

The Importance of the Promise



SABBATH—OCTOBER 29

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 3:15–20; Genesis 9:11–17; Matthew 5:17–20; Exodus 16:22–26; Genesis 15:1–6.

MEMORY VERSE: “The great gift that God has for us does not depend on the law. If it did, it would no longer depend on a promise. But God gave it to Abraham as a free gift through a promise” (Galatians 3:18, NIV).

SOMEONE ONCE ASKED A POLITICIAN, “HAVE YOU KEPT ALL THE PROMISES YOU MADE WHILE YOU WERE RUNNING FOR OFFICE?” He answered, “Yes—well, at least all the promises that I planned to keep.”

Who has not failed to keep a promise at one time or another? Who has not been the one to break a promise or the one to have a promise made to him or her broken?

Sometimes people make promises. They fully plan to keep them, but, later, do not. Others make promises, but they know that they are all lies.

Fortunately for us, God's promises are of a different kind. God's Word is sure and never changes. “‘I will bring about what I have said. I will do what I have planned,’” says the Lord (Isaiah 46:11, NIV).

In this week's lesson, Paul directs our attention to the relationship between God's promise to Abraham and the law given to Israel 430 years later. How should we understand the relationship between the two? What does that mean for the preaching of the gospel?

SUNDAY—OCTOBER 30**LAW AND FAITH
(Galatians 3:15–18)**

Suppose Paul's enemies had admitted that Abraham lived his life by faith. Paul knew they still would wonder why God gave the law to Israel about 400 years after Abraham. He knew they might say that this meant the law took the place of grace.

What is the point in Galatians 3:15–18 of Paul's comparison between a person's final will at death and God's covenant¹ with Abraham?

A covenant and a will are different. A covenant is an agreement between two or more people. It often is called a "contract" or "treaty." But a will is the announcement of a single person. The Greek translation of the Old Testament never translates God's covenant with Abraham with the Greek word used for agreements or contracts (*syntheke*). Instead, it uses the word for a testament or a will (*diatheke*). Why? Maybe it is because the translators recognized that God's covenant with Abraham was not a "contract" between two people. Instead, God's covenant was based on nothing other than His own will (desire). No string of ifs, ands, or buts was attached. Abraham was simply to accept God at His word.

Paul uses this double meaning of "will" and "covenant" to make clear

the special example of God's covenant with Abraham. As with a human will, God's promise names special receivers: Abraham and his future children (Genesis 12:1–5; Galatians 3:16). It also includes an inheritance² (Genesis 13:15; Genesis 17:8; Romans 4:13; and Galatians 3:29). Most important to Paul is that God's promise never changes. Once it has become legal, a person's will cannot be changed without special permission. In the same way, the giving of the law through Moses cannot change God's earlier covenant with Abraham. God's covenant is a promise (Galatians 3:16). And God is not a promise breaker (Isaiah 46:11; Hebrews 6:18).

Replace the word *covenant* with *promise* in the following verses. What is the nature³ of the "covenant" in each set of verses? How does understanding God's covenant as a promise make the meaning of the verses clearer? And how does it help us understand better what a covenant is (Genesis 9:11–17; Genesis 15:18; and Genesis 17:1–21)? What does this teach us, too, about the character of God, and how we can trust Him?

MONDAY—OCTOBER 31**FAITH AND LAW (Romans 3:31)**

Paul has argued strongly for the importance of faith in a person's relationship with God. Paul often has said that circumcision⁴ is not a requirement

1. covenant—promise or agreement between God and His people.

2. inheritance—a gift (money, property, and so on) that is received from someone when that person dies.

3. nature—a basic quality that something has.

4. circumcision—the act of cutting off the skin (called the foreskin) at the end of the penis of a man or a boy.

for salvation. Neither are any other “works of the law” (ESV). This is because “we can be made right with God by believing in Christ, not by obeying the law” (Galatians 2:16, NIV). So, it is not the works of the law but faith that marks a person as a believer (Galatians 3:7). Of course, this brings up the questions, Does the law have no value, then? Did God remove the law?

Salvation is by faith and not by works of the law. Does Paul mean to say that faith removes the law? What do Romans 3:31; Romans 7:7, 12; Romans 8:3; and Matthew 5:17–20 tell us?

Paul’s argument in Romans 3 helps us understand his discussion about faith and law in Galatians. Paul knows that his comments might lead some people to think that he is pushing the idea of faith without the law. So he asks this question: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” (verse 31, ESV). The word translated as “overthrow” in Romans 3:31 (ESV) is *katargeo*. Paul uses the word often. And it can be translated as “to nullify [make useless]” (Romans 3:3, ESV), “to abolish [remove]” (Ephesians 2:15), “to be brought to nothing” (Romans 6:6, ESV), or even “to destroy” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Some people today claim Paul wanted to support the idea that the law was somehow removed at the Cross. But Paul denies that idea with a powerful “No!” He says very clearly that his

gospel “establishes [supports]” the law.

“The plan of justification by faith⁵ shows God’s high respect for His law through the cleansing sacrifice of His son. If justification by faith removes the law, then there was no need for the forgiving death of Christ to free the sinner from his sins, and bring him back to peace with God.

“True faith suggests in itself that a sinner is willing to follow the will of God by obeying His law. . . . Real faith is based on wholehearted love for the Savior. It leads only to obedience.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 510.

Think through the situations that might happen if Paul did mean that faith makes the law useless. Would this mean that adultery (sex outside of marriage) was no longer a sin, or stealing, or even murder? Think about the sorrow, pain, and suffering you could save yourself if you just obeyed God’s law. What suffering have you or others gone through just because you disobeyed God’s law?



Real faith is based on whole-hearted love for the Savior.

5. justification by faith—the belief that being saved and forgiven depends only on the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins.

TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 1**THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW
(Galatians 3:19–29)**

In Galatians 3:19–29 Paul speaks many times about “the law.” What law is Paul talking about in this part of Galatians?

Some people believe that the word *until* in verse 19 (ESV) shows that this law was only temporary. So they have thought the verses must have talked about the ceremonial law.⁶ This is because the purpose of that law was fulfilled at the Cross and then came to an end. This might make sense by itself. But it does not seem to be Paul’s point in Galatians. Both the ceremonial and moral law⁷ were “added” at Sinai because of sin. But we will learn by studying the following questions that Paul seems to have the moral law in mind.

Does Paul say that the law was added? To what was it added, and why? Compare⁸ Galatians 3:19 and Romans 5:13, 20.

Paul is not saying that the law was added to God’s covenant with Abraham as if it were an addition to a will in order to change the original (first) plans. The law had been around long before Sinai (read tomorrow’s lesson). Instead, Paul means

that the law was given to Israel for an entirely different purpose. It was to redirect (turn) the people back to God and the grace⁹ He offers all who come to Him by faith. The law shows us our sinful condition and our need of God’s grace. The law was not to be some kind of program for “earning” salvation. Instead, the law was given, Paul says, “to increase [magnify] the trespass [sin]” (Romans 5:20, ESV). Its purpose is to show us more clearly the sin in our lives (Romans 7:13).

The ceremonial laws pointed to the Messiah (Chosen One) and focused on holiness and the need of a Savior. But it is the moral law that shows us that sin is not just a part of our natural condition. Sin also breaks God’s law (Romans 3:20; Romans 5:13, 20; and Romans 7:7, 8, 13). This is why Paul says, “Where there is no law, the law can’t [cannot] be broken” (Romans 4:15, NIV).

“The law acts as a magnifying glass. The magnifying glass does not really add more dirty spots that make clothes dirtier. Instead it makes the dirty spots stand out more clearly and shows many more of them than one is able to see with the naked eye.”—Adapted from William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition [Written Explanation] on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1968), page 141.

6. ceremonial law—the law dealing with the sanctuary (the house where God was worshiped by the Jews in Bible times). The sanctuary services helped the Jews to better understand God’s plan for saving them from sin.

7. moral law—God’s law, the Ten Commandments.

8. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

9. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.



The ceremonial laws pointed to our need of a Savior.

WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 2

THE LONG HISTORY OF GOD'S LAW (Genesis 9:5, 6)

Paul says that the law was added at Mount Sinai. Does he mean that the law was not there before Sinai? If not, what was the difference before and after Mount Sinai? Read Genesis 9:5, 6; Genesis 18:19; Genesis 26:5; Genesis 39:7–10; and Exodus 16:22–26.

God did not need to show His law to Abraham with thunder, lightning, and a penalty (punishment) of death (Exodus 19:10–23). Why, then, did God give the law to the Israelites in that way? It was because, during their slavery in Egypt, the Israelites had forgotten God's greatness and His perfect character.¹⁰ As a result, the Israelites needed to realize how sinful they were. And they needed to understand how holy God's law was. The example at Sinai certainly did just that.

What does Paul mean in Galatians 3:16–19 when he says the law was added “until the promised Seed had come” (NirV)?

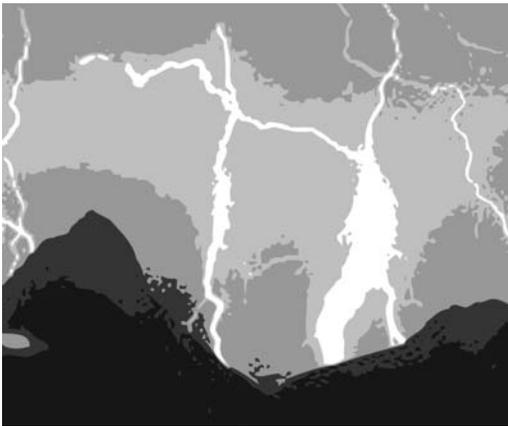
Many have understood this verse to mean that the law given at Mount Sinai was temporary. It entered 430 years after Abraham and then ended when Christ came. But this interpretation does not agree with what Paul says about the law in Romans, or with other verses in the Bible. For example, read Matthew 5:17–19.

The mistake readers often make with this verse is to decide that the word *until* always suggests limited time. This is not the case. In describing the person who fears the Lord, Psalm 112:8 (ESV) says, “His heart is steady; he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries [enemies].” Does this mean that when the person who fears the Lord succeeds he will become afraid? In Revelation 2:25 (ESV), Jesus says, “Only hold fast what you have until I come.” Does Jesus mean that once He comes we no longer need to be faithful?

The work of the law did not end with the coming of Christ. It will continue to point out sin as long as the law continues. What Paul is saying is that the coming of Christ shows the turning point in human history. Christ can do what the law could never do. Only Jesus can give a true cure for sin. How? He justifies (forgives) sinners and by His Spirit fulfills His law in them (Romans 8:3, 4).

¹⁰ character—who God is; having and understanding the character of God is the same as being kind, loving, honest, and so on. God's law (Ten Commandments) shows us His character.

Have you ever thought to yourself, *If only the Lord did this for me, then I would never again doubt or question Him?* Think about what happened at Sinai! The Israelites saw a powerful example of God’s power, but what did they still do? What should this tell you about what true faith is and how we get and keep it? (Read Colossians 2:6.)



God gave the law on Sinai in a great show of power because the people had forgotten His greatness.

THURSDAY—NOVEMBER 3

THE GREATNESS OF THE PROMISE (Acts 7:38)

In Galatians 3:19, 20, Paul continues his chain of thoughts about the law not removing the covenant of grace. This is important because, if Paul’s enemies were correct, the law would do just that. Think, then, what our position as sinners would be if we had to depend on our law keeping, not on God’s grace, to save us. We would, in the end, be without hope.

The details of Paul’s comments in Galatians 3:19, 20 are difficult to understand. But his basic point is clear: the law comes second to the promise because the law was given through angels and Moses. That the angels gave the law is not mentioned in Exodus. But it is found in several other places in the Bible (Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53; and Hebrews 2:2). Paul uses the word *mediator*¹¹ in 1 Timothy 2:5 when speaking of Christ. But his comments here strongly suggest he has Deuteronomy 5:5 (NIRV) in mind, when Moses says, “I stood between the Lord and you. I announced to you the Lord’s message.”

The giving of the law on Sinai was full of glory,¹² with countless angels. And Moses was also important as the lawgiver. But the giving of the law was indirect.¹³ When God gave His promise, it was different. The promise was made directly to Abraham (and to all believers). For this reason, there was no need for a mediator. In the end, the law is important. But it is no substitute for the promise of salvation through grace by faith. Instead, the role of the law is to help us better understand just how wonderful that promise really is.

Describe the nature of Abraham’s direct experiences with God. How could such a relationship with God be helpful to us? Study Genesis 15:1–6; Genesis 18:1–33; and Genesis 22:1–18.

11. mediator—a person making peace between two persons or groups.

12. glory—great power, beauty, and royal perfection.

13. indirect—not going straight from one point to another.

Think about some of the other experiences people in the Bible had with God—Adam and Eve in Eden (Genesis 3); Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28); and Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Maybe you have not experienced anything as wonderful. But in what ways has God shown Himself to you? Ask yourself, too, whether anything in your personal life might prevent you from having the kind of closeness that Abraham experienced with God. If so, what steps can you take to change this?



The law on Sinai was given through angels and Moses.

FRIDAY—NOVEMBER 4

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “In their slavery the people had greatly lost the knowledge of God and of the covenant with Abraham. In freeing them from Egypt, God tried to show them His power and His mercy, so that they might be led to love and trust Him. God brought them down to the Red Sea where escape seemed

impossible to the people with the Egyptians chasing them. God wanted the people to realize their helplessness and their need of His help. And then He performed [did] a miracle to save them. In this way, God had hoped that the people would be filled with love and thankfulness and confidence in His power to help them. He had connected the people to Himself as their Savior from the slavery of Egypt.

“But there was a still greater truth to be taught to them. Living in the midst of idol-worship, the people had no true understanding of the holiness of God, of the sinfulness of their own hearts, their inability to obey God’s law, and their need of a Savior. All this they must be taught.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,¹⁴ page 371.

“The law of God was spoken in great power from Sinai in condemning [judging as guilty] sinners. It is the role of the law to condemn. But there is in it no power to forgive or to save.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 1094.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Think about this whole idea of promises, especially broken ones. How did you feel about those who have broken their promises to you? How much difference did it make whether the person planned to keep

14. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God’s people in early Bible times, men such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel; prophets are men or women who are spokespersons for God.

his or her promise or did not? What happened to your level of trust after the promise was broken, whatever the reason? What does it mean to you to know that you can trust God's promises? Or perhaps the question should be, How can you learn to trust God's promises in the first place?

② In what ways are we in danger of being so influenced by our environment that we forget the important truths God has given us? How can we recognize these negative influences? And then how can we keep them from influencing us?