS 3:15-17

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

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.

In our previous Lesson we stated that in verses **15-18**, Paul argues that the blessing of Abraham, specifically justification by faith, inclusive of the receipt of the Holy Spirit, was covenanted to Abraham before the Law was given. Therefore, the Law cannot annul that which was done by God prior to its introduction. In these verses, the word “promise” is used three times and the word “promises” is used one time. The words refer to God’s promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (**Genesis 12:1-3**).

In this section, Paul addresses a probable argument of the Judaizers that since the Law came later, it took precedence over the Abrahamic

Covenant. Some may even have gone to the extreme of claiming that the Mosaic Covenant of Law annulled and therefore replaced the Abrahamic Covenant. They would have reasoned that God would not have given another covenant, if the Abrahamic Covenant was still to be considered valid. At the very least, they were of the opinion that the Law had been added to the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul deals with the arguments of these legalists by showing that the Law, which came later than the Abrahamic Covenant, could not alter it.

In verse **15** Paul writes, *“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.”* In this verse, Paul contends that the covenant that God made with Abraham is still in force, and he bases his argument upon the fact that it is a preeminent and unalterable covenant. He uses human logic and makes an illustration from everyday life in order to argue his point. He states that it is common knowledge that when individuals make a contract that is agreed upon by all the parties, it cannot be modified or changed except by the mutual consent of all the parties. Paul applies this rule to God’s covenant with Abraham, contending that the Mosaic Covenant of Law cannot modify the Abrahamic Covenant since it was given centuries later.

The word *“covenant,”* is a translation of the Greek word, **diathéké:** (**dee-ath-ay’-kay**) which in its verb form means, “to place between two.” A covenant is something placed between two. It is an arrangement between two parties. It refers to the act of two individuals placing between them something to which they obligate themselves. A covenant is a solemn, binding arrangement between two parties and entails a variety of responsibilities, benefits and penalties depending on the specific covenant which is being entered into.

In the context of **Galatians 3:15**, the *“covenant”* refers to the agreement in which God entered into covenant relations with Abraham, and in which He promised to justify him on the basis of his faith in the atonement which He Himself would someday offer. The Abrahamic

Covenant was not a covenant of works, but a covenant of grace. God's covenant with Abraham was unilateral and unconditional and its integrity depended entirely on God! It was not a **man**-made covenant, but a **God**-made covenant!

Brothers and sisters, whenever a lawyer constructs a case for the defense, he or she prepares arguments and counterarguments. He or she needs to be able to argue the case from different vantage points, to anticipate questions and formulate answers even before those questions are asked. And that is exactly what Paul has been doing throughout this letter. He has been preparing a very thorough defense of the authentic Gospel and of his apostolic ministry. Paul's ultimate aim is to counter the erroneous, legalistic teaching of the Judaizers which was undermining the central New Testament doctrine of justification by faith, and threatening to overthrow the faith of his precious Galatian converts. His arguments are rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures because the Judaizers had twisted the Old Testament Scriptures in an attempt to support their false, legalistic message and methods.

As a result of the false, legalistic teaching of the Judaizers, the Gentiles in the Galatian church had begun to doubt their identity as Abraham's children and their inheritance of the divine promises made to Abraham, because they were not his physical descendants. They were now desirous of being circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses in order to guarantee their status as members of God's family.

Paul's argument goes in two directions. The first direction of his argument is from an example in everyday life. Paul asks them to consider human covenants, or contracts. Can they be dissolved or annulled? Of course not! When two parties mutually agree and the covenant is confirmed by shaking hands or signing a piece of paper, it cannot be reversed without compromising the integrity of one of the parties.

As it relates to the covenant that God made with Abraham, God cannot compromise His character. What He has promised, He will do. His

contract with Abraham is irreversible. Moreover, what He promised to Abraham will come through his “offspring” or “seed” (singular).

Galatians 3:16 clarifies that the seed to which God refers to in Genesis is not in fact the descendants of Abraham (who are many) but Christ (who is One). Christ becomes the true heir of all the divine promises made to Abraham.

The second direction of Paul’s argument is from the timeline. The promises were made to Abraham more than four centuries before the Law was ever given to Moses. Could the Law really supersede the promises if the promises were given first? Of course not!

In verse **16** Paul writes, *“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.”*

In this verse, Paul argues that the Covenant of Promise was superior to the Covenant of Law because it was **Christ-centered**. It was catered in Jesus Christ, the “offspring” or “seed.”

Commenting on this verse, **Kenneth Wuest** says:

“The promises were made to Abraham and to his seed, Christ. But when Christ is seen as seed of Abraham here, all those saved by Him are included. The word seed when used in the singular number in the Old Testament means progeny. Thus to Abraham personally and to all those who by faith in Christ are brought into salvation, were the promises made. The fact that the promises were made to Abraham and to all believers all down the ages who follow Abraham in his act of faith, indicates that the faith way of salvation existed before the law was given, continued through the time the law was in force, and still is in effect after the abrogation of the law at the Cross. Thus the entrance of the law did not affect the covenant at all.”

Brothers and sisters, the Abrahamic covenant could only be fulfilled by Christ. Only in the infinite Son of God could all the families of the earth be blessed. But Christ is viewed in this chapter as also being the head of a new family. According to **Galatians 3:28-29**, all who receive Him by faith become sons of Abraham in a spiritual sense:

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

(English Standard Version)

Paul writes, “*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.*” When God made a covenant with Abraham, He promised him an offspring or a seed (singular). In **Genesis 22:15-18** we read the following:

15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven

16 and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,

17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,

18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

(English Standard Version)

In verse **18**, we are informed that it is through that “*offspring*” or “*seed*” (singular), that all the nations of the world would be blessed. So the promise that God made to Abraham was actually the promise of salvation which would be made available to both Jews and Gentiles. And just as Abraham entered that covenant by faith, so too all who are

descendants of Abraham likewise enter that covenant by faith. The Abrahamic Covenant was an unconditional covenant that God planned and implemented. Man's part was to receive and enter the covenant by faith. Today, although the New Covenant supersedes the Abrahamic Covenant, they are related in the sense that both were made, or "cut," by God. Both are unconditional and both are entered into by faith.

In the Hebrew, the word translated "*offspring*" or "seed" in **Genesis 22:18** is **zera**: (**zeh'-rah**). The word is **singular** describing **one** descendant, not plural describing many descendants. And Paul tells us in **Galatians 3:16** that the one descendant is Christ.

Warren Wiersbe explains that the Bible concept of "the seed" goes back to **Genesis 3:15**, after the Fall of Adam, and of every human being in Adam. God addresses Satan in the form of the serpent directly and says, "*And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel*" (**King James Version**).

In this verse, God states that there will be conflict in the world between Satan's seed (the children of the devil), and the woman's seed (the children of God, and, ultimately, God's Son, Jesus Christ). The Scriptures reveal this conflict: Cain versus Abel, Moses versus Pharaoh, Israel versus the pagan nations; David versus Goliath, John the Baptist and Jesus versus the Pharisees, the true believer (wheat) versus the counterfeit believer (tares), (**Matthew 13:24-30**). Satan's goal in the Old Testament was to keep the Seed (Christ) from being born into the world, for he knew that this Seed would one day crush his head.

In the final analysis, God made this covenant of promise with Abraham through Christ, so that the only two parties who can make any changes are God the Father and Christ. Moses cannot alter this covenant. He can add nothing to it and he can take nothing from it.

John MacArthur explains that,

"The one and only heir of every promise of God is Christ. **Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ.** Therefore the only way a person can participate in the promised blessings to Abraham is to be a fellow heir with Christ through faith in Him. **Whether before or after Christ came to earth, salvation has always been provided only through the perfect offering of Christ on the cross.** Believers who lived before the cross and never knew any specifics about Jesus were nevertheless forgiven and made right with God by faith in anticipation of Christ's sacrifice, whereas believers who live after the cross are saved in looking back to it...When Christ shed His blood, it covered sins on both sides of the cross. The Old Covenant goes to the cross; the New Covenant comes from it. On the one hand faith pointed forward, whereas on the other it points back. **There has never been, nor can there ever be, salvation apart from the finished work of Christ.** The covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in the covenant of Jesus Christ, and therefore the covenant of law, whatever its character and purpose, did not abrogate or modify those two covenants, which really merged into one."

Incidentally, Paul's theological argument concerning the Abrahamic Covenant makes a strong affirmation of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, for he grounds his argument not merely on one **word**, but on one **letter**, the letter "S" in English! It is not "seeds," but "seed."

Thus the promised "Seed" was not the nation of Israel, but the one Person Who alone could fulfill the great promises made to Abraham, namely, Christ, the Messiah. The promises to Abraham do not reside in the Jewish people. They reside in Christ, and in Christ and through Christ, they are the inheritance of every individual believer. The whole spiritual seed of Abraham concentrates in Christ. The promise is to Christ and all those who are in Christ.

On this point **Spurgeon** says,

"Notice how important a single letter of the Scriptures may be. A vital doctrine may depend upon the use of a singular or plural noun."

In verse **17**, Paul writes, "*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.*"

The statement of the length of time that elapsed between God's covenant with Abraham and His giving of the Law to Moses, a period of 430 years, implies that the Law was something new and different and therefore could not affect the promise made to Abraham. The longer the Abrahamic Covenant was in force as the **exclusive** method by which God justified sinners, the more powerful is Paul's argument. Paul probably took the figure of 430 years, from **Exodus 12:40-41**:

40 The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years.

41 At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.

(English Standard Version)

God was saving men and women on the basis of faith without works since the time of Adam, or approximately 2,500 years before the Law was given! The Law was in force from Moses to Christ, or for a period of approximately 1500 years. At the Cross it was done away with. The Judaizers not only attempted to retain the Mosaic institutions for the Jews, but tried to impose them upon the Gentiles, to whom that Law was never given. This was what Paul was fighting against.

Paul's argument is as follows: If a covenant once in force cannot be changed or rendered void by any subsequent action, God's covenant with Abraham cannot be changed or rendered void by the subsequent introduction of the Law.

We know that a person is justified by faith alone because God made His covenant of faith with Abraham before He gave the Law to Moses and

the children of Israel. The Covenant of Law did not appear on the scene until four hundred and thirty years later. It is very important for us to note that when the Law was given, God's promise to Abraham in **Genesis 22:18** that, "*in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*" (**King James Version**), had not yet been fulfilled. It had not yet been fulfilled because the "seed" referred to in this verse, is a reference to Christ the Messiah Who had not yet come. Therefore, the Law could not annul or alter the Abrahamic Covenant. As **James Montgomery Boice** asks,

"If God had been blessing Abraham and his posterity through the way of promise for 430 years and if he was to do the same for all men through Christ and his posterity, how could the giving of the law annul this promise?"

The Abrahamic Covenant informed Abraham how he himself and all the nations would be blessed in or through his seed, Christ. In **Galatians 3:6-9**, we read the following:

6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

(English Standard Version)

In verse **14**, we read, "*So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith*" (**English Standard Version**).

Therefore, when the Law was given, it must have been given for a different purpose entirely than the justification of sinners. It could not have been given to inform lost unregenerate, sinful human beings as to how they were to be justified, or declared righteous, or saved, for that truth had already been established in the covenant of faith given to Abraham! The point is clear, no human being is justified by the Law. That was not the purpose of the Law. A person is justified by faith in the “seed,” Jesus Christ alone!

Phil Newton explains that the uniqueness of the Abrahamic Covenant, as opposed to the Covenant of the Law, is found in the details of its arrangement. He notes that in the Covenant of Law ratified at Mount Sinai, God obligated Himself to bless the children of Israel based on their total obedience to His Law. He also obligated Himself, in the same covenant, to curse the children of Israel based on their disobedience to His Law. This, Newton says, was a covenant of “mutual obligations.”

The Israelites were obligated to obey the Law in its entirety, including all of its ceremonial and civil aspects, and God was obligated to bless or curse Israel, depending on how well they upheld their part of the bargain. Obviously, Israel failed to uphold their part.

The covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, was “one-sided.” The Lord God obligated Himself to bless Abraham and all who come to faith in his “seed” Jesus Christ, unconditionally.

The Covenant of Law was based upon works. All of its promises were conditional. But God’s promises in the Abrahamic Covenant were based upon pure grace; there were no conditions attached to them! The fulfillment of the promises did not depend upon anything Abraham did or did not do, nor upon anything his offspring did or did not do. Abraham made no promise to God either for himself or for his offspring after him. All the promises were made by God, and carried with them no conditions whatsoever! It was not a man-made covenant, but a God-made covenant!