

Lesson 12 – Galatians 3:15-18

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Review/Introduction

Paul is writing to the Galatian churches who are in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. “Grace” is God’s sovereign, omnipotent, supernatural, unilateral intervention in the most hopeless and helpless situations with actions that only He can perform and with the results that only He can produce, all for His glory. The true gospel is all about grace “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”.

Paul first greeted the Galatians, then started right into their correction and his attack on the Judaizers who are disturbing the Galatians with a different, distorted gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

He then went on to show that the true gospel that he preached was not learned from other people nor found in Scripture-invalidating tradition nor did he invent it. He received it directly from the Lord Jesus. He presented the authentication of the Gospel through the source (God) and its power to change lives (persecutor/murderer to preacher).

❖ **Does your life authenticate the gospel?**

In chapter three, Paul begins the doctrinal section of the letter, looking at the defense of justification by faith.

He began by showing that the Galatians had had a true spiritual experience because they had received the Spirit. They did not receive spiritual baptism through works of the law, but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Relying on the law cannot bring about Spirit baptism. In fact, Spirit indwelling was fundamentally different prior to Christ which was only a selective indwelling for particular service (Genesis 41:38; Exodus 31:3; Numbers 27:18; Judges 6:34; 3:10; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 1 Samuel 10:9-10; 16:13; 35:31; Psalm 51:11; Daniel 5:11-14; 6:3).

Then he gave an OT Scriptural argument showing that justification is by faith alone. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. The declaration of Abraham’s justification by faith alone came prior to receiving circumcision and before the Law existed.

Then he showed from the OT that those who rely on the law for justification are under a curse. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul’s arguments have been ironclad. There is no way to refute Paul’s arguments since they are clear scriptural teaching. So, now he will anticipate the Judaizer’s response. Abraham was saved by faith they will agree (since the Torah says so), but when the law was given to Moses, the means of salvation changed from faith to law (or faith plus law). What other purpose could there have been to another covenant given to the people of Israel?

Today, we look at Paul’s anticipatory argument against the expected response of the Judaizers. In doing so, Paul shows the superiority of the promise over law.

Paul's defense of justification by faith – The priority of promise over law (3:15-18)

1. The nature of human covenants (3:15)

¹⁵Brethren, 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.

¹⁵To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. (ESV)

Paul again changes his tone with the Galatians. Early in the letter, he referred to the Galatians as “brethren”, fellow believers in Christ.

¹¹For I would have you know, **brethren**, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. (Galatians 1:11)

But at the beginning of chapter 3, in an emotional appeal, he referred to them emotionally as “O, foolish Galatians”. Paul was emotional regarding the Galatians – sad, disappointed, perplexed (to be at a loss, to be dazed and confused, to be disturbed).

¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. (Galatians 3:1 ESV)

¹⁹My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— ²⁰but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am **perplexed** about you. (Galatians 4:19-20)

But now he changes the tone back to “brethren”. Appealing to them with logical, biblical arguments that cannot be refuted. Paul begins by giving the human example of covenants between people.

“Covenant” is an arrangement between two parties that is binding until the covenant is fulfilled or is dissolved by both people.

“Ratified” was used of legal action meaning to confirm, validate, make legally binding; to confirm solemnly or publicly.

Paul gives two things that cannot be done to a covenant. If they are, the covenant is invalid. The first to “set it aside” meaning to do away with what has been laid down, to set aside and thus to regard as nothing, to declare invalid, to not recognize, to annul (make ineffective, inoperative or nonexistent). The second is to “add conditions to it” which is a legal term meaning to change, but with the implication that the changes were not in keeping with the original purpose of the covenant.

Paul's discussion about covenants would have taken the Judaizers to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. In biblical times, when people made a covenant, they would cut animals in half, lay the two halves on the ground, and walk between the two halves ratifying the covenant.

¹⁸I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, **when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts**— ¹⁹the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf (Jeremiah 34:18-19)

The covenant with Abraham is detailed in Genesis 15.

¹After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." ²Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." ⁴Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." ⁵And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶**Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.**

⁷And He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." ⁸He said, "**O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?**" ⁹So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. ¹¹The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

¹²**Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.** ¹³God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

¹⁷**It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.**

¹⁸**On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram,** saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: ¹⁹the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite ²⁰and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim ²¹and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite."

In this case, only God walked between the animals indicating that the covenant was unconditional. It was a promise of God and God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). God will always do what He has said and fulfill what He has promised. He is steadfast, unchanging, perfectly reliable, and utterly dependable. He is 100% reliable, 100% of the time. He is perfectly faithful to fulfill His promises.

²in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, (Titus 1:2)

⁴"The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; **A God of faithfulness** and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He. (Deuteronomy 32:4)

²¹This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. ²²The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; **Great is Your faithfulness.** (Lamentations 3:21-23)

¹³If we are faithless, **He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.** (2 Timothy 2:13)

❖ **What would life look like if you unwaveringly believed that God is faithful?**

Paul's point is clear. If people make covenants and keep them with or without change or without adding unrelated conditions, how much more an unconditional covenant between God and Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham was a promise relying only on God's faithfulness, where the Law was a conditional covenant relying on the Israelite's faithfulness.

The law did not nullify or change the unilateral covenant made with Abraham.

2. Abraham's covenant is divine (3:16)

¹⁶Now 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.

¹⁶Now 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," who is Christ. (ESV)

The giving of the Law does not invalidate the promise of salvation by faith. Not only is promise superior to law because of the unilateral-ness of the promise, but the promise is about Christ, not legalism. Paul is referring to when Christ preached the gospel to Abraham in a theophany in Genesis 22.

God the Son to Abraham after offering Isaac... ¹⁵Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, "By **Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord**, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸**In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed**, because you have obeyed My voice." (Genesis 22:15-18)

Paul gives an intricate argument based on the inspiration of Scripture. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is interpreting verse 18 as referring to Christ. He is making the argument based on the singular noun "seed" as opposed to the plural, "seeds". This demonstrates the inspired, plenary, verbal, infallible, inerrant in the original manuscripts word of God.

The Bible is inspired. "Inspiration" from 2 Timothy 3:16 translating the Greek *theopneustos* which literally means "breathed out by God" or "God-Breathed". Inspiration explains the means and extent of the Bible being the Word of God.

¹⁶All Scripture is **inspired** by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

God is the source of Scripture and as such it takes on His qualities of inerrancy (without error) and infallibility (trustworthy). God "moved" or "superintended" or directed (but did not dictate to) the human authors so that, using their own personalities and styles, they composed and recorded without error in the original manuscripts God's specific revelation to mankind (2 Peter 1:21-22).

²⁰But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but **men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God**. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Inspiration is verbal (extending to the very words) and plenary (including all the words). This is shown by the Lord Jesus' and Apostle Paul's statements, usage, and arguments (Matthew 5:18; 22:31-32; Galatians 3:16).

¹⁸For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18)

³¹But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ³²**I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.**" (Matthew 22:31-32)

This means that the very words in the original manuscripts are the very words of God. When God chose a word or a grammar it was chosen for a reason. This is why we must be careful. The Bible is not full of "inspired" ideas or principles; it is full of inspired words – the very words of God.

❖ **Are you committed to be a doer of the inspired, plenary, verbal, infallible, inerrant in the original manuscripts word of God?**

Since the covenant was given to Abraham by the Son of God who preached the gospel to Abraham (Galatians 3:8) and it is referring to Christ, then by the nature of the covenant it is superior to the law.

3. Abraham's covenant was first (3:17-18)

¹⁷What 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. ¹⁸For 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.

¹⁷This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. (ESV)

Paul's point is that the giving of the law to Israel cannot invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. The usage of "previously ratified" indicates the covenant's permanence.

There are several passages that discuss the timing of the Israelites in Egypt.

Two passages refer to the time of living in Egypt as being 430 years.

⁴⁰**Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.** ⁴¹And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:40-41)

¹⁷What 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. (Galatians 3:17)

Two passages refer to the time of enslaved and oppressed (or mistreated) as 400 years. This can be taken as a round number or the “enslaved and mistreated part was 400 years.

¹³God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where **they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.** (Genesis 15:13)

Stephen’s defense before his martyrdom where he refers to Genesis 15:13... ⁶But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that **they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.** (Acts 7:6)

One refers to the time of Israel’s stay in Egypt through the wilderness wanderings to the distribution of the land as an inheritance as “about 450 years”.

Paul on the sabbath day in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch... ¹⁷The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. ¹⁸For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—**all of which took about four hundred and fifty years.** ²⁰After these things He gave *them* judges until Samuel the prophet. (Acts 13:17-20)

Terry Riley in his Bible Chronology notes says that it seems best, after examining all the data, to interpret Exodus 12:40-41 in a literal manner. Exodus 12:40-41 is an explicit statement that Israel was in Egypt 430 years. This 430-year period began with the renewal of the covenant promise to Jacob in Genesis 46:2-4 just prior to the descent to Egypt. The promises to Abraham were repeated several times, even to Isaac and Jacob. God periodically renewed His covenant and the final appearance of God reaffirmed the covenant just before Jacob left Canaan for Egypt (Genesis 46:2-4).

²God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” ³He said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. ⁴I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes.” (Genesis 46:2-4)

So, Paul is using the Exodus length of 430 years from confirmation of the covenant to Jacob rather than from the initial giving of the covenant to Abraham. Using the 430-year time, the chronology becomes.

2166	Abraham’s birth in Ur				
2066	Birth of Isaac				
2006	Birth of Jacob				
1876	Jacob’s descent into Egypt	430 Yrs			477 Yrs “About 450 Yrs”
1806	Joseph Dies		360 Yrs	400 Yrs	
1446	Exodus from Egypt				
1406	Israel’s entrance into Canaan under Joshua				
1399	Assignment of the land to the Twelve Tribes				

It seems clear that Genesis 15:13 is a general statement predicting this event in the future. In so doing, the sojourn is simply rounded off to 400 years. As a result, Stephen in Acts 7:6 is simply quoting Genesis 15:13 rather than making an exact statement about chronology. Alternatively, it could be referring to the time from when Joseph dies and a king that did not know Joseph came to power (Exodus 1:6-8) to the entrance into Canaan. However, that would depend on one's interpretation of "oppressed" in Genesis 15:13.

⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. (Exodus 1:6-8)

Paul makes a summary statement, "If salvation is based on law, then it is no longer based on promise." The two are mutually exclusive. However, the truth, which Paul just showed, is that "God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise". "Granted" means graced and the usage indicates the promise is permanent.

In this passage we see faith, grace, and Christ. Salvation has always been by grace through faith in Christ (the promise of the "seed").

Conclusion

The Galatians were in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul began this doctrinal section of the letter by asking five questions of the Galatians driving home the point that they did not receive spiritual baptism through works of the law, but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He then gave a Scriptural argument from Abraham's pre-circumcision and Law justification by faith alone. Then he gave the argument from the Law's failure to justify. Now today, he gave the argument that law did not invalidate promise.

Additional Study

1. Read Galatians once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for six days).
2. Today's Questions
 - If you truly understood God's faithfulness at the heart level, what would be your response to feelings like: worry, anxiousness, fear, despair, or depression?
 - Read Jeremiah 17:5-8
 - Describe the person who trusts in other things than God (v5-6):
 - Describe the person who trusts in God (v7-8):
 - Read 2 Peter 1:3
 - What does God's faithfulness mean to believers who are committed to be doers of God's Word?
 - Read Hebrews 12:4-13
 - What does God's faithfulness mean to those who have decided to continue in willful sin?
 - Read Psalm 96:11-13 and Revelation 19:11
 - What does God's faithfulness mean to those who have not bowed in submission to Jesus as Lord and Savior?