

## The Covenant of God

Galatians 3: 15-22

As Paul confronted the false doctrine of the Judaizers, he defended Abraham's justification being based on faith rather than works in the preceding passage. It appears that Paul anticipated the natural response of the Judaizers to his claims. He felt they might agree that Abraham was justified by faith, but what about those who came following the law being given to Moses? Through their teaching, it is certain that the Judaizers believed, following the giving of the law, men were justified in the eyes of God through adherence to the law, not solely of faith.

Anticipating such an argument, Paul continued his defense of justification by faith. "The heart of his answer is to show that the covenant with Abraham was an unconditional covenant of promise relying solely on God's faithfulness, whereas the covenant with Moses was a conditional covenant of law relying on man's faithfulness," MacArthur.<sup>i</sup> Such is the basis of contention today. There are two views regarding justification – one based by faith in the promise of God to provide justification through the promised Messiah, and the other based on man's ability to keep the law through absolute obedience. One is of grace; the other is of works. Christianity alone, out of all the religions in the world, rests in the faithfulness of God instead of the faithfulness of mankind.

As we examine the [aspects](#) revealed in the text before us, I want to consider: [The Covenant of God](#).

**I. The Superior Covenant (15-18)** – Paul begins with a defense of the superior covenant, the covenant of promise made to Abraham. In so doing, he will argue that the covenant given through Moses did not annul the covenant made with Abraham. Consider:

**A. The Confirmation (15)** – [Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto](#). Paul argues that the covenant God made with Abraham had been confirmed. It was ratified and no man could annul or alter the covenant. Even the covenants made of men were held in this regard. Once covenants were made and agreed to by both parties, the covenants were valid and unchangeable.

➤ In most cases, a covenant was ratified by both parties. In the case of the covenant between God and Abraham, only God ratified the covenant. God alone walked through the slain animals, done to symbolize the ratification of the agreement, [Gen.15:12-17](#). The covenant certainly had implications for Abraham, but it rested solely in the faithfulness of God, not of Abraham.

**B. The Designation** (16) – *Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.* Paul revealed the significance of the covenant made with Abraham and its superiority to the covenant made with Moses – this covenant was centered in Christ! Paul was clear that the promise was made to the seed, singular, of Abraham, which is Christ. Granted, Abraham would have a son of promise in Isaac, through which the nation of Israel would come and the lineage of Christ would be established, but this covenant promise was given regarding the Promised Son, Christ the Lord.

➤ Christ was and remains the intended heir of the promises of God. Regardless of time, whether in Abraham's day, prior to Calvary, or in our day, following Calvary, Christ was always the source of salvation through His perfect sacrifice on the cross to redeem and atone for sin.

**C. The Preservation** (17) – *And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.* Here Paul referred yet again to the law of Moses and its effect on the covenant with Abraham. Abraham's covenant was confirmed of God in Christ 430 years before the law was given to Moses. The giving of the law did not alter or cancel the covenant promise made to Abraham. The Greek word, *prokuroo*, translated **confirmed** is in a perfect tense revealing its ongoing and lasting effect. Thus, this covenant is irrevocable. While the law given to Moses was of God, it did not remove or replace the covenant with Abraham.

**D. The Presentation** (18) – *For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise.* Paul argues the covenant made to Abraham was based on the promise of God and was not bound to or dictated by the law given to Moses. If it were tied to the law, then it would no longer be a promise due to its association with the demands of the law. The law expects obedience and action upon the part of man and the promise rests in God's grace.

➤ We need to consider the "**inheritance**" Paul spoke of in this verse. His refers to the promise of justification by faith. That promise, while made to Abraham, was not reserved for Abraham alone. The promise would pass on to the descendants of Abraham, which we have already established that all believers are, based on faith. This inheritance was given by God through His promise. Again, the verb translated **gave** is in a perfect tense and reveals an ongoing and lasting action of the Lord. "Man *cannot succeed* in perfectly keeping the **law**, and God *cannot fail* in perfectly keeping the **promise**. Because the covenant of **promise** is complete, the covenant of **law** can in no way improve or change it," MacArthur. <sup>ii</sup>

**II. The Inferior Covenant** (19-22) – Paul discussed the inferiority of the covenant with Moses.

**A. The Purpose of the Law (19a)** – *Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.* Paul asked a relevant question – what was the purpose of the law; why was it given? The law was given to Moses by God due to the transgressions of mankind. It was given to reveal the depravity of men and their need for a Savior. The law revealed man’s inability to meet the righteous standard God required.

- It is important to note the distinction Paul made about the timeframe regarding the law. It was given because of man’s sin, to reveal their need for a Savior, until the time when the promised Seed would come. The law was never given as a means of salvation, but to point humanity to the Christ who was promised in Abraham.
- While the law revealed the righteousness nature of God, and challenged men to live righteously before the Lord, it was never given to save. However, Paul does not imply the law is of no value. The righteousness revealed through the law should be sought by all who seek to serve the Lord. That does not imply that we can obtain sinless perfection, but we can strive to live uprightly before the Lord according to His desire for us. It is dangerous to ignore the teaching of the law altogether, but we must not substitute adherence to the law for faith in Christ.

**B. The Presentation of the Law (19b-20)** – *and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.*<sup>20</sup> *Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one.* The law was given through two mediators – the angels and Moses. While we don’t have exact details of the role of angels in the giving of the law, we do know that God gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai. Moses was revered in the eyes of the people, and he served as a mediator between God and man. The Sinai account reveals the awesome nature of God and only Moses was allowed on the mountain.

- The covenant with Abraham was more personal and gracious. He met with Abraham and offered the promise of salvation by faith. This reveals the nature of salvation and a stark contrast between law and grace. The law reveals God’s holy nature, but doesn’t grant access to God. The promise of grace through faith offers one to come to God through Christ the Son. What the law could not do, grace provided. By faith in Christ, all who believe have access to the God through the Son. We are invited into His presence. The veil of separation has been removed in Christ.
- The covenant with Abraham was ratified by God alone and rested solely in His faithfulness. The covenant of the law was mediated by angels and Moses, carrying obligations for God and man. God kept his covenant in the law, but Israel was unable to keep the covenant. In fact, no man has the ability to keep the covenant of the law.

**C. The Promise regarding the Law (21-22)** – Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. <sup>22</sup> But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. Paul asked another profound question and responds to his question. Is the law then contrary to the promise of God? Absolutely not; God forbid! Paul declared that it was never the intention of God for the law to provide salvation; the law was unable to give life and provide the demanded righteousness. Mankind was unable to keep the law of God, thus remaining condemned in their sin. Thus, the promise of Abraham was made prior to the law being given – the promise of life in Christ through faith in Him.

➤ The giving of the law had its place and purpose. As we will discuss later, it served as a schoolmaster, a tutor, to point us to Christ and our need for the righteousness that is only available in Him. As I consider the truths we have discussed, I am thankful for the covenant of promise which was fulfilled in Christ. He provided what we nor the law could, securing salvation through His atoning sacrifice on the cross. This salvation, revealed in the promise to Abraham, is available for all who come by faith to Christ. [1 Tim.1:15](#) – This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

**Conclusion:** I trust you are resting in the promise of God made to Abraham centuries ago. This promise was made regarding the coming Messiah. Christ our Lord fulfilled this promise and made the way for undeserving sinners to be reconciled to a holy God. The promise requires faith in Christ, apart from works of the flesh. It is available for all who will believe in the finished work of Christ which brings salvation.

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<sup>i</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., [Galatians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 82.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 82.