

God's Covenant and God's Law

Galatians 3:15–29

In developing the theology of justification by faith, Paul puts a very fine point on his argument, beginning in 3:15 and continuing through chapter 4. Rather than working verse by verse, as is my normal discipline, I want to take the complex argument and simply follow the flow of his argument, explaining what would have been common knowledge to the Jews in Galatia, but with which we may not be quite as familiar. So let's read the passage and seek to understand the both the value of the Law in its proper role, and the surpassing beauty of the grace of God received by faith in Christ.

Galatians 3:15–29 — 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.

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. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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.

PRAY

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We are saved by, and serve a covenant-keeping God.

God's primary way of revealing himself to us, and relating to us is through covenant.

A covenant involves a promise by one party to do something. One party is vows to do something. Our hope always rests in God's saving and sustaining covenant because he does not change. He has never changed. He is immutable. We are confident he will do what he says because of who he is.

Covenant of works (or Covenant of life, same thing) — God offered Adam perfect eternal life if he would comply with one commandment. "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." He violated that singular command, and all of humankind, in Adam's loins, catastrophically suffered death through his treason. When he sinned, we sinned. In that same sense, the Covenant of Works was for all humankind in Adam. There was no distinction of a particular people.

The **Covenant of Grace** was given to Abraham 430 years before the Law came through Moses. Paul calls the Covenant of Grace "*the Promise*" in these verses. We are talking about the same thing: The promise of righteousness through faith is the covenant of grace through Abraham, by way of the perfect obedience and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, Abraham's offspring, as **v. 16** tells us. Where the Covenant of works was to all humankind through Adam, the covenant of grace is through the seed of Abraham to a specific people. **Genesis 12:2-3** — I will make of **you** [Abraham] a great nation [at the end of v. 3] — in **you** [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

So, 2 important things already as Paul makes his argument:

- **Concerning the covenant:** God is immutable — unchanging— and keeps his promises. The covenant of grace is the promise of righteousness through faith that is specifically through Abraham, who was described as the father of those who believe and are counted righteous. Those of faith are the sons of Abraham, as we saw last week in **v. 7**.
- **Concerning the of promise and law:** The promise of righteousness through faith preceded the Law by 430 years. God's promises have no expiration date. The Covenant of Grace did not sunset when the Law was given. So the Law does not supplant, supersede the promise. His covenant promise endures. That's the argument of **v. 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. If a man-made covenant has such legal staying power, Paul infers, what of the promise of God?

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What, specifically, is the Promise to Abraham? It is that all nations would be blessed by his offspring, Christ. Let's be reminded that the blessing of God is not a social media hashtag: #blessed. God's blessing is set in contrast to God's cursing as we saw in the first part of the chapter.

The curse of God is the unmitigated wrath of holy God righteously poured out on sinners resulting in their eternal death and damnation. Christ became a curse for us; He bore the wrath of the Father.

The blessing of God is the unmerited, undeserved grace and forgiveness of God purchased by Christ and gifted to sinners. They are counted as righteous and given eternal life through Christ's resurrection from the dead. The blessing of God is not a new car, the house of your dreams, or your best life now. The blessing of God is nothing less than justification through the saving work of Jesus Christ. That is the promise to Abraham. And Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. He became, then, the father of those who believe and are credited as righteous.

Note that the term *promise* points us to both God's work, not ours. Abraham has no work or merit in the equation. As children of Abraham in faith, we are included in that promise — we are the “all nations” that are blessed through the work of Jesus and his gift of grace. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2) The promise was God's work then, and it's God's work now.

The Law comes after the promise and does not cancel the promise. God would not be a covenant keeping God if that were the case. The Law, in contrast, is not a promise that points to what God does or would do. The Law points to God, defining his righteousness and exposing our unrighteousness. That is huge, and we must not miss this. The remainder of our time will be in understanding the purpose of the Law and why it was given.

The righteous shall live by faith. And so Abraham did, and so all those who are children of Abraham must do. No one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” The law is not of faith, as vvs. 11 & 12 instruct us. So let's understand God's purpose and intent in the Law by asking some questions and letting God's word give us answers. And let's start with the negative:

What does the Law not do?

- It does not annul the promise of blessing through in Christ as we see in v. 17.
- It does not give life; it does not provide righteousness. v. 18 — if the inheritance comes by the law, [what is the inheritance? The blessing of God in righteousness and salvation to all nations] if

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

In the context of the Judaizers enticing the Galatians to require select parts of the Law to be counted as righteous, do you see how Paul is completely dismantling the notion that works — any works — are required to be counted as righteous? The Law does not provide righteousness. God made that promise through the work of Christ. We must believe this.

Next question: **Why then the Law? What's the point?**

v. 19 — **“It was added because of transgressions.”**

It was added because of transgressions. What does that mean?

When the Law was given and the commandment said, “You shall not steal,” that was not the first time people knew it was wrong to steal. From the beginning God wrote his righteous laws on the conscience so that we knew it was wrong to steal. We did not require something in writing, as though when Moses brought the tablets down off the mountain that suddenly everyone said, “What? I can't take someone else's stuff anymore? Well, rats!” The conscience convicted them that it was wrong to steal, and wrong to murder.

But consciences have a way of getting seared. I don't have data to back this up, but I would be surprised to discover that someone who was bold enough to walk into a bank with a gun and rob the place never took something that did not belong to him prior to that heist. I would find it incredible for someone to get on a witness stand under oath and perjure themselves having never lied to their parents. Consciences are seared, layer upon layer, over time.

The Law was added because of transgressions. As sins mounted up, as consciences became harder. God graciously gave the written law that could not be muted. The Law puts the righteousness of God on blazing display cutting through seared consciences and forcing us to see and grapple with the holiness of God. It makes it clear that God is holy, and you are not. Without holiness no one will see God. You may have fooled yourself and silenced your conscience, but you can't escape the moral imperative of God's holiness carved in stone tablets and put in your face.

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So, **the Law our tutor, exposing sin and transgression**. It teaches us our sin. But it only exposes our failure. It does not give life. It cannot. It demands; it does not provide. It reduces us to dependency on the Promise, since we cannot measure up.

Illustration: Pole Vaulter works up to record-setting heights of a bar.

Mondo Duplantis set the world's record for pole vault in September, 2020. Mondo vaulted 20' 2". As long as records have been kept, no one has ever done that. This ceiling, at its peak, I estimate to be around 16 feet high. Mondo went 4 feet over the peak of this room. Impressive.

Let's put the requirements of the Law in terms of Pole Vaulting. Mondo, whose name I love, did better than anyone has ever done. That's good. Imagine that we were required to successfully pole vault in order to live. I know that sounds over the top, if you will, but just go with me for a minute. Can you vault 20 feet? The best in the world just did 20' 2". No one has ever hit that. But let's say the standard for an acceptable pole vault is greater than 20'. In fact it's greater than 40'. In order to not be put to death, the standard for Pole Vaulting is not getting over the arch in St. Louis. The pole vault requirement is not clearing the Empire State Building. The standard is not clearing the moon. The required pole vault to live is clearing Pluto and returning safely to earth without hitting Jupiter or Mars on your way back down. That's literally impossible, you say? Literally no one can do that, you say? But wait! Our hero, 20-year-old Mondo, just set the world record at 20', 2". He's young, athletic, in good shape. At his age he still has another 2 or 3 years of living at the top of physical condition before age begins to slow him down. Maybe with more work and good coaching and strict dieting... I don't care how good Mondo is. He's not gonna make it over the Gateway Arch at 630', so he's definitely not gonna make it over Pluto. In fact, the requirement of Pluto accentuates how silly it is for Mondo to try to earn the right to live by vaulting 20 measly feet. The Law exposes our bankruptcy.

The Law is a mirror — In revealing God's holy character, it shows me unholy character. It is a mirror that doesn't lie. It won't allow to continue to lie to myself that I am basically a good person.

The Law is a Whip — As I realize that I will never be able to pole vault over Pluto, that I will never be able to perfectly keep all the Law in thought, and deed, and affection, it becomes a whip that drives us to the Promise of blessing in Christ, Abraham's offspring. In every attempt to keep the Law and its incumbent failure, I am forced to an awareness I cannot do it and ultimately driven to the cross where I behold the Lamb of God who makes peace by the blood of his cross.

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How futile, how stupid, how worthless are attempts to do beef up merit through works of the Law that that only expose our lack of merit and sin! Every act of “law-keeping” in circumcision, in dietary law observance, in tithing, in whatever, **it puts on blazing display**

- The need a new heart — of circumcision of the heart...
- The need to be purified from the inside out, rather than by dietary guidelines about what I eat...
- The failure to understand that the very breath in your lungs ordained by God, and every aspect of who you are and what you have testifies to the goodness of God who causes bread to spring from the earth and by the counsel of his will.

The Law held us captive, constantly binding the heart and conscience with the knowledge of righteous requirements, but providing no power to live by those righteous requirements. Would you now put your confidence in works of the Law, Galatians? What about you? Are you hoping that some measly effort to gain favor with God will do anything other than expose spiritual poverty?

The Law was the guardian that hemmed us in, fencing and restricting the deadly consequences of sin, not delivering us from the power of death.

That is what the Law did, and what the Law still does. It still reveals God’s righteousness. It still reveals our unrighteousness. It is still used by the Holy Spirit to convict of guilt under the Law. But it does not save, or give life, or justify us before God.

Lastly today, **faith changes everything**. **vv. 25–26** — 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.

We are justified, not by keeping the law, but by faith in the One who did keep the Law perfectly. The Law-keeping Savior fulfilled all the requirements of the Law. Jesus frees us from the imprisoning demands of the Law. Galatians, you must believe this. Redeemer’s Grace, we must believe this.

In Adam, we are children of wrath, ruined by the fall. But in Christ, we are sons of God through faith — faith in the promised offspring of Abraham, so that **God alone is glorified in salvation**. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But believers are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be

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received by faith. In this was he shows his righteousness so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Apart from faith in Christ alone you remain under the curse of sin. The wrath of God abides now, and it is heaping up. There is no refuge in the Law, but only a death-row prison. There is no hope for working off the bad or trying to earning blessing. The requirements for righteousness are beyond you; you do not have the price in your hand. Flee to Christ.

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

Not through your work, or through the Law, but through the finished work of the Promised Messiah.
God is a covenant keeping God.

Pray

Gospel Thread

Covenant Reading

Lord's Supper

Benediction