

Galatians 3:15-25 ~ The Law and the Promise ~ Discussion Questions

1. If you lost all of your legal papers and documents, what would you do?
2. What is the parallel point Paul wants to make about covenants that people make between themselves and the covenant God made with Abraham? (3:15, also 3:8)
3. Through whom were the promises to Abraham fulfilled? (3:16) what is the distinction between “seed” and “seeds?”
4. What was the relationship of the law to the covenant? (3:17-18)
5. Does God change as circumstances change? What did God promise that we can be sure that he will do? (3:17, Genesis 12:1-3, 17:8)
6. In Verse 17, Paul says the law does not do away with the promise; so what is its purpose? (see vv 19 and 23 and Romans 3:20) Can you identify both a negative and positive purpose?
7. In the NLT, v. 19 reads, “the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised (Jesus)” so many people believe the law was temporary and no longer has any purpose. What do you think? (Jeremiah 31:31-33)
8. Who is the prisoner of sin? What does that mean? (3:22, Deuteronomy 27:26)
9. How is relating to God through the law like being kept in prison (v. 23) or being supervised (v. 25)?
10. If you had lived in Old Testament times, how would you have benefitted from living under the law?
11. How does faith in Christ set one free from legalism? Has it set you free? Specifically, how?
12. How would you use this passage with someone who thinks that keeping the Golden Rule or Ten Commandments is what’s needed to get right with God?

Galatians 3:15-25 ~ The Law and the Promise ~ Leader's Guide

1. If you lost all of your legal papers and documents, what would you do?

2. What is the parallel point Paul wants to make about covenants that people make between themselves and the covenant God made with Abraham? (3:15, also 3:8)

In Greek, the “human covenant” Paul speaks of in Verse 15 would normally refer to a last will and testament. But in the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT) the term was widely used to describe God’s covenant with his people first made with Abraham. So the analogy was apt for Paul’s purpose, which was to show that God’s original covenant with Abraham could not be modified or set aside.

3. Through whom were the promises to Abraham fulfilled? (3:16) what is the distinction between “seed” and “seeds?”

Paul makes the point here that the promises God made to Abraham are fulfilled through Christ, i.e., if you believe in Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit and eternal salvation..

I understand why in Verse 16 Paul is distinguishing between seed and seeds, but personally I see it as a bit of a nit. To make his point, Paul rejects the accepted meaning of Genesis 17:8 (I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God) as a reference to the promises given to Abraham and the generations of his descendants. Paul takes ‘seed’(in the Greek, Geneva, Darby, Young’s, KJV, and ASV Bibles; ‘offspring’ in the ESV, NRSV, Holman, Lexham; ‘descendants’ in most modern Bibles) in its literal sense in the singular to refer to one person, Christ. So, he says, God’s promises were given only to Abraham and Christ; later in vv. 26-29 Paul will insist that those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s offspring, rather than Abraham’s physical, i.e., ethnic, descendants.

4. What was the relationship of the law to the covenant? (3:17-18)

Paul spells out the relationship right in v. 17-18 – The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

Paul’s point is that as the law came *later* than the covenant ratified by God, it could neither nullify or modify the promise to Abraham. In v. 18, the law and the promise are set as directly opposed to or mutually incompatible with each other. The inheritance comes via the promise given by God’s grace, not via the law.

5. Does God change as circumstances change? What did God promise that we can be sure that he will do? (3:17, Genesis 12:1-3, 17:8)

God never changes. The covenant is still in effect and through it God promised to bless Abraham's descendants and make them His own special people — in return, Abraham was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel through which God's blessings could flow to the rest of the world.

In Q 3, we discussed Genesis 17:8 – I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.

6. In Verse 17, Paul says the law does not do away with the promise; so what is its purpose? (see vv 19 and 23 and Romans 3:20) Can you identify both a negative and positive purpose?

Paul spells out the purpose of the law in two verses a little further on, but summarizes it very clearly in Romans 3:20.

Galatians 3:19 – What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

Galatians 3:23-24 – ²³ Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Romans 3:20 – Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

All the purposes of the law are positive, but one might view as negative the fact it reveals and makes us conscious of our transgressions, even increases them; it imprisons all of humanity, and threatens the wrath and judgement of God to those who do not follow it. The law also shows the need for salvation.

Balancing that is the truly positive purpose which is to lead us to Christ that we may be justified (made right with God) by our faith in Jesus.

7. In the NLT, v. 19 reads, “the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised (Jesus)” so many people believe the law was temporary and no longer has any purpose. What do you think? (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

Oh, ho, ho. I'd like to get some Christian Bible commentators in the same room with some Midrash rabbis. In general, most Christian scholars feel that the while the promise is permanent, the law was temporary and was fulfilled with the coming of Christ. In contrast, in nearly all strands of Jewish thought, and in the view of Paul's agitators, the law had been given by God permanently. After the Exodus from Egypt, they believe the law contained in the Sinaitic covenant became an *additional* element in God's relationship with his people. What Jeremiah had called the “old covenant” now became the “new covenant.”

Jeremiah 31:31-33 – ³¹ “The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It

will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. ³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

The last sentence in Jer 31:33 essentially means that law in the “new covenant” effectively governs people’s lives and the way they interact with each other. Being written on your heart and mind actually makes it even stronger than if it was just written on stone.

8. Who is the prisoner of sin? What does that mean? (3:22, Deut 27:26)

To be a prisoner of sin or a prisoner of the law amounts to much the same thing because the original law reveals and, in some cases, actually stimulates sin. In this verse Paul refers to the way that Scripture (probably Deut 27:26) has imprisoned the whole of humanity, indeed the whole of creation under the power of sin.

Deuteronomy 27:26 – “Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

But this negative role played by the law had a positive outcome: so the promise might be given to all who believe.

9. How is relating to God through the law like being kept in prison (vs 23) or being supervised (vs 25)?

God (the prison warden) gives you rules that must be followed. Love and grace are not factors. The relationship and communication is all one way.

10. If you had lived in Old Testament times, how would you have benefitted from living under the law?

11. How does faith in Christ set one free from legalism? Has it set you free? Specifically, how?

12. How would you use this passage with someone who thinks that keeping the Golden Rule or Ten Commandments is enough to get right with God?

Galatians 3:15-25 ~ Scripture Verses

The Law and the Promise

¹⁵ Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. ¹⁶ The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ. ¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

¹⁹ What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. ²² But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

²³ Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Questions from previous weeks to consider:

1. Whose approval do you seek?
2. If you had to convince someone that Christ is real by giving an example from your own life, what would you say?
3. How would you change the way you live your life if you unexpectedly inherited \$10 million? How do you think God would feel about your plan? With whom would you discuss your plan?
4. In the U.S. we admire “self-made” men—people who have achieved success through their own efforts, who have earned their position in life. How do you feel about such people? How does this feeling affect your response to the concept of *grace* (or *unmerited favor*)?