

The Law and the Promise
 Galatians 3:15-22
 Tampa Covenant Church
 27 September 2026

Proposition: Because God is faithful to his promise of salvation to Abraham; we receive the promised inheritance; not by keeping the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

FCF: Seeking to earn what God has already given us in Jesus Christ.

RHF: Through his person and work, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise of blessing given to those who place their faith in him.

(#1) Introduction:

We're continuing our study in the book of Galatians, entitled "*The Gospel of Freedom*." Where the Apostle Paul is writing to the Galatian churches in defense of the gospel he preached to them. And over the past few weeks we've seen that right standing before God comes through faith alone; apart from works of the law. Last week, Lou closed with Paul's reminder that Christ has done for us on the cross what we could never do for ourselves. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. And Paul didn't grab this out of midair. Rather he quoted from Deut. 21, "*cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*." And he landed his point by saying, "*So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith*." And in today's text, Paul continues his defense by first showing the **(#2) Galatians and us** that the law cannot replace the promise of blessing given to Abraham then he'll discuss the law's purpose in redemptive history.

The Law Cannot Replace the Promise: (vv.15-18)

(#3) Here in v.15, Paul sets out to prove that the law cannot replace the promise. And he begins by way of human analogy, "*even with a man-made covenant (last will and testament); no one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified (validated)*." **(#4) Next, he says**, "*Now 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*." Recall our meditation passage, the promises God gave to Abraham concerned numerous descendants and the extension of blessing to the nations. Later in Gen 17, the LORD said to Abraham, "*I will give to you and your offspring the land of their sojournings*." Now, Paul knows that "offspring" can also refer to many descendants. His point is that as God's promise unfolds through Scripture, it ultimately comes to rest on one particular offspring: Jesus Christ."¹

(#5) In v.17, Paul clarifies the illustration, he writes, "*This 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*." What is Paul doing? He's reasoning from the lesser to the greater: If the principle is true that we don't annul or add to a human covenant once it's been ratified, then how much more is this principle true concerning a covenant ratified by God? And notice the timeline, the law came 430 years after the promise was given. Now in our culture of "*out with the old and in with the new*" it's fair to think that the law replaced the promise but Paul is saying that's not the case. The promise given to Abraham still stands.

(#6) And here in v.18, we see why that matters, *“For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”* (#7 Blank) In the OT, the inheritance promised to Abraham was associated with the land God would give to his descendants. But Paul has already shown us that the promise ultimately reaches beyond real estate. Christ is the promised offspring through whom the blessing of Abraham comes. And so the point is that if the inheritance depends on works of the law, then it's no longer something God has promised to give; it's something we've earned. But that's not what happened (#8) with Abraham; Paul says, *“God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”* The verb “gave” describes the manner in which God gave the promise to Abraham...it was given graciously.² There was no law to keep nor merit to establish. Abraham simply received what God graciously promised through faith.³ There's no middle ground in Paul's argument. The inheritance is either received as a gift or it's something earned through law-keeping. Paul is saying it can't be both.

(#9 Blank) And clear as that distinction sounds, we can get tripped up. I was telling someone the other day that on occasion I look through some of my old journals and I shriek in horror at how I approached my relationship with God. I acted more like an employee working for a wage than a child resting in the gift of his father's grace. Christmas is coming and in the Farrell household everyone will get good gifts. And I couldn't for the life of me imagine after our gift exchange one of our loved ones pulling Aida and me aside and asking, *“what do I need to do to earn this gift?”* We'd probably look at them a little confused and say, *“Nothing. It's a gift. We gave it to you because we love you.”* See, if you have to work for it then it's no longer a gift; it's a wage you've earned. As ridiculous as that sounds, we sometimes fall headlong into this kind of thinking in our relationship with God. We come to church on Sunday after a “bad week.” And after the communion homily, all followers of Christ are invited to this table of grace. And instead of coming to the table trusting Christ for his grace and help in our time of need, we remain in the pew or we come feeling as if we don't deserve to be here. Why? Because somewhere in our thinking, we believe we need a few more good weeks under our belt before we can get right with God.

And it can work the other way too. We find ourselves walking through a difficult season and begin thinking, *“Why is this happening to me? I've been faithful. I've been praying, serving, and I've been generous with my resources so what's going on?”* And underneath all that doing can lie the conviction that I've done my part; therefore, God owes me better than this. The moment we succumb to that kind of thinking; we've turned grace into wages due based on performance. But God didn't look at Abraham's performance in determining his blessing. He gave it to him by promise, and the law coming 430 years later couldn't undo what God had already graciously promised.

What we do as Christians matter: our obedience, devotion to Christ, prayer, worship and generosity. But none of those things serve as the basis for our inheritance. It's all grounded in the gospel of grace, not a gospel of works. And so, Paul has already argued that the works of the law can't justify us; the law brings a curse from which Christ has redeemed us; and now we see that our inheritance doesn't come through works (#10) of the law.⁴ And if that's true, why then the law? This question was probably on the reader's mind and Paul anticipates it in v.19; this brings us to our second movement...

The Law Serves the Promise: (vv.19-22)

Paul shows that the law had (#11) a definite beginning. Why then the law? *"it was added because of transgressions."* Say you give your child a snack, and every day they take it into the living room to watch their favorite show and they always make a mess. So one day you make a law, *"From now on, you're not allowed to take your snack into the living room. You must finish it in the kitchen first."* A few days later, you give them a snack and with snack in hand, they head straight into the living room. What have they done? They've transgressed your law and are now subject to your wrath. (#12) Paul says in Rom 4, *"For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression."* In other words, sin was already in the world and when the law came, it didn't create new sins; rather, it revealed sin as a conscious violation against the law of God.⁵ (#13) And Paul is clear that the law would be in play *"until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made."* None other than Jesus Christ; the one through whom all our transgressions are forgiven.⁶

Paul continues that the law was *put in place through angels*⁷ *by an intermediary; which implies more than one but God is one.* Not exactly sure of the role of the angels but the intermediary most likely refers to Moses as the mediator of God's law. (#14 Blank) The work of a mediator is to stand between two parties: God the lawgiver and the people who are called to obey the law. Recall in Ex. 24, Moses told the people all the words of the LORD and the people responded, *"all the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."* On the other hand, there was no mediator when God gave the promise to Abraham. God himself made the promise and Abraham responded by believing God.⁸

And Paul anticipates that some might conclude that the law and promise function like oil and water in God's plan of salvation, and he beats them to the punch by raising the (#15) question in v.21, *"Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?"* And once again, he strongly pushes back; certainly not, may it never be, perish the thought! (#16 Blank) Yes, the law came 430 years after the promise and yes it was added because of transgression and yes it was temporary until Christ came. But it certainly didn't serve as God's back up plan for salvation. As if God said, *"Well, the promise isn't working, so maybe the law will get their attention. And if that doesn't work, maybe Christ is the answer."* Certainly not! There has only ever been one plan of salvation because we don't serve a plan B or a plan C God. We serve a plan A God. And that means the law and the promise aren't competitors. Rather, they serve different purposes in God's one and only plan to redeem both Jew and Gentile.

(#17) Listen to Paul's explanation, *"For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law."* Perhaps it's helpful to hear it this way: suppose the law could give new life; then right standing before God would indeed be by the law. Now if that were true then the law and the promise would be two competing ways of obtaining righteousness. But Paul has been clear from the outset, the law can't give life; therefore, there's no competition. And this doesn't mean there's something defective or bad about the law. The problem isn't with the law; the law is holy. The law is good. The problem is our sinful hearts! The law can tell us what righteousness requires but we're incapable of rendering the perfect obedience required in obtaining right standing with God.

So then if the law can't give new life, what does it accomplish? (#18) It serves the promise. Listen to what Paul writes in v.22, *"But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin..."* Meaning the law exposes our sin

in light of God's holiness and strips away every possible basis for self-justification. It brings us to the realization that we cannot make ourselves righteous before God.⁹ Left to ourselves, we're spiritually bankrupt with no hope of redemption in this world. But thanks be to God that's not the (#19) end of the story. Because this imprisoning under sin has a purpose, *"SO THAT the promise (right standing with God) by faith in Christ Jesus might be given to those who believe."* Not those who do the works of the law.

(#20) John Calvin said, *"This sentence is full of the highest consolation. It tells us that, wherever we hear ourselves condemned in Scripture, there is help provided for us in Christ, if we betake ourselves to him."*¹⁰ What strikes me most about Calvin's words is that even in condemnation, there's help. Because when the truth of Scripture exposes our sinful hearts, rather than trying to fix ourselves; we run to Christ who is our rock, our refuge and the source of our help in times of need.

(#21 Blank) And brothers and sisters, that's not only true when we first come to Christ. It's also true of the way we continue in Christ. The law continually reveals those areas in our lives that are out of step with God's will. And when that happens, our response isn't to hide from God until we get our act together. Nor is it to work harder to get back into his good graces. Rather all of life is characterized by turning from sin and turning to Christ in faith. Because the Christian life from beginning to end is a life of grace. God doesn't just pardon us and accept us as righteous in his sight; then leave us to ourselves to figure things out. His grace is always at work in us; conforming us to the image of Christ. And it constantly reassures us that our salvation doesn't rest in our performance but in the death, burial, and resurrection of our Savior.

Conclusion:

And so church, it's all grace! Grace amazing and grace abounding that sought us, redeemed us and brought us into fellowship with the Father through the work of the Son. And this inheritance that we've received and will receive in its fullness when our Savior returns to make all things new is never something we could earn. What God promised to Abraham is now ours through faith in Christ. And even the law that exposes our sin serves God's gracious purpose of showing us our desperate need for Christ. It's all grace! And if it is indeed all grace then let us cease from trying to earn what God has already given us in Christ. And let us cease from measuring our standing before him based on what we've done, haven't done or should've done. Instead, whether we're having a good week or a bad week, we remember that the Spirit of God lives in us. And we treasure in our hearts the sacrificial love of our Savior, who loved us and gave himself for us that we might live to God for his glory and his glory alone.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 229.

² Ibid, 231.

³ Ibid, 231.

⁴ Ibid, 232.

⁵ Ibid, 234.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 90.

⁷ The idea that angels were involved in the giving of the law is not taught anywhere in the OT (though see Deut. 33:2 LXX), but it is a common Jewish tradition (Jub. 1.27–2.1; Philo, *Somn.* 1.143; Josephus, *Ant.* 15.136) that has left its mark on the NT elsewhere (Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). In none of these texts does the mention of angels suggest any question about its divine origin; on the contrary, the emphasis, if anything, is on the holiness and majesty of the law. Moo, 235.

⁸ Moo, 236.

⁹ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 263–264.

¹⁰ John Calvin, quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 240.