

Gal. 3:15-22, Law and the Promise
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A. Overview

3:15-22 is distinctively the "promise" section in Galatians. The word occurs for the first time at the end of 3:14 by way of transition, occurs 6 times in this section, and elsewhere only at 3:29; 4:23, 28. Two parts:

1. 15-18, Law *does not* supercede promise.
2. 19-22, The law *does* prepare for promise.

The next section, 3:23ff, shows that just as promise precedes the law, faith follows it.

B. 3:15-18, Law does not supercede promise

1. Overview of argument: the promise of blessing to Abraham cannot be removed by Sinai, a later covenant.

- a) Some covenants do not interfere with one another; cf. David and Sinai.
- b) Some covenants do interfere: New and Sinai.
- c) What is the relation here? Are the covenants non-interfering, like Sinai and David, or interfering, like Sinai and New? Can't tell on the basis of chronology alone, as these two examples show.
- d) Key observation: A covenant cannot be overruled while its promises remain unfulfilled. That is the argument Paul makes here.

2. v.15: Human example.

- a) Uses example of a human "will" (Gk *diagkh* can mean both "covenant" and "will;" covenants can be amended, but a will, once "ratified" at the death of the testator, is invariant.)
- b) Two things cannot be done with such a will, after it is in effect: Annul it (cancel provisions), or Add to it (add provisions).
- c) There is an implied "until": the will stands until its provisions have been carried out. Then it is history; moves from being imperative to being indicative.
- d) **Application:** Take this assurance to heart. None of God's promises to his people can ever fail. If men's law holds a promise to be binding, how much more must God, ever consistent with his own higher law, be faithful?

3. v.16: The nature of Abraham's covenant: addressed to Abraham and his seed.

- a) "Seed" is singular; naturally understood as collective, but Paul uses the singular to illustrate that it ultimately refers to Christ.
 - b) Paul is NOT excluding its application to other individuals too.
 - 1) Note that he expressly refers to "Abraham and his seed." Thus at least Christ and Abraham.
 - 2) v.29 also calls us "Abraham's seed."
 - 3) Indeed, one aspect of these promises is the innumerable *plurality* of those included in the seed.
 - c) What is the point?
 - 1) The promise cannot be considered complete until Christ partakes of it, in a way that will become clearer as we proceed.
 - 2) He is the head, the representative, of a great multitude, incorporating all of God's people in every age, who enjoy its benefits through him.
 - d) It is worth noting that the phrase cited by Paul, *kai tw spermati sou*, appears in the Abrahamic promises only in reference to the land. Paul indeed extends its scope: "the promises," including the promise about blessing the gentiles. But the particular promise that leads to this argument is that Abraham will one day inherit the land in which he wandered as a stranger (17:8), the land which he personally saw (13:15), the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates (15:18). Even when Hebrews shows us that Abraham was looking forward to a heavenly city, it acknowledges that the physical land is the "land of promise" (11:9).
4. v.17,18, the conclusion: Law does not supercede promise.
- a) God confirmed the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob (as the 430 year reference shows) before the law came.
 - b) It was confirmed *toward Christ*, which is simply a restatement of v.16. Note two translational problems here:
 - 1) NASB, NIV omit the reference to Christ entirely.
 - 2) KJV "in Christ" makes Christ the means or agent of the ratification. He may be, but that is not Paul's point here. Gk. *eis xriston* is "unto Christ," not "in Christ" or "by means of Christ."
 - c) Christ doesn't come until *after* the law, yet the covenant is intended for him.
 - d) Therefore the law cannot cancel the covenant of promise.
 - e) 18, But if you do follow the law, you have discarded promise, since the two are antithetical to one another. Cannot view the law as an add-on.

5. *Application*: God's faithfulness! Recall Bob Maziasz and MVI, hired one week, out the next. God doesn't deal with us that way. He promises, and he fulfills.

C. **3:19-22, The Law does prepare for promise**

Two questions, exploring the implications of the law, since it does not cancel out the previously given covenant of promise. The first is general: "What can we say about the law?" The second zeros in on the more specific issue: "Is it in conflict with promise?"

1. 3:19-20, What about the Law? *ti oun ho nomos?*

Very general interrogative. Not just purpose, as AV suggests, and in fact it covers three questions, developed in the response: Why? When? How?

a) Why? To increase transgressions.

So far from solving the sin problem, as the judaizers had taught, it actually intensifies it. It turns sin into transgression. Recall discussion of 2:19; cf. John 15:22; Rom. 3:20; 7:7; and Gal. 3:24. Increases sin, not objectively, but subjectively.

b) When? Til the seed should come.

Based on the argument in vv.15-18, it was only temporary, a holding action while waiting for the fulfillment of the earlier promise.

c) How? As a mediated, therefore bilateral, agreement.

1) By angels.

a> OT ref's to their attendance at Sinai: Deut. 33:2 (esp. LXX); Ps. 68:17

b> Other NT ref's: Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2

2) Mediator: Moses.

3) v.20--over 300 interpretations! John Brown has the best discussion of the options here. The most likely, in my mind:

a> The presence of a mediator implies that two parties are involved; cf. the bilateral nature of the covenant at Sinai.

b> But God unilaterally made the covenant with Abraham; God is the only party to it. Cf. the picture in Gen. 15 of covenant-making.

c> Problem: Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Is that also a bilateral covenant, thus inferior to the covenant with Abraham?

d> Answer: Because Christ is God, he can be mediator without implying bilaterality. He is not the mediator of two separate entities, but rather in himself brings together both manhood and deity. The difference between a rivet (Moses) and a weld (Christ).

d) Thus we have three specific ways in which the law is different from promise: its purpose, its duration, and its bilateral nature. *Application*: Each of these should lead us to thank God.

2. 3:21-22, Is it in conflict with the promises?

Absolutely not! Shown in two ways. First, the law is intrinsically incapable of addressing the same problem that the law addresses. The two are incomparables as substitutes for one another. Second, the law in fact serves the promise as a feeder, an introduction.

a) 21: The law cannot save. If it could, God would use it, rather than sacrifice his son. Cf. 2:21. Note that what is in view is the incapacity of the law to save, not man's weakness.

b) 22: Instead, the law has imprisoned all things under sin. It leaves men with no hope of escape, thus turning their attention toward the promise and the escape it offers. So far from conflicting with promise, the law works with it, for it prepares people's hearts by showing them their need for gracious salvation.

c) *Application*: The right use of the law in evangelism. People will never be saved unless they know they are lost. The biblical way to show them their lost condition is through the law.

D. Conclusion

Two major lessons in this section:

1. God is faithful to his promises. He does not change his mind in midstream and withdraw what he has promised.
2. The law is not a mistake or useless. It is God's instrument to show people their sinfulness and the hopelessness of salvation apart from Christ.

E. Hymns:

1. Great is Thy Faithfulness