

In Chapter 3:1-14 Paul had argued that the Galatians did not need to be circumcised to be saved. They had received the Holy Spirit who was the sign of salvation and the proof that they had already been justified apart from works of the Law (3:1-5). They had also become sons of Abraham by faith and had received the redemptive blessings promised to Abraham (3:6-9). By way of contrast, those who were attempting to be justified by the Law were cursed because the Law demanded perfect obedience and none could perfectly keep it (3:10-12). The solution to man's need is Christ who redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse on our behalf (3:13-14).

In 3:15-4:11 Paul will explain that the Abrahamic Covenant supersedes and is superior to the Mosaic Covenant. He does this by tracing God's redemption plan through history. He divides history into three epochs: "(1) the period of promise from Abraham to Sinai; (2) the period of Law, from Sinai to the coming of Christ; and (3) the period of faith, commencing at 'the fullness of time' (4:6)" (Silva, Commentary of the NT Use of the OT, 805). Paul's point is to show that the promised inheritance cannot come by Law, for if it did, it would no longer be by promise (3:18).

To understand Paul's argument, one must have a fundamental understanding of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. Prior to the Abrahamic Covenant, God's actions toward men were more preservative than positive steps in the program of salvation. History before the covenant demonstrated man's inability to fulfill the creation mandate of ruling over the earth. It is with the Abrahamic Covenant that God initiates His program of salvation, and the promises in it are the essential ingredients of the rest of salvation history. The Abrahamic Covenant was the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. The Covenant itself had no conditions that Abraham had to fulfill; it was rooted in God's sovereign purposes, a promissory oath on God's part. The climax of the Abrahamic Covenant is the promise, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." This blessing culminated in Christ.

The Mosaic Covenant was made with Israel with Moses acting as Israel's representative. Unlike the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant was conditional (Exo. 15:16); the reception of the blessings it offered depended on Israel's obedience. The Mosaic covenant extends from Exodus 20:1 to Deut. 26:68. The key provision was the 613 commandments.

***3:15 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.***

***3:16 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.***

Paul begins in 3:15 by explaining the nature of human covenants. He then applies this to the covenants instituted with Abraham and Moses and shows the unchanging character of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Even in daily society people considered covenants unbreakable. Once ratified, a covenant could not be annulled or the conditions in it changed. How much more, then, can this be said of the covenant of God! If God made a covenant with Abraham, it could not be revoked nor could new stipulations be added to it (v. 16a).

Next, Paul looks at the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant (3:16), specifically, that it was *a promise* that God had made with Abraham. This meant that what was promised would come to pass apart from human effort; Abraham was not required to do anything to obtain the blessings. They would be fulfilled by the grace of God.

Verse 16 also tells us that the promises God made to Abraham included Abraham's seed (his offspring).

Paul points out that the word "seed" is singular, not plural, and is a reference to Christ. This argument is surprising for "seed" or "offspring" (ESV) is a collective noun. That is, it is a word that is singular that refers to a group (like "team" or "family"). It can be either singular in meaning (as in "he is his offspring") or plural (as in "they are his offspring"). Paul realizes this and even uses it as a plural concept in 3:29 ("if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring"). This, of course, has stirred some debate about how Paul uses the OT.

The quotation "and to your seed" is found in a number of places in Genesis when God spoke to Abraham (Gen. 13:15; 17:8; 24:7 and without the "and" in 12:7; 15:18; and 22:18). The phrase is used elsewhere in addressing the patriarchs. In each case it is clearly a reference to descendants. How then can Paul legitimately say it is a reference to Christ?

There are many answers offered to this question, but one of the simplest is offered by Robert Saucy (Progressive Dispensationalism). He states, "though Abraham's seed referred to his descendants (Gen. 15:3-4; 13:16), the word also had a doctrinal significance that tied it to Genesis 3:15 where it is predicted that there would be a victorious seed (Christ) who would be for all mankind. Thus, the promise of the seed of Abraham was part of this original promise in Genesis 3. Therefore, as a singular collective noun, "seed" referred to both the singular "seed" of Genesis 3:15 (i.e. Christ, cf. Gal. 3:16) or the numerous descendants of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:29); it can refer to Christ or to the many who are united to Him."

Silva sees 3:15-16a as the integral thought that is expanded upon by 3:17-18. He paraphrases it like this: "Even a human arrangement, if ratified, cannot be altered; similarly, God ratified His promises to Abraham and his seed (and, by the way, we know that 'the seed' refers to Christ, as the singular should remind us). Let me be clearer, the Law cannot alter the Abrahamic Covenant." Silva then comments, "Paul is not attempting to prove anything; rather, he is merely bringing to the surface something that his readers already know and accept. He mentions the point here because he is about to show its relevance to the more general argument ('the Law was added . . . until the seed should come' [3:19]). The Galatians aspire to be fully included within the fold of Abraham's people, but that can only be true of those who are in corporate union with *the seed*, Christ" (Silva, 807).

***3:17 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.***

***3:18 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.***

It is presumed that Paul's opponents believed that the Law supplemented the Abrahamic Covenant. However, the historical chronology of the covenants shows that this cannot be true. The Law of Moses came 430 years *after* the Abrahamic Covenant (Exo. 12:40), and because covenants cannot be nullified or altered, the Law could not nullify or amend the promise. In other words, the Abrahamic Covenant has a historical priority over the covenant with Moses; therefore, the Law could not set aside the covenant previously established by God and do away with the promise to Abraham that is entered by believing.

Paul sees a fundamental difference between the two covenants. The Abrahamic Covenant is characterized by promise, the Mosaic Covenant by human obedience. If believers lived under the Mosaic Covenant, the promise to Abraham would be nullified because human obedience, not promise, would be the means by which the Abrahamic blessings would be received. Verse 18 highlights this. Paul says, "God has granted it to Abraham." "Has granted" is a perfect tense verb. The meaning is that the promise was given (not earned) and that He gave it in perpetuity. He gave it then and it holds forever.

In summary, God has made a solemnly binding agreement and He hasn't changed His mind. God hasn't altered the conditions or requirements of His promises, because God is unchanging. The relationship and the way into the relationship haven't changed. As He dealt with Abraham, so He deals with Abraham's seed. The promises to Abraham are received by faith alone.

***3:19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.***

***3:20 Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.***

If the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (salvation) were based on God's promise to Abraham, not the Law, then why give the Law? What role does it play?

Paul says it was added because of transgressions. Understanding what Paul means by this is quite difficult because it is so vague. Although there are many interpretations, I favor the one by Longenecker who says, "the Law was given to bring about a consciousness of sin in a sin hardened community" (Longenecker, 138).

The Law fits into God's redemptive plan in this way:

God had called Israel to Himself; He was their God; they were His people. But they were a wayward people, a fickle people, a people easily influenced by the world around them. So God set up an elaborate system of law to remind them of who they were, to confront them with the reality of their sin, and to clarify the heinousness of it. So the Law revealed that sin is an offense against God (Ro. 3:20), and was instituted to preserve His people from the influences of the world. The Mosaic Covenant was ADDED to the Abrahamic Covenant to provide structure and conditions for the *temporal enjoyment* of the promises to Abraham UNTIL the final provision of salvation came in Christ. When Christ came, the Mosaic Covenant as a preservative to guard and keep the people of God was no longer needed. It had done its work in demonstrating that men are sinful and that it could not give life (Gal. 3:20). It had also pressed men to the place where they knew that if they were to gain a right standing with God, they

needed grace – they needed someone to save them. Understood in this way, verse 19 explains why men under the Law are under a curse (Gal. 3:10), and how the Law acts as a guardian (tutor – NASB) that leads men to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

The mention of angels in the giving of the Law is not clearly documented in the OT, but it may come from Deuteronomy 33:2: "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." (ESV) The Greek translation of the OT is clearer on this verse which speaks of angels with God. In Acts 7:53 Stephen says, "you who received the Law as ordained by angels." Hebrews 2:2 makes a similar point.

The Law was put into effect thirdhand; it was from God, but mediated through angels to Moses who then gave it to the people. In other words, there was a distance between God and Israel. But when God made a covenant with Abraham He did so directly. Therefore, the Law is inferior in the way it was given. Why then, would the Galatians want to add the Law to the covenant with Abraham?

***3:21 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.***

***3:22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.***

***3:23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.***

***3:24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.***

***3:25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.***

Based on all that Paul has said about the Law thus far, it would be easy to conclude that the Law was contrary to the Abrahamic promise. Paul denies this emphatically, and goes on to explain how the two are in accord. They function differently, but they complement each other in accomplishing God's purposes.

First, the Law could not give life: "if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (3:21). The Law told men of the will of God, but it didn't provide the power to do it. Because men could not live righteously under the Mosaic Covenant, they could not bring the Abrahamic promises to perfection (Heb. 10:1-18). However, the promise to Abraham does provide people with life. In the New Covenant righteousness WITH GOD was provided for by justification through faith; righteousness OF LIFE is only provided for by the indwelling Spirit (Ezek. 36:27 - "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.").

The Law functions as a prison house: "the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin" (3:22). Thus, the Law compliments the promise in God's purposes for it drives people to the promise, so that they may be declared righteous through faith in Christ.

Verse 23 describes the period between Moses and the coming of Christ as a time when men were kept in custody under the Law. Romans 11:32 says, "God has shut up all in disobedience."

When Paul says, "before faith came," he does not mean that faith was nonexistent prior to the coming of Christ, for he had just argued that "Abraham *believed* God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (3:6). The difference between the period when the law reigned and the period following the coming of Christ is not "faith" per se, but that faith *in Christ* is the characteristic of the new age. Abraham and the OT saints believed in God's promise to Abraham ("in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed"), but after Christ was revealed people place their faith in Jesus. From the perspective of historical development (from Abraham's vantage point), faith in Christ was "faith which was later to be revealed."

Although Paul does not specifically say this in Galatians, in Romans 6:14-15 he shows that those under the Law are also under the dominion and power of sin (see Schreiner 246-247 for a lengthy discussion).

In other words, the law functioned as a tutor functions (3:24). The word "tutor" was used of household slaves that had charge over the master's children until they became teenagers.

In the laws of Plato he writes, "just as no sheep or other witless creatures ought to exist without a herdsman, so children cannot live without a παιδαγωγῶν [a tutor], nor slaves without masters. And of all the wild creatures, the child is the most intractable; for insofar as it, above all others, possesses a fount of reason that is yet uncurbed, it is a treacherous, sly and most insolent creature. Wherefore the child must be strapped up, as it were, with many bridles – first, when he leaves the care of a nurse and mother, with παιδαγωγοῖς [tutors] to guide his childish ignorance, and after that with διδασκαλοῖς [teachers] of all sorts of subjects and lessons, treating him as becomes a freeborn child. On the other hand, he must be treated as a slave; and any free man that meets him shall punish both the child himself and his παιδαγωγὸν [tutor] or his διδάσκαλον [teacher] if any of them does wrong" (VII.808D-E; quoted by Longenecker, 146-147).

We learn from this and other literature in antiquity that although tutors may have on occasion taught the children, they were distinct from teachers and were more of an attendant or babysitter who "had custodial and disciplinary functions rather than educational or instructional ones" (Longenecker, 146). They were supposed to be the children's moral guides, but they did not always live up to the ideal. In the same way, the Law was a custodian until maturity when the tutor was no longer needed. The Law functioned for a time, until Christ came (Schreiner, 248-249). Paul concludes in verse 25, "now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." The analogy to a tutor stresses the temporary nature of the Law. But that is not all that this analogy points to. The Law was also designed "to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith." The Law leads us to Christ by displaying man's sinfulness in his inability to keep the commandments. This is clearly seen in Israel's history. The OT is a repeated story of a people who just could not obey God no matter how many times they suffered for it. It is a record of people who needed grace and the righteousness of another to gain a right standing with God. Christ met this need.