

*What is in view*

We are still mining truth out of Galatians three and come, this week, to focus on the ideas of "covenant" and "promise." The simple point is that rule-based living is antithetical to living on the basis of God's promises. We have an "agreement," as it were, with God. But this agreement is not our pledge to do something for God, but is God's pledge to bless those who believe!

*What is helpful to note*

As you read through the passage in view, you will undoubtedly see more to be discussed than you will be able to handle in a single meeting. Don't despair; we will come back to this passage. For this session, we want to focus on the contrast between promise and law.

You'll notice that Paul makes reference to the covenant God made with Abraham. He speaks of this agreement and refers to it under both the language of "covenant" as well as the language of "promise." What Paul has in mind is God's dealings with Abraham back in Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1 and 17:1-8.

In those passages, God promised to bring blessing to Abraham and, through Abraham, to all the nations of the world. This idea is in view in 3:14. But what is that promised blessing?

When reading Galatians 12:1-3, it's clear that God intends to bestow blessing, but the exact nature of that blessing is not clear. In Genesis 15:1, the last phrase is best understood as God saying that He, Himself, will be Abraham's "very great reward." And, when we turn to Genesis 17:8 and the culmination of God's explanation of His blessing of

*"The promise and the law are two separate, though complementary, arrangements. They operate on entirely different principles. The promise is about what God will do, while the Law is about what we must do."*  
Philip  
Graham  
Ryken

## Reflections on Paul's Letter to the Galatians



Abraham, God says it is all moving toward He, Himself, being their God. The blessing is, at its heart, *relationship with the living God*. This is what God intended for Abraham and, through him, intends for the nations (and us!) as well.

What Paul is driving at in this section is that this promise/agreement that God made with Abraham *predated* the giving of the Law. Paul has already made the case (3:6-9) that Abraham was found to be in right relationship with God *by faith and not by rules-keeping*. In 3:10-21, Paul is underscoring this idea of a faith-based life with God by pointing out that the addition of the Law, which came after the giving of the promise, cannot undo or over-ride the provisions of the promise that God had already ratified. Now Paul will go on, later in chapter 3, to explain more fully the purpose of the Law. But here we need to simply see the law-promise tension and realize that the giving of the Law cannot and does not supersede the freely given, grace rooted, "believe Me in this" promise of God.

The argument drives to the idea captured in 3:18:

The "inheritance" (that is, the promised blessing of relationship with God) is not based on rules-keeping, for if it was based on the Law and rules-keeping then that would nullify the very promise that God had previously made.

*What to talk about with your group*

As mentioned, there is more in this passage than you will be able to cover in a group meeting; you might need to say that up front!

The opening questions are intended to help your group think about different kinds of "agreements." Some are "fully mutual." Some are rules-based. But then there are some (very few, actually) where someone simply "promises" to do for you. That's the "covenant" idea Paul has in mind here.

As you explore the passage, focus on the contrast between the promise (God, in a sense, saying "I will") and the Law (where we, in a sense, must say, "we will"). One is "faith-in-God" oriented; the other "effort-of-mine" oriented. And Paul's point (again!) is that these are two diametrically opposed ways of approaching God.

*"The promise sets forth . . . God's plan, God's grace, God's initiative. The promise (standing for the grace of God) had only to be believed. But the Law (standing for the works of men) had to be obeyed."*  
John Stott

## Questions for Reflection and for Group Discussion

## Thinking . . .

Think about different kinds of “contracts” you have entered into over the years. Some are business deals, some personal agreements, some relational commitments. What do you base these various “contracts” on?

Which “contracts” are rule-based? Why?

Which “contracts” are entirely reciprocal? Why?

Which “contracts” seem to be different than all the rest? Why?

## Reflecting . . .

At the heart of Paul’s ongoing discussion of Gospel-centered life is the mention of “covenant” (or “testament”). Read Galatians 3:11-21.

What words describe the kind of “covenant” Paul is referring to here? Which words, in the passage itself, help define what kind of agreement he has in mind?

How does Paul relate the “covenant” to the Law? What is their connection?

What is the point he is making about the place of the Law in the carrying out of God’s covenant?

## Responding . . .

Christians *do* have an “agreement” or “contract” with God. But to live out this agreement well, we *must* think about it rightly. From what Paul has said here, what aspect of God’s covenant with *you* do you need to get a better grasp on?

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