

The Greater Covenant

Joshua Fried / General Adult

Big Idea : Progressive Revelation

The Law was never meant to replace the promise but to reveal the problem and point people to Christ.

Opening Illustration

Tim Keller had a common illustration for the Law/Gospel distinction. One day, you wake up with pain in your leg, and you don't know why you can't put full weight on that leg. You go to the hospital and the doctor gets an X-ray of your leg. He looks at the x-ray and says, "you have a fracture in your leg." The x-ray reveals the problem. But you look at the doctor and say, "great! Let's get another x-ray to fix it!" That would be absurd! The x-ray can only reveal the problem, but it can't heal the problem. The same is true with the law. God gave Israel the law in order to reveal the sin in their lives, but the law cannot give healing to those lives. Those lives are dead in sin, and the law can only reveal how broken and dead those lives are.

Abraham received a covenant that came with a promise: I

will send a great physician to heal humanity.

Moses received a covenant that revealed a problem: Here is an x-ray machine to show you what's wrong

Christ came to fulfill the promise: I am the great physician who can heal your broken bones.

God's Word does not change; God's promise remains the same. Salvation comes by faith in the promise.

The Law was never meant to replace the promise but to point people to Jesus Christ.

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds

by the power of your Holy Spirit,

that as the Scriptures are read

and your Word is proclaimed,

we may hear with joy what you say to us today.

May your words be once again made present in us today

by the power and persuasion of your Spirit,

and may we live in the truth and assurance they provide.
Amen.

Galatians 3:15–22 ESV

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. 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. 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. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. 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. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. 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. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

God’s promise cannot be changed

Galatians 3:15–18 ESV

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A human example

Even man-made contracts, like the title to a car, cannot simply be changed once ratified.

Comparing covenants

In Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham that he will have an offspring. The covenant was a promise.

In Exodus 19-24, God makes a covenant with Israel where Moses institutes the instructions on how to live as the people of God. The covenant was the law.

The promise is fulfilled by faith; the law is fulfilled by works.

One by grace, the other by obligation. One is permanent, while the other is temporary; but both point to Christ.

The main point is that Paul is trying to make is that the inheritance has always come through promise, not by performance.

Let's take a moment to address an issue within the church that verse 18 directly speaks to:

Galatians 3:18 ESV

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

You are not saved because you were raised around the promise, and in the same way, you are not saved because of your nationality, or culture, or connections. You receive your nationality by law, and inheritance does not come by the law. Paul's point is that the Jewish people assumed that being descendents of Abraham and possessors of the law gave them the right to stand before God, but the true heirs of Abraham, as we will continue next week are those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

So for any of you who have confidence in your salvation in anything outside of faith in Jesus Christ, return to the promise.

The institution of the mosaic covenant did not change or

cancel the covenant made with Abraham. And it did Mosaic covenant did not contradict the Abrahamic covenant.

From Genesis to Galatians, salvation has always come by grace. Righteousness has come by believing God that His promise is true and secure. The promise is received through faith, and the promise is Jesus Christ.

The Promise was always about Christ

Galatians 3:16 *ESV*

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.

Fulfillment of the promise was never intended to be for the nation of Israel as an ethnic entity. Paul clearly teaches that the promise is fulfilled in the person of Israel, who is Jesus Christ.

Let's unpack this.

God gave Abraham a promise to bless his offspring, or literally to bless his seed. Throughout the Old Testament, the people understand this seed to be a collective singular

referring to the offspring of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob — that is the ethnic people of Israel, but Paul reveals that the seed is singular, and the seed is Christ. The promise is not just for the nation of Israel, but it is for all peoples.

What we see here is something called progressive revelation. God reveals the promise through the covenant of promise to Abraham, he further reveals his plan of redemption through the law given to Moses, and again further reveals his plan through a covenant with David for an eternal king from his lineage and to Jeremiah and Ezekiel that there will be a new covenant where the law is written not on tablets of stone but upon our hearts of flesh.

That was a lot, so let's pull it back again. God's plan for redemption is revealed in Genesis 15 with the promise of an offspring, an heir. Abraham understood that heir to be Isaac, but the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

The promise was always about Christ. God reveals his redemptive plan gradually across history, but the message never changes.

The Gospel remains the same: Salvation by faith through the promise of Jesus Christ.

The Law had a temporary

function

Galatians 3:19–20 ESV

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. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Why then the law!?

If the promise had been made, and the promise is sufficient to save, why did God give his people the law?

Paul gives his answer: because of transgressions.

What does that mean?! To restrain transgression? to define transgressions? to deal with transgressions? There's an aspect to each of these that are correct, but the law was given to *increase* transgressions. We get this clarity from Paul in Romans:

Romans 5:20 “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,”

If the law was intended to restrain sin, then why does it increase? If it was intended to deal with transgression, then why do we need a Savior?

God did not fail in giving the law; God made his promise clearer through the law.

The law revealed sin, exposed rebellion, defined guilt, and most importantly, it demonstrated that humanity was incapable of reconciling themselves to God on their own.

The law was not a cure for sin. The law was the tool to diagnosis sin.

Comparing covenants

Let's compare the two covenants once again.

First, we see that the covenants have distinct functions.

The promise gives life and makes one righteous by faith; the law gives death and declares one condemned by works.

In other words, the promise saves, and the law exposes the need to be saved.

That brings us to the second point of comparison, both share the purpose of pointing us to Jesus Christ, the promised seed of Abraham.

The promise in the Abrahamic covenant is clear: I will give you an heir, and Abraham's belief in the promise was

counted unto him as righteousness.

As the promise is further revealed in the person of Christ, we now believe in the promise fulfilled, and it is counted unto us as righteousness.

The law given in the Mosaic Covenant, however, says, this is how you live in the presence of God as the people of God. Here is the law, do it and live.

But, I can't do it. It's too hard so I must look back to the promise given to Abraham and trust in the goodness and faithfulness of the promise-giver, and then I am counted righteous.

Both point to the necessity of the promise, and the promise points forward to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

And third, the former covenant is superior to the latter covenant.

The promise points forward to Christ, while the law points back to the promise and then forward to Christ.

The promise, as Paul points out comes directly from God.

In the promise to Abraham, God directly gives the promise and swears upon himself to uphold the covenant.

In the law, Paul explains, that God gave Israel the law

through angels and an intermediary. Okay, I know you are going to be wondering, where did angels come into this?!

In Deuteronomy 33:2 “He said, “The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the word angel instead of holy ones, and this is confirmed as a correct interpretation here in Galatians, but also by Stephen’s speech in Acts and in Hebrews

Acts 7:53 “you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.””

Hebrews 2:2 “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,”

God gave Moses the law through angels and gave Israel the law through Moses.

I don’t want you to get too caught up on this point. Here’s what matters here: God gave Abraham the promise directly but gave Israel the law through an intermediary.

The promise is primary and essential, the law is secondary and contingent. The promise is permanent, and the law is temporary. But again both share the same purpose.

The Law as Temporary - Scaffolding

The law and promise can be understood through the idea of a building's construction. The promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ is the finished product. Jesus Christ is the building, and the promise given to Abraham is the building plan. The law, which came after the building plan is the scaffolding around which the building is constructed. Both point to the end product of the building, but once the building is completed, the plan is actualized, while the scaffolding is unnecessary and thus removed.

Those who mistake the law as essential to the building end up treating the scaffolding as if it is the building itself. But the scaffolding is temporary and serves a specific function.

The Promise is greater than the law because the promise is permanent, while the law is temporary. The promise is greater because it gives life, while the law only reveals condemnation and death.

The Law functioned as a prison

Galatians 3:21–22 ESV

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. But the Scripture

imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

As I have reiterated multiple times, the law is not contrary to the promise, but it points to the need for the promise.

The Jewish people saw the law as a fence that cordoned them off from the Gentiles around them, but what they did not realize was that this fence was not there only to protect them and keep them pure until the time of Jesus, but also as a prison to proclaim them condemned and slaves to sin. The law confined humanity under guilt and condemnation.

The law proclaimed:

You are sinful; you are incapable of saving yourself; and you are in need of a Savior.

But, I need to clarify, this does not make the law evil or bad. Returning to the opening illustration, the law is like an x-ray. Just because an x-ray reveals a broken bone does not make the x-ray the source of the broken bone. The law reveals sin, but it is not the cause of sin.

The law remains holy, righteous, and good as it is a divinely sanctioned mandate, but for the Jewish people, the law feels like one of the evil powers of this “present evil age” because it serves as an instrument of condemnation, judgment, and death (George).

The fence of the law that guarded the people of God ended up being a cage that imprisoned them. Yet the prison door of the Law leads us to the freedom of Christ in the Gospel!

Gospel Connection

In the words of Martin Luther, “God wounds in order to heal; He kills in order to make alive.”

God installs the law in order to point the Jewish people back to the promise and hence forward to their need of Christ.

Final Application

The Law was never meant to replace the promise but to reveal the problem and point people to Christ.

Some of us here today need to return to the law not for salvation but so that we can better know the meaning of grace.

What I mean is that God has no grandchildren. You are not saved because you were raised around the promise. You are only saved by trusting in the promised one.

Throughout this study of Galatians you have heard me say give the application of stop trusting in or performance; stop

trying to earn God's grace; and look for Christ who alone is sufficient for salvation.

We need the law, because the law crushes us. The law is a brutal master that allows us to rejoice in the goodness of our true master. We need to study the law, be convicted by the law, and hear the rebuke of the law, so that we may stand in the joy and freedom of Jesus Christ!

Galatians 3:22 "But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

Praise God!