

LESSON SIX (3:15-29)

The Law And The Promise (3:15-20)

15 To give a human example, brethren: no one annuls even a man's will, 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," which is Christ. 17 This is what I mean: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. 18 For if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

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

Paul is not ready to rest his case. There are still many more good reasons why faith is superior to law. Having proved this point with scripture, he now turns to example and illustration from everyday life. Even these, as you will see, are also supported by God's Word.

V. 15 To Give A Human Example, Brethren - The very first word in the Greek text of this verse is "brothers." Paul is not writing off the entire church as lost. To those who still were listening he makes his appeal. This fourth argument of Chapter three is based on an experience of everyday life: a man's last will and testament.

No One Annuls Even A Man's Will - It was well known by Paul's readers that once a man's will goes into effect, it could not be changed. Specifically, once a man has written his will and then has died, and once the will is validated by the authorities, no one can come along and start changing its provisions. How much more, then, is the last will and testament (or covenant) of God unchangeable!

The word for a man's will in this verse is the same word used of the "covenant" of God in verse seventeen. It is an arrangement made by one party with full power, which the other party may accept or reject, but cannot alter. If two people were making an agreement, a different word was used. The covenant between God and man is a grant, not a partnership. We can accept or reject the gift of salvation, but we cannot do enough to be worthy of it, nor can we change the terms of our acceptance.

Or Adds To It - In other words, once God established the covenant of salvation in Christ, no one has the right to add legalism to it.

Once It Has Been Ratified - Once a man has died and the authorities have approved his will as genuine, there are no changes. Before ratification, of course, changes may be made. The point at which God's covenant was ratified will be discussed in verse seventeen.

V. 16 Now The Promises Were Made - Just as there were two kinds of covenants in Greek (one-way grant and equal partnership), there are two kinds of promises. One kind of promise is obtained by negotiation, where each party gives and takes. The other kind of promise is a gift graciously bestowed, without receiving equal value in return. This is the word always used in the New Testament of the divine promise.

To Abraham And To His Offspring - In Genesis 12:7 and thereafter, God made the promises to "Abraham and his seed." In the original Hebrew the form of the word is singular (although they would have thought of "seed" in a collective sense, just as we do in English: "to buy seed for planting.") Paul calls attention to the grammatical feature of "seed," not "seeds," and makes the application to the one special descendant Jesus Christ. The ultimate fulfillment of the promise did not lie in the Jewish people, as they had thought, but in Christ.

V. 17 This Is What I Mean - God made a promise to Abraham, and then ratified that promise or covenant. Four hundred and thirty years later the law came along. The law did not mean that God was canceling his previous commitment, nor did it mean He was changing it in any way.

Some people find a problem in the dating of the 430 years. According to Exodus 12:40, the time between Abraham and Moses must have been much more than 430 years, because the Israelites spent that much time in Egypt. And the stay in Egypt began long after the time of Abraham.

There is a simple explanation. The word “ratify” means to make sure, or make firm. A man’s will is not ratified when he first writes it, but when it first begins to take effect. The first part of God’s promise to Abraham which took effect was that his descendants would stay four centuries in “a land not their own.” (Gen. 15:13) The promise was thus “made sure” when Joseph and his brothers went to Egypt. From that point until the time of Moses was 430 years.

So As To Make The Promise Void - It is wrong to think of God as abandoning his first plans and switching to another arrangement or dispensation. From the very beginning, in fact before the beginning (I Pet. 1:20), it has been God’s plan to grant salvation through the sacrifice of Christ.

V. 18 For If The Inheritance Is By The Law - The right to eternal life is either earned as a wage, or received as a gracious gift (Rom. 4:1-5). It cannot be both; it must be one or the other. Which is it?

God Gave It To Abraham By A Promise - Since this inheritance cannot be based on both law and promise, the Old Testament tells us which: the promise. Likewise, we can put our trust in God’s ability to keep His promises, or our ability to keep His laws. One or the other -- but not both!

V. 19 Why Then The Law? - At this point someone might well complain, “If what you say is true, there was never any need for the Law in the first place!” Was the Law of God a bad idea from the very beginning?

It Was Added Because Of Transgressions - The law was added to show men how guilty they are of breaking God’s standards of right and wrong. There was nothing wrong with the Law - there was something wrong with men. The Law was needed to show men how flawed and imperfect they were, and to show them how badly they need salvation.

Till The Offspring Should Come - God never intended the Law to be permanent. It was to prepare men for the coming of the offspring (Jesus), by pointing out how bad their sin was.

Ordained By Angels Through An Intermediary - God delivered the Law to Moses through angels (Acts 7:38, 53 and Heb 2:2). The Greek version of the Old Testament also teaches this in Deut. 33:2). Just exactly how this was, we do not know. The point is this: Unlike the work of Christ (Heb. 1:1-4), God did not deal directly with His people when He gave the Law.

V. 20 Intermediary Implies More Than One; But God Is One - When Christ dealt with men directly, as God in the flesh, it reflected more the true nature of God. He is not divided into levels or degrees. He is one. The covenant of grace was delivered directly; the covenant of law was second-hand.

Sons No Longer Under Law (3:21-29)

21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. 22 But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

23 Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. 24 So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; 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 neither male nor 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.

V. 21 Is The Law Then Against The Promises Of God? - It might seem that the law and the promises are competing against each other, but they are not. They were each given by God to accomplish a specific purpose, and each succeeded in the task to which it was appointed. Since each was a necessary part of God's plan, there was no conflict.

If A Law Had Been Given Which Could Make Alive - It was never the purpose of the law to justify or make alive. The purpose of the law was to expose sin, and it did this very well. After the law did its job, then the promised grace in Christ Jesus stepped in to bring spiritual life. There is no conflict. It is only when people try to use the law to bring life - which it was never intended to do - that any problem exists.

V. 22 But The Scripture Consigned All Things To Sin - Before God could give life, men had to know the reality of their death. The law proved all men to be sinners, as later O.T. scriptures declare (Ps. 14:1-3; Is. 59: 7-8; etc.).

That What Was Promised . . . might be given - The stern severity of the law was a necessary prelude to grace. God did not ever condemn men out of simple hatred or hostility. To the contrary, God's judgment has been shown to bring men to His grace. Once it had been shown that salvation could not be earned by anyone, God could then give it as a free gift to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

V. 23 Now Before Faith Came - Here "faith" is the belief and trust in the revealed Son of God. Abraham had faith in the future fulfillment of a promise; we have faith in the Christ who has actually stepped into history. Until Christ came, the law was necessary - in a way that is explained in the following verses.

We Were Confined Under The Law - God's people in the Old Testament had to be confined or "held prisoner" for their own well-being. The law was used to "guard and keep watch over" them, as a literal translation of the Greek would show. This protective custody helped shield God's people from their own sinful urges, but it was not His best and final remedy.

Kept Under Restraint - The best the law could ever do was to act as a restraint on people. It did not draw people closer to God; it merely fenced them in to keep them from drifting farther away. Law restrains, but love constrains. The first is a negative force, but the second is positive.

V. 24 So That The Law Was Our Custodian - In Greek and Roman society the custodian (*paidagogos*) was a household slave, purchased to help care for the children. He would guard them from danger, discipline them, and direct their physical exercise and body development. He was not a teacher; rather, he would escort the children to and from school. Some translations of this verse use the word "schoolmaster" or "tutor," but the custodian would have taught only the most rudimentary things. The real teaching was done by someone else.

Paul's readers would have immediately caught the application of this illustration. While the law had helped to guide, guard and discipline God's children, its main purpose was to bring them to the point of real education - Christ.

Until Christ Came - The Greek says literally that the law was our custodian "unto Christ." This could mean the law helped to bring us to Christ (by convicting us of sin), or it could mean the law was in charge of us only until the arrival of Christ.

That We Might Be Justified By Faith - The law was never intended to be more than a temporary aid. From the very beginning the law was destined to be removed from any authority, just as soon as the real Authority came. Then man could be justified by trusting in the final Authority, rather than by submitting to the slave.

V. 25 But Now That Faith Has Come - As in verse twenty-three, “faith” is commitment to the revealed object of faith, namely, Jesus Christ. He is our true teacher (Eph. 4:20).

We Are No Longer Under A Custodian - God’s law in the Old Testament has served its purpose; it has prepared the world for Christ. Now it is taken out of the way. The children have come of age. The custodian has been dismissed.

It is astonishing that people could read these verses in Galatians and still defend the law as binding on us. To force men to stay under the rule or the custodian is to doom them to immaturity. Baby-sitters and nannies may be fine for children, but no adult is under guardianship unless he is mentally or physically incompetent.

The law was our custodian; but when we commit ourselves in faith to Christ, we are no longer under it.

V. 26 In Christ Jesus You Are All Sons Of God - God’s maturing children have outgrown their nanny. Jesus Christ has made this possible for us, as children of God. But in addition to our freedom from legalism, something more has been won for us by Christ. As free sons of God, we also enjoy equality with one another. Because we came into the family of God on the same basis, we all share a common fellowship and unity. The first and most emphatic word in the Greek sentence is “all.”

Through Faith - This verse joins together two important benefits for the Christian. First, we are freed from legalism; second, we are freed from divisive class status. Indeed, these two are intertwined. For if we were saved by our own merit, we would be appointed to certain levels and grades on the basis of who we were and what we had accomplished. Since we are saved through faith, neither legalism or status mean anything to us any longer.

V. 27 For As Many Of You As Were Baptized Into Christ - The entrance into the new covenant relationship with God is the act of baptism. There is, of course, no merit or magic in the water. What counts is the humble surrender to God. All men approach the Creator in the same way -- on their knees. God has designated that we submit to the richly symbolic act (Rom. 6: 1-4), and we have no right to quibble. (Acts 2:38; 22:16)

All Greek dictionaries, incidentally, agree that the word *baptizo* means “immerse.” (See John 3:23 and Acts 8:35-38).

Have Put On Christ - In Christian baptism we “clothe ourselves” with Christ. We will not stand before God in the filthy rags of our own attempted goodness, but in the white robes of Christ’s righteousness. (See Isa. 64:6 and Rev. 6:11).

V. 28 There Is Neither Jew Nor Greek - Since we “clothe ourselves” with Christ (see vs. 27) we all look alike! Jews and Greeks (representing all Gentiles) are no longer divided, for “the dividing wall of hostility” has been taken out of the way (Eph. 2:14). Probably no racial prejudice or national hatred ever surpassed the intensity of animosity between Jew and Gentile, but this animosity is ended in Christ.

There Is Neither Slave Nor Free - Roman slavery was at its worst at the birth of Christ. Masters had the legal right to torture or kill slaves, since they were mere property. But now, in Christ Jesus, the free man and the slave stand before God on equal footing. Both are unworthy; both are accepted on the merit of God’s Son.

There Is Neither Male Nor Female - Ancient society, including the Jews, usually took a disparaging view of women. Since women could not receive circumcision, they were less than full participants in the old covenant. The Talmud (the official Jew book of traditions and scripture commentary) has some very harsh statements in this regard: “May the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women.” “Women are greedy, inquisitive, lazy, vain, and frivolous.” “Happy is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females.” “Ten measures of empty-headedness have come upon the world, nine having been received by women, and one by the rest of the world.” “Conversation should not be held with a woman, even if she is your wife.”

Women are saved in Christ on the same terms as men. This does not, however, cancel out the separate and distinct roles of men and women in the home or in the church. It was after Paul wrote Galatians that he affirmed the woman's appointed role (I Cor. 11:3-16; 14:33-36; I Tim. 2:8-15). The context in Galatians deals with eligibility for salvation.

The Jewish Book of Prayer, which dates back to at least 200 A.D., contains this prayer (possibly known to Paul as a young Pharisee):

O Lord, Ruler of the Universe
I thank thee that thou didst not
make me a Gentile
or a Slave
or a Woman.

Even the order is the same as in this verse. But in Christ we are all saved on the same basis.

V. 29 And If You Are Christ's - Verses 26 and 28 have just affirmed that we are Christ's. Because this is so, we share in the two wonderful consequences named in this verse.

Then You Are Abraham's Offspring - It is not our bloodline, but our faith that makes us descendants of Abraham. The Jews who trusted in their ancestry have been replaced by Christians, who trust in their Savior.

Heirs According To Promise - Our faith in Christ not only makes us descendants of Abraham, but also makes us heirs of His estate. What was coming to Abraham is now also coming to us; namely justification by faith.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. How was God's promise to Abraham like a man's will?
2. What does Paul conclude from the fact that "offspring" was singular in God's promise to Abraham?
3. Was it 430 years from Abraham to Moses?
4. If the law could not save us, why did God give it?
5. Is law opposed to promises? Is it proper to say that one succeeded and one failed? (See V. 21.)
6. What were the duties of the custodian? In what way did the law do similar things for God's children?
7. What happens when a person is baptized?

8. What categories became irrelevant in the salvation of mankind? What other categories might be named today?
9. Are women, then, the same as men in every respect, so far as God is concerned?
10. What two blessings are ours since we belong to Christ through faith?

ABA REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain Paul's fourth argument which centers upon the "Example of a man's will."
2. Elaborate on the specific word for "will" in Gal. 3:15.
3. Is the covenant between God and man a grant or a partnership? Explain.
4. What are the two kinds of covenants in Greek?
5. What are the two kinds of promises in Greek? Which one is always used in the New Testament of the divine promise?
6. What is the important difference between "offspring" and "offsprings" in Gal 3:16?
7. What does the word "ratify" mean, and how does it clarify the period of 430 year in Gal. 3:17?
8. "The right to eternal life is either _____ as a _____, or _____ as a _____."
9. "The Law was needed to show men how _____ and _____ they were, and to show them how _____ they need _____."
10. List the 4 verses, in the New Testament, which teach that God delivered the Law to Moses through angels.
11. "Unlike the work of _____, God did not deal _____ with His people when He gave the Law."
12. "The covenant of _____ was delivered _____; the covenant of _____ was _____."
13. Is the law and the promises of God competing against each other? Explain.

14. "It was never the purpose of the law to _____ or _____. The purpose of the law was to _____."
15. What do Psalm 14:1-3 and Isaiah 59:7-9 teach about sin?
16. "Once it had been shown that _____ could not be _____ by anyone, God could then _____ it as a _____ to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ."
17. How did the law help shield and protect people from their own sinful urges?
18. "The best the law could ever do was to act as a _____ on People. It did not _____ people _____ to God; it merely _____ them in to keep them from _____ away."
19. Explain the textbook author's words, "Law restrains, but love constrains."
20. What is the Greek term for "custodian"?
21. "While the law had helped to _____, _____, and _____ God's children, its main purpose was to bring them to the point of _____--_____."
22. Refer to Gal. 3:24, and explain the meaning of "until Christ came."
23. Explain the textbook author's words, "From the very beginning the law was destined to be removed from any authority, just as soon as the real Authority came."
24. Explain the textbook author's comment, "Then man could be justified by trusting in the final Authority, rather than by submitting to the slave."
25. What are two benefits for the Christians that are joined together in Gal. 3:26?
26. What do the following verses teach about baptism: Acts 2:38, 22:16, and Romans 6:1-4?
27. What is the meaning of the Greek word "baptizo"?
28. Explain the significance of the following:
 "There is neither Jew nor Greek—"
 "there is neither slave nor free—"
 "there is neither male nor female—"
29. What is the Talmud?
30. Contrast the Talmud's exclusion of women with Christ's inclusion of women in His family.

31. Does coming into a saving relationship with Jesus cancel out the distinctive roles of men and women in marriage, the home, or the Lord's church?

32. "It is not our _____, but our _____ that makes us descendants of Abraham."