VIII. Redeemed from the Curse of the Law

February 1/2, 2012 Galatians 3:10-18

Aim: To appreciate the wondrous grace of the imputation, that Jesus Christ became a curse for us to save us from the curse of the law.

A. The Curse of the Law (Gal. 3:10-14)

In addition to the fact that not even Abraham himself was justified by the works of the law, there is another, more serious and fatal matter. The law condemns rather than justifies.

1. The Curse (3:10-12)

In verses 10-12, Paul uses three Old Testament passages to demonstrate that if one seeks to be justified by works of the law he will fall under God’s curse. In the Bible, a curse means a pronouncement of ill upon a person or object (just as a blessing means a pronouncement of good). Specifically, a curse is a divine judgment that brings the sentence of condemnation.

   a) Law (3:10)

   For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’

Paul expands his argument beyond the ceremonial law. The apostle asserts that the one seeking salvation through law-keeping will not find peace and commendation, but falls under condemnation and the curse of the law. The legalistic Jews had unwittingly placed themselves under God’s wrath rather than His blessing, because they could not live up to His law and they would not submit to His grace.

The Scripture refers here to God’s moral law, and not merely to the rituals that separate Jews from Gentiles, as the New Perspective of Paul and the law would have it. The New Perspective maintains that when Paul wrote about abiding by all things written in the book of the law, he did not have the whole Old Testament law in mind. What he meant instead were the ceremonial regulations that marked Israelites off from Gentiles, such as circumcision and the rules for table fellowship, not the moral code that people might use to justify their righteousness before God. But ‘all’ is central to the meaning of the Old Testament verse, which concludes an extended condemnation of every possible violation of God’s law, and of those who break it. The word ‘all’ is equally central to Paul’s argument. Deuteronomy 27:26 wraps up an exhaustive catalog of the demands that God makes in His law (nearly all of which fall under the category of moral law) and His curse on anyone who violates any one of those demands. When Paul writes, ‘All who rely on observing the law are under a curse,’ he is defending the doctrine of justification through faith alone, insisting that no one can be accepted by God through the law unless it is kept in all its perfection.

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26. The background to this statement is Moses’ address to the Israelites delivered on the threshold of the Promised Land. In a statement of great solemnity, he presented them with two options: obey and be blessed; or disobey and be cursed (Dt. 11:26-30). To dramatize these options, Moses gave certain instructions to be followed after the people had entered the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 27 and 28, the twelve tribes were to be
gathered together, six of them on Mount Gerizim, representing God’s blessing upon obedience, and six on Mount Ebal, representing God’s curse upon disobedience. A litany of blessings for obedience is pronounced and another of curses for disobedience. It is the concluding curse pronounced at Mt. Ebal, a summary statement of the covenant curses, which Paul quotes here.

The law, therefore, could bring either a blessing or a curse, depending on whether it was obeyed or transgressed. However, the existence of two options is, for fallen man, an illusion. Because of his sinful nature, man is incapable of obeying the law. The possibility of blessing, received through obedience to the law, does not arise. It is not sufficient to obey some of the laws all of the time, or all of the laws some of the time. God, by His nature, requires perfection. We would have to obey all of the laws all of the time, and that is beyond the capacity of human nature (cp. Gal. 2:16). Since the option of blessing is excluded by the sinfulness of human nature, it follows that only the curse upon disobedience remains. The law, therefore, condemns all men, but reserves its greatest menace for those who seek to be justified by its works!

The purpose of the curses was to remind the people that they were unable to keep the law of God in a way that would make them acceptable to Him. For this reason, an altar for sacrifice was erected on Mt. Ebal, reminding the people of their need of grace, their need of pardon through an atoning sacrifice. Therefore, they lived by grace.

It would be understandable that someone might think Paul’s concern here is with circumcision (due to the context of chapter 2). But Paul has a more general point to make. The law can never justify! Paul derives from what was said at Mt. Ebal the general principle: the person who seeks to come to God by the means of his obedience or the person who does not deal with the fact that he is a sinner, who falls short of the glory of God, is under God’s curse. This means that we ourselves are under that same curse that was shouted down from Mt. Ebal.

Who lies under the curse? The curse lies upon all those who practice law-keeping with a view to pleasing God. Such people seek to be justified by the works of the law, and not by Christ. Since all men have the law ‘written in their hearts,’ and since they reject God as truly as did rebellious Israel, it follows that all mankind lies under the ‘curse of the law,’ not just the Jews. Admittedly, the Jews and Judaizers made a conscious effort to obtain justification by law-works, so rejecting the sufficiency of Christ. Yet all unregenerate men are essentially the same, seeking to please God (or merely to appease their consciences) by the things that they do.

The entire history of Israel had been, in effect, a portrayal of the way the curses of the Mosaic Law had been inflicted, in plagues, ‘natural’ disasters, famine, disease, military losses, and exile. The attempts to keep the law had brought Israel under the curse of occupation by the Roman Empire. What these Christian Jews needed to understand was that God now had a way for the Gentiles also to be a part of the kingdom – and that this way had nothing to do with obeying these rules and regulations that the Jews had held so dear as a distinctive mark of their ethnic identity.

If it is true that everyone, without exception, is condemned by the curse of the law, then why would anyone ever try to base salvation on keeping the law? This is Paul’s point. Everyone who depends on the law is under a curse because the law curses everyone who breaks it, which everyone does. Ironically, by advocating obedience to the law the Judaizers were not escaping God’s curse but actually incurring it! The problem with the law, then, is not the law; the problem with the law is our sin. Since we cannot keep the law, the law cannot bless us. All it can do is curse us, placing us under the condemnation of divine wrath.
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The indictment of this curse is threefold. First, it reminds us that we are called to a comprehensive obedience (cp. James 2:10-11). Second, God’s law demands personal actions of obedience. We must personally obey the law. We are under a curse if we do not perform the demands of the law. Third, God requires perpetual obedience. The law is a perpetually binding obligation (cp. Ez. 18:24). Therefore, Paul uses Deuteronomy 27:26 to indict anyone who thinks that he can be right with God on the basis of the works of the law. Left to ourselves, we are under the curse of God and there is absolutely no hope that we can be justified by the works of the law.

b) Faith (3:11)

But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’

When the law is viewed in its proper, scriptural light, argues the apostle, it is evident that no one can be justified by keeping it. The holy law serves only to make sin more obvious, as man’s behavior is measured against God’s requirements (cp. Rom. 3:20-23). If the law cannot bless us, then how can we receive God’s blessing? This is the question Paul has been wrestling with throughout this letter. How do I stand in right relationship with God? How can God accept me? What must I do to gain His favor? In a word, how can I be justified? Paul’s answer is that justification cannot come by works of the law; it must come through faith.

Next, Paul demonstrates from the Prophets that justification is by faith by quoting Habakkuk 2:4. This verse is cited two other times in the New Testament (cp. Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). Habakkuk had complained about the sin of the covenant people and God said that He was going to punish them by the Babylonians. Habakkuk was scandalized. He pointed out that the Babylonians were far worse than the covenant people. Why would God use them? God replied that in the future He would make all things right (Hab. 2:3). In verse 4, God anticipates the proud person who says that he does not want to wait for God’s timing. The ‘proud’ in the context of Habakkuk were the Chaldean invaders, raised up by God as an instrument of judgment upon rebellious Israel and other nations. They are representative of man in his proud self-sufficiency. The proud man does not want to live by that which he cannot see. He quibbles against the purposes of God. Such people are unwilling to submit; they are unwilling to live by the promise of the word of God; they demand to live by sight, by human effort, by their own rules. This is the type of one whose ‘soul is not right within him.’

By contrast, the righteous man is the one who lives by faith, relying not on himself, but on the grace of God for justification. Habakkuk is referring to the behavior of the righteous man and not to how one becomes righteous. The fact is, however, that those who are righteous before God live by a very different principle than the proud. They live by faith. Paul’s inference is, if they live by faith, then they have come to that righteousness by faith, which is exactly what he has already proven. So he rightly concludes that if the righteous man continues by faith, he begins by faith; he persists and perseveres by faith. Therefore, Paul argues from Habakkuk 2:4 that salvation is by faith alone. Righteousness is received by faith alone and the righteous one lives by faith. Faith is the basis of their acceptance with God and their escape from divine judgment. There is no other way.

In their original context, Habakkuk’s words condemned the pride of the Babylonians who conquered Jerusalem. The prophet accused them of proud self-confidence. But this is not how God wants His people to live. He wants them to live by faith. They are the justified ones, the
ones who have been declared righteous by God. Now they must live by faith, as Abraham did. Instead of trusting in themselves, they must trust in God.

c) Law vs. Faith (3:12)

Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’

Paul anticipates the objection that although one is justified by faith, true faith obeys, therefore works play a role in our justification. He reminds his readers that with respect to justification these two roads (faith and law) will never converge. With respect to being right with God, the law and the gospel are diametrically opposed. We can no more mix faith and works as instruments in justification than we can mix oil and water. Faith and law-works are based on entirely different principles.

Faith and works operate according to different principles. They are two entirely different ways to live; by believing and by doing. If we live by faith, we trust God to justify us through Jesus Christ. If we live by works, we count on our own contribution to make us fully acceptable to God. But we cannot have it both ways. Believing and doing are mutually exclusive. Either we trust God to justify us through faith or we try to justify ourselves by works.

To prove his point, Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5. Paul wants to show the utter antithesis between a view of justification based on obedience to the law and one based on faith in Jesus Christ. It is impossible to hold both positions. Paul’s point is to show that law and faith are opposites; that the ‘law is not of faith.’ If you begin by insisting on obedience as the way of salvation, you are committed to a view of complete obedience and not partial obedience. You cannot begin with obedience and then add faith somewhere along the line. It is ‘all or nothing.’ It is not enough to keep this law or that law; obedience, if it is to be a means of justification, must be absolute and total (cp. James 2:10).

The law, as found in Leviticus and elsewhere, operates on a different basis from faith. The only blessings it has to offer are for those who keep it. As far as justification is concerned, the law is not for believers; it is only for doers. Therefore, the law is based on works.

Once again we see two distinct options: either try to earn God’s favor by your works, or else recognize your ungodliness and look by faith to Christ. We cannot do both at the same time, for there is a mutual contradiction. To claim salvation through our works, we must at the very least establish that we are godly. To live by law is to live by self-effort and leads inevitably to failure, condemnation, and death. To claim salvation by grace, through faith, we must admit the very opposite! It is only as we recognize that man is incapable by nature of pleasing God that we will apply for mercy. To live by faith is to respond to God’s grace and leads to justification and eternal life.

The Judaizers have twisted the law from its God-given purposes by making it the means of justification. When it is abused in this manner, the judgment of the law resounds – ‘he who practices them shall live by them.’ To practice the law in order to seek righteousness by it brings one under the comprehensive demands of the law. The moment that we introduce any aspect of law into the equation of being right with God we have actually done away with grace and placed the person under law. Therefore, we may never combine faith and works with respect to justification.

In principle the law of Moses could bring either a blessing or a curse. That was its nature. Perfect obedience would secure God’s blessing, but anything else would result in His curse.
However, because human nature is sinful, the blessing could never be obtained by humankind. Only the curse remains. Because of the curse, it is impossible to obtain justification through human efforts. That route to salvation is forever barred. Only faith in the work of Christ avails. Reliance on works and trust in Christ are mutually exclusive, for the one presumes that the natural man can be godly, whereas the other accepts the innate sinfulness of man and looks alone to grace.

One practical lesson from these verses is the importance of using the law in our evangelism. We are to use the law to bring people to a conviction of sin. People need to realize that they are under the curse of the law and that their only hope is in Jesus Christ. Leviticus 18:5 with its insistence on obedience to the law, has pointed the way to Jesus Christ. It anticipated all along that He would be the only one able to perform its demands. A second lesson is the necessity for each of us to be humbled at the realization of our sinful weakness. Paul’s reminder here is very humbling: ‘the righteous man lives by faith.’ At the end of the day, regardless of how much we have done and of how many years we have lived the Christian life, we have done nothing to make ourselves acceptable to God.

2. The Curse-Bearer (3:13-14)

   a) Christ Redeems His People (3:13)

   Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’)...

   This verse reminds us of the penalty of the law (see verse 10). The penalty of the law is the wrath of God. God’s law pronounces a curse on everyone who fails to keep it—a curse, remember, that we are all under. Therefore, if we are to be saved, the curse must be removed. And this is what Christ was doing on the cross; redeeming His people from the law’s accursed penalty.

   The curse of the law lies upon all men, whether Jew or Gentile. The good news is that Christ provides a way of escape from that curse: He has ‘redeemed’ us. ‘Redeem’ means to ransom, to purchase by a price paid; the price is designated a redemption or ransom; and the reality of being purchases by that price is to be redeemed. It literally means ‘acquire at (or out of) the forum’ (exagorazō), and is a direct reference to the practice of freeing slaves through the payment of a purchase price. Christ, then, has ‘bought us back’ from the slave-market of sin. Man is in bondage to the law just because he is in bondage to sin. Redemption includes deliverance from the curse and purchase of the inheritance.

   Paul teaches that Christ redeems His people from the curse of the law. Christ has made a payment, not to Satan, but to God, because their sin has brought them under His curse. Their violation of the law exposes them to the curse of a just and perfect God. They are liable to punishment, because they are guilty. But Christ has paid a redemption price to deliver His people from the curse of the law.

   A price was paid, the very life of Christ (cp. 1 Pe. 1:18). If the price has been paid, then the transaction is complete and the slave is free. There is no room for the idea that Christ’s death only makes possible the salvation of the sinner. The redemption of the elect has been accomplished, not merely facilitated.
Although it is the law that ‘curses’ in this passage, it is God the Father who issued this curse – the law is but a reflection of His holy nature. Christ redeems His people from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them. These words are perhaps the most astonishing words in the Bible. Galatians offers us here the clearest possible teaching of substitution and we are reminded of the great transaction of imputation (cp. 2 Cor. 5:21). We are the ones who had committed sins worthy of death, not Christ. The curse and judgment of an offended God fell upon His righteous Son, instead of us. Imputation means to place to one’s account. Christ, who was pure, spotless, and undefiled, who had obeyed the law of God perfectly in all respects, willingly took on Himself the guilt of the sins of His people. It is not just that He was accursed, but He became ‘A Curse.’ He took the curse of the sins of His people on Himself, the guilt to which they were liable. Very simply, our deliverance from slavery to sin resides in our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.

The law’s accursed penalty did not apply to Jesus personally because He never broke the law, but God imputed our sins to His Son (cp. 2 Cor. 5:21). When Christ took our sins upon Himself He was accursed, not for His own sins, but for ours. The curse was legally transferred from us to Him.

Paul demonstrates the curse-bearing nature of Christ’s death by using Deuteronomy 21:23 to relate His death on the cross with being cursed by God. Crucifixion was a mode of execution unknown to the Jews of Moses’ day, but Paul clearly treats the quotation as prophetic of the death of Christ.

In ancient Judaism a criminal who was executed, usually by stoning, was then tied to a post, a type of tree, where his body would hang until sunset as a visible representation of rejection by God. The point of hanging a criminal in this way was to expose his capital crime to public shame. Hoisting his body onto a tree demonstrated that he was under God’s curse. But he was not to be left on the tree overnight, for this would be an offense to God.

It was not that a person became cursed by being hanged on a tree but that he was hanged on a tree because he was cursed. Jesus did not become a curse because He was crucified but was crucified because He was cursed in taking the full sin of the world on Himself. The curse inflicted upon the Son was that He would know the Father’s unmitigated wrath poured out upon Him (cp. Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). The price of redemption was the alienation of the Son from the Father. In the language of the Apostles’ Creed, ‘He descended into hell.’

In the old covenant the person who was guilty of a capital offense was put to death most often by stoning and then, if the offense was particularly heinous, he was hanged on a post or a tree as a mark of his cursedness (cp. Jos. 8:29). God revealed this form of punishment because He intended to put His Son to death in this manner in order to signify He was the cursed of the cursed. He was the most cursed of all; cursed like an enemy of God.

That truth was extremely hard for most Jews to accept, because they could not imagine the Messiah being cursed by God and having to hang on a tree. 1 Corinthians 12:3 suggests that ‘Jesus is accursed’ was a common, demon-inspired saying among unbelieving Jews of that day. To them, Jesus’ crucifixion was final and absolute proof that He was not the promised Messiah.

Imagine, then, how offensive Christianity was to the Jews, because at the very heart of its message was a man hanging on a tree! The apostolic message was about a man who was so cursed by God that he was crucified. The apostles almost went out of their way to call the cross
a ‘tree’ (cp. Acts 5:30; 13:29; 1 Pe. 2:24). At the same time, they claimed that the crucified Jesus was also the Christ. To the Jews, this was absolute blasphemy: a cursed Messiah on a cursed cross. No wonder the cross was such a stumbling block to them!

\[b) \text{ Christ Purchases Benefits (3:14)}\]

...that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

In verse 14 Paul speaks positively about the covenant benefits Christ has purchased for His people. Verse 14 begins with a purpose clause that shows the close connection between the negative work of redemption by which Jesus satisfies the curse and the positive work of redemption by which He has purchased the benefits of the covenant.

The blessing of Abraham is the twofold promise of the remission of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. God pictured this promise for Abraham and the old covenant community by the inheritance of the land. The fulfillment of this inheritance belongs to all of the seed of Abraham, Jews, and Gentiles. Christ by His work of redemption purchased this blessing for all His people, so that by His work the Gentiles become heirs of Abraham. Note that this verse, in fact, contains two purpose clauses: in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles; in order that we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is not a promise made by the Spirit, but rather that the Spirit Himself is the promised entity. The blessing promised to Abraham, then, is nothing other than the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This promise was fulfilled, in human experience, as a result and consequence of Christ’s atonement.

The blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles ‘in Christ Jesus.’ It does not come through Moses, but only through Christ. If the blessing comes upon the Gentiles directly through Christ, then of course there is no point in seeking it through submission to the law of Moses. Paul is always careful to emphasize that everything believers possess, now and eternally, is theirs through Christ. Notice also that the Galatian Gentiles are heirs in their own right and have no need to ‘become’ Jews in order to participate in the heritage of faith. The promise comes upon all who are ‘of faith,’ regardless of their pedigree or nationality. The Galatians’ desire to become like Jews, submitting to the law, was therefore wholly misconceived.

Which comes first, faith or the indwelling of the Spirit? It is clear from Scripture that the unregenerate man is incapable of faith (1 Cor. 2:14). Faith is God’s gift, imparted by grace (Eph. 2:8-10). Regeneration and the impartation of faith are alike the work of the Holy Spirit (cp. Jn. 3:1-8; Acts 16:13-15). Clearly, no one can exercise faith without first being wrought upon by the Spirit of God in regenerating power. In what sense, therefore, do we receive the Spirit ‘through faith’? It is by faith that we receive the Holy Spirit consciously, welcoming Him into our hearts and lives as a permanent resident, according to the promise of Christ (cp. Jn. 4:10-14; 7:37-39). Scripture does not countenance the idea that the indwelling of the Spirit may be postponed by our failure to exercise faith.

Justify faith involves three things: 1) self-renunciation, putting away all confidence in one’s own merit and works; 2) reliance on and submission to the Lord; and 3) appropriation, as the sinner gratefully receives the free gift of pardon Christ offers and submits to His authority. Justifying faith does not have to be strong faith; it only has to be true faith. And true faith not only brings salvation to the believe but also glory to the One who saves.
Faith in Jesus Christ (rather than obedience to the law) brings three things: 1) *Justification*. The blessings of Abraham which Paul had referred to earlier in the first half of this chapter.  2) *Inclusion*. That Gentiles as well as Jews might be received into the kingdom in exactly the same way.  3) *The Gift of the Spirit*. Faith brings the promise of the Spirit, and the giving of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promise of the New Covenant.

Here Paul summarizes everything he has been saying in this chapter. He reminds us of the blessing given to Abraham: a right standing with God. He reminds us that this blessing is for all the nations of the Gentiles. He reminds us that God’s blessing includes receiving the Holy Spirit, with all His gifts and graces. All these blessings could never come by works of the law. They come only ‘in Christ Jesus.’ This is the doctrine of union with Christ—that all of God’s blessings come to us when we get into Christ Jesus. And the way to get into Jesus is by faith. Faith deserves to have the last word, because it is the last word in Galatians 3:14. What was a curse for Christ becomes a blessing to us by faith.

**B. The Promise of the Covenant (Gal. 3:15-18)**

If, as Paul has argued, Abraham was justified by believing the promise of the covenant that God made with him, what are we to make of the covenant made with Moses? Was this an entirely different sort of covenant, one perhaps based on ‘works of obedience’ rather than faith? Did God, in the period of Moses and the law, set aside what He had established with Abraham? And if so, was the law permanent or temporary?

Paul anticipates the probable argument his adversaries, the Judaizers would likely make against what he has just proved. ‘Very well,’ they would argue. ‘But granted that Abraham and his pre-Sinai descendants were saved by faith, it is obvious that when God gave the law to Moses, the basis of salvation changed. A new covenant was made and a new means of salvation was then established. After Moses, the basis of salvation became law in place of faith or at least as a necessary supplement to faith. The covenant with Moses annulled and supplanted the covenant with Abraham, a temporary measure God provided until He gave Moses the more perfect and complete covenant of law. Abraham and others who lived before the law were saved by faith only because they did not have the law. Why else would God have given the Mosaic covenant of law?’

It is that anticipated, imaginary argument that Paul next answers. The heart of his answer is to show that the covenant with Abraham was an unconditional covenant of promise relying solely on God’s faithfulness, whereas the covenant with Moses was a conditional covenant of law relying on man’s faithfulness. To Abraham, God said, ‘I will.’ Through Moses He said, ‘Thou shalt.’ The promise set forth a religion dependent on God. The law set forth a religion dependent on man. The promise centers on God’s plan, God’s grace, God’s initiative, god’s sovereignty, God’s blessings. The law centers on man’s duty, man’s work, man’s responsibility, man’s behavior, man’s obedience. The promise, being grounded in grace, requires only sincere faith. The law, being grounded in works, demands perfect obedience. In contrasting the covenants of promise and law, Paul first shows the superiority of the one (3:15-18) and then the inferiority of the other (3:19-22).

In this passage, Paul gives us a great deal of insight into the relationship of law and gospel. He uses the term ‘law’ to refer to the Mosaic covenant. If law culminates in curse, what then are its role and its relationship to God’s grace? Paul answers this question by explaining the
relationship between the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. In verses 15-18, Paul proves that the Mosaic covenant does not nullify or alter the Abrahamic.

The Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ is **berith**. Two different Greek words can be used to translate this Hebrew concept. One possibility is **syntheke**, which expresses the idea of mutuality, a compact or treaty. This word preserves one aspect of the Hebrew covenant, an agreement, but does not do justice to the predominant emphasis on God’s initiative. Therefore, the word used in the New Testament for covenant (and Septuagint) is **diathēkē**, a word meaning ‘disposition’ or ‘arrangement.’ Paul’s argument hinges on the fact that the same Greek word, **diathēkē**, can be rendered as will or testament (3:15) and as covenant (3:17).

The word ‘covenant’ can therefore signify one of two, rather different things. It can mean a will, in which one party, the testator, is active and the other, the beneficiary, is passive, except for the act of receiving the inheritance. A last will and testament expresses the desires and intent of but one party and may or may not involve other specific parties. The implementation of a will lies entirely in the power of the testator (cp. Heb. 9:16). On the other hand, a covenant can also mean an agreement or contract, which implies the active participation of both parties in fulfilling the terms of the covenant, although the terms may be stipulated and fulfilled by only one. When God is party to a covenant, of course, the terms are dictated exclusively by Him. Sometimes God’s covenants with His people were conditional and sometimes not. Nevertheless, a covenant of this kind still exists if the agreement requires man’s obedience, or if man has the power to break the covenant (cp. Jer. 31:32; Heb. 8:9). Paul, in using the **diatheke** for ‘covenant’ seems to make a deliberate and subtle use of its double meaning.

Four reasons are given for affirming the superiority of the covenant of promise: its confirmation, its Christ-centeredness, its chronology, and its completeness.

1. **Human Covenants (3:15)**

   *Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man’s covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.*

   First of all, the covenant of promise was superior because it was confirmed as irrevocable and unchangeable. Even God’s own covenant with Moses did not nullify or amend His covenant with Abraham, because God had made the former covenant permanent and unchangeable.

   In verse 15, Paul uses an analogy from human contracts to establish the boundaries of the relationship between the two covenants. By doing so, Paul is stating that covenants made by God can be illustrated by those made between men. God’s covenants are not mysterious transactions which lie beyond our comprehension, but are basically of the same nature as those commonly made among men.

   The apostle points out that a testament or covenant has to be ‘confirmed’ before it comes into force. When both sides sign the contract/covenant, it is ratified and is binding on all parties. Someone may not come along later and nullify or change it. This is analogous to what Paul teaches with respect to the relationship of the Mosaic to the Abrahamic. The covenant that God made with Abraham could not be laid aside by a later covenant made through Moses.

   The kind of human covenant Paul has in mind is irrevocable. Once it is signed, sealed, and delivered, it cannot be changed. There is no way to set it aside or add to it. It cannot be
abrogated or annulled. It cannot be amended or adjusted. It is legally binding exactly as it stands.

Roman covenants could be annulled or added to. A man could tear up his old will and write a new one at any time. Or he could add a codicil to change the terms of the original will. Among the Romans, it was only when the man died that his testament could no longer be altered. If Paul was thinking in terms of Roman law, this is what he meant by ‘ratified.’ A last will and testament was permanently settled at death. American jurisprudence works the same way. Once an estate has gone through probate, it cannot be redivided.

Greek law was slightly different from Roman law. According to the Greeks, a will could not be repealed or revoked. It could not even be modified. Once it had been properly registered and deposited at the public-record office, a Greek testament could never be altered. This practice would fit Paul’s point exactly; once the covenant was made, it was irrevocable. It is not certain which legal system is intended in Galatians 3, but it hardly matters. In any legal system, there comes a time when a testament is settled once and for all, either by death or by some official action. After that point, nothing can be done to change the terms in any way. If this is true at the human level, it is all the more true when it comes to the covenant God established through Abraham. Paul’s argument is from the lesser to the greater. What holds true in a human court has even greater force in the courtroom of Almighty God. As far as covenants go, what God proposed to Abraham was more like a testament. It was not a contract set up between equals. On the contrary, it contained a long list of things God promised to grant as His legacy to Abraham. Paul’s point is that what God covenanted to do for Abraham would remain in force forever.

If human covenants are treated with such respect, how much more binding are those covenants to which God Himself is a party! This is the essence of Paul’s argument here. A covenant, once it has been made by God, cannot be broken or annulled. Having established the way of faith and grace with Abraham, this promise cannot be taken away in the very next book of the Bible, Exodus, with its allusions to Moses and Sinai. That interpretation is simply not an option. So Paul begins by referring, not to the Bible, but to something his readers knew to be true in everyday life. Covenants (agreements which have standing in law) cannot be changed once they are made. What were the terms in this particular case? That Abraham and his posterity would be justified by faith.

2. **Abrahamic Covenant (3:16-18)**

Paul continues in verses 16-17 to demonstrate that the Abrahamic covenant takes precedence over the Mosaic covenant. He begins with the fact that God sovereignly made specific, unilateral (with no conditions attached) promises to Abraham.

   a) **Priority of the Seed (3:16)**

   *Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.*

Second, Paul argues from the lesser to the greater (human covenants to God-initiated covenants), by saying that the covenant of promise was superior to the covenant of law because it was Christ-centered.

The explicit promises made to Abraham contained three elements: firstly, the inheritance of the Promised Land (Gen. 13:15); secondly, descendants without number (Gen. 13:16); and thirdly,
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that in Abraham’s seed all nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). These promises clearly had a historical fulfillment in the Jewish nation. They did possess the land in the days of Joshua; they did become a great and numerous people; and Christ was born, historically, of Jewish stock, bringing the blessing of the Christian message to the whole world.

But these historical fulfillments were clearly not the primary purpose of the promises. Their chief intent was spiritual, as Paul argues here in Galatians and indeed elsewhere as do other writers (cp. Heb. 11:10, 16). The key to the spiritual interpretation of the promises lies in the statement which Paul makes regarding the Abrahamic promises, namely that the promises were made to ‘Abraham and to his Seed.’ Paul develops the argument to show that the ultimate recipient of those promises was none other than Christ.

Interpreting the Abrahamic promise (see Gen. 13:15) in light of Genesis 3:15, Paul teaches that the term ‘seed’ refers primarily to Jesus Christ. Paul is not denying that God promised Abraham a seed more numerous than the stars of the heavens (cp. Gen. 15:5). However, he is teaching that the promises belong not to Abraham’s physical seed, but to his spiritual seed, and that it is only in ‘the seed’ (Christ) that the promises will come to Jew or Gentile. Hence, he builds on the promise of Genesis 3:15 that the seed of women will destroy the serpent, Satan. The seed of the woman is the promised Messiah.

Both the Greek term (sperma) and the corresponding Hebrew term (zera’) are like the English seed in that they can be either singular or plural. Apart from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul could not have established such a crucial interpretation on the basis of grammar alone. Hebrew grammar, like Greek and English, allows, but does not necessitate, the singular. Sometimes the term in context does obviously apply to one person. In an even earlier promise, a clearly singular use of seed also refers to Christ (Gen. 3:15).

The point is that Paul wants us to appreciate that the promise had reference to a singular seed, ‘which is Christ.’ That is, the promise was given to Abraham as a kind of trust, to be held in trust for his ultimate seed, namely Christ. This essentially Christian understanding and interpretation of Genesis (and of the Old Testament) has enormous ramifications. Paul, from the vantage point of the New Testament can see layers of meaning that Old Testament interpreters might not have seen: implicit within this promise was a prediction of the coming of Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 3:16, Paul is not so much making an argument based on Old Testament grammar as he is explaining what the Old Testament really means. Jesus Christ is the true offspring. He is the party to the covenant that God made with Abraham. The covenant was all about Jesus Christ. Once we understand that God’s promise to Abraham is a promise to Christ, then the fact that the word ‘seed’ is a collective noun makes perfect sense. The promise first of all refers to a single individual, Jesus Christ. But it also refers to a collection of individuals, namely, everyone who belongs to Christ. The party to the covenant is Christ and all who are in Him. God gave the promise to Abraham. The promise was Christ. Since we are in Christ, the promise is for us. Here we are reminded again of the doctrine of union with Christ, which is so central to Galatians and to Paul’s theology in general. Paul used the promise to the seed to remind them that God’s eternal plan is for one family in one Christ. By the time he gets to the end of chapter 3, this will be the climax of his argument (see Gal. 3:26, 29).

Thus, the promise was made, through Abraham, not to the Jews but to Christ Himself. Seen in this light, what do the promises mean? Reinterpreted in spiritual terms, they mean: 1) That Christ would gain the promised land of salvation for His people. It is a land obtained by
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conquest, that is, Christ’s conquest of sin, death, and Satan. It is a land of plenty, for in salvation God has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3). It is a land of rest, for those who have ceased from their works have entered into rest (Heb. 4:10). 2) That Christ would beget (in the sense of redeem and regenerate) a numberless multitude. 3) That every nation of the earth would be represented among Christ’s ransomed people (Rev. 5:9).

This emphasis on Christ is important for two reasons. First one could argue that although the promise was made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, since they were now dead, at Sinai God introduced another contract to replace the previous one. Paul argues that there can be no change, because the ultimate recipient of all the promises in the Scriptures is the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom are all the promises of God (cp. 2 Cor. 1:20). The promise, therefore, not only is about Christ, it also belongs to Christ. Second, Paul reminds us that we have no blessings in the promise apart from Christ. The descendants (which, of course, now included Gentiles) are considered as singular, because (and this was something very dear to Paul’s heart) believers are in union with Jesus Christ. It is as we are in union with the Lord Jesus Christ that we have the things that were promised to Abraham, which are the promises of the gospel.

In other places (e.g., Rom. 4:16), Paul takes the word ‘seed’ to mean ‘descendants’ (plural). This reminds us that there are both primary and secondary meanings to found in the promise scriptures. The primary meaning is that Christ is the true and ultimate heir of the promises. Secondary to that is the fact that all the redeemed are co-heirs with Christ of the promises (Rom. 8:16-17). Thirdly, there was a purely historical and material fulfillment of the promises to the Jewish nation. Whether ‘seed’ is taken to mean Christ, His redeemed people, or the Jews, must depend upon which of these three meanings is in view. Paul’s purpose, as he writes to the Galatians, is to demonstrate that all the promises of God, culminating in the gift of the Holy Spirit to His people, are centered on Jesus Christ, and cannot be received or enjoyed outside of Him.

b) Priority of Sequence (3:17)

And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect.

Third, the covenant of promise was superior to the covenant of law because of chronology. The precedence of the Abrahamic covenant is based also on the time sequence. Since the promise was made to Christ and is eternal, what God did at Sinai four hundred and thirty years later cannot invalidate the previously ratified covenant of God.

Verse 15 describes the permanence of the covenant, which was established once and for all when God gave it to Abraham. Verse 16 identified the party to the covenant. God’s promise to Abraham was also made to Christ, and to everyone in Him. Next Paul clarifies the promise of the covenant. The promise and the law are two separate, though complementary, arrangements. They operate on entirely different principles: faith and works. The promise is about what God will do, while the law is about what we must do. The difference between the promise and the law is evident from the vocabulary God used when He first gave them. When He made the promise to Abraham, God said, ‘I will, I will, I will.’ But in the law of Moses God said, ‘Thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt.’

Within God’s covenant of grace, it is the promise that takes precedence over the law. The law is secondary within the history of redemption, not primary. The law principle is subordinate to the
promise principle. For one thing, the promise came first in time. God gave Abraham the promise long before He gave Moses the law. Some might argue that the law therefore superseded the promise. Or that the law supplemented the promise, which is what the Judaizers were trying to teach the Galatians. They wanted to add works to faith as the basis of their standing before God. In other words, they were trying to make the law an addendum to the promise.

This is exactly why Paul introduced his legal illustration. God’s promise to Abraham was an irrevocable covenant. It had the same status that a will has after it has gone through probate. There was no way it could be invalidated. The law could not replace the promise. It could not even supplement the promise. Once God made His covenant, it could never be annulled or added to. This means that the gospel has more to do with Abraham than it does with Moses. The Judaizers were fond of Moses, which is why they tried to introduce a legalistic version of Christianity. They said that the law was necessary to make the promise complete. It took works to finish what faith had started. But the law could not change the terms of God’s promise, as if God had signed a contract with Abraham and then changed his mind by adding some fine print for Moses. Besides, if the law had been necessary for salvation, it would have come too late to do Abraham any good! No, the covenant was entirely a matter of promise, received by faith.

There is an interpretive problem with Paul’s chronology here (cp. Ex. 12:40). Either Moses includes in his chronology of Exodus 12:40 the time from Abraham, but telescopes it to the period in Egypt, or, since God renews the promise to Jacob as he is about to leave the land (Gen. 46:1-3), Paul has in mind the repetition of the Abrahamic promise to Jacob as he went down to Egypt. So the period of four hundred and thirty years either began with Abraham while he was in the land or with the renewal of the promise to Jacob as he left the land. Either interpretation is valid.

The explanation of this apparent discrepancy in Paul’s reckoning is probably that Paul is here merely distinguishing between the patriarchal era of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Egyptian exile. The Law came 645 years after Abraham, but 215 years later God repeated the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob, exactly 430 years prior to the Mosaic covenant at Sinai. The former was the era of promise, for the promises originally made to Abraham were repeated to Isaac and Jacob (e.g., Gen. 26:2-4; 28:13-14). With the settlement in Egypt, the era of promise came to an end, though the promises themselves lived on.

c) **Priority of Promise (3:18)**

*For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.*

Fourth, the covenant of promise is superior to the covenant of law because it is more complete. Paul’s point is that an inheritance based on law depends on man’s performance, whereas the one granted to Abraham by the means of a promise depends on God’s power. The term ‘granted’ translates the perfect tense of *charizomai* (‘to give graciously’) to show a past action with present results, pointing to the permanent character of the inheritance. It means that salvation is a gift given once and for all and then kept forever.

We see that the covenant of promise has the nature of a testament, since it gives rise to an ‘inheritance.’ In referring to the Abrahamic covenant, Paul therefore employs the first of the two meanings of ‘covenant,’ that is, a will or testament. The law of Moses, by contrast, is a covenant of the second kind, namely an agreement between two parties. There are not only two different
covenants, but two different *kinds* of covenants, under consideration in this passage. The two covenants are wholly distinct.

In verse 18, Paul draws his conclusion. The term ‘for’ shows the relation of the analogy to the two covenants. The inheritance (the benefits promised to Abraham) would be lost if God changed the terms. God, however, has not changed the terms. He promised the inheritance to Abraham and sealed that promised with an oath (cp. Heb. 6:17-18). Abraham received it by faith. Therefore, the promise and the means (faith) remain in effect. If the inheritance were by law, God would have changed the principle of inheritance.

As far as the Galatians were concerned, it was not God who changed the principle of inheritance, but the Judaizers. Hence, God did not bring in law as a competing way of receiving the promised benefits.

A beneficiary receives an inheritance on the basis of a binding legal promise. Therefore, if God has promised an inheritance, it must come by way of promise, and not by works of the law. God deals with us according to His promise, not according to our performance. We are justified by faith only and not by works. It was the same for the Galatians as it was for Abraham, and it is also the same for us: we are justified by grace through faith. It is impossible to earn a promise. The only way to receive a promise is to trust in it. Only God can fulfill His covenant promises. This brings us to a very practical conclusion: God deals with us according to His promises, not according to our works. Everything God has to offer comes through a promise. As it was for Abraham, so it is for everyone who is in Christ.

Salvation in Christ does not rest on a law that we inevitably break; it rests on a promise that God *cannot* break. He has promised eternal life to everyone who comes to Christ in faith. God will not—indeed, He cannot—go back on His promise. His covenant is an irrevocable will and testament. It stands firm forever. The Christian life is not a quid pro quo, so that if I do what God wants, then God will do what I want. God simply does not operate this way. Instead, my relationship with God is based entirely on believing His gracious promise.

By definition, an inheritance is not earned but simply received, and to work for that which is already guaranteed is foolish and unnecessary. Trying to earn the inheritance God promises through faith in His Son is much worse than foolish. To add works of the law to faith in God’s promise is to ‘nullify the grace of God’ and to cause Christ to have ‘died needlessly’ (2:21).

There are two covenants in Paul’s argument: the covenant of promise and the covenant of law. The first has the nature of a testament or will, under which God provides an inheritance for Abraham and his seed. The second covenant, Moses’ law, has the nature of an agreement or contract, involving obligations upon two parties, God and Israel. The covenant of promise was not only given, but also ratified by God’s oath, long before the covenant of law was established. The latter cannot, therefore, annul or supplement the former. They are distinct and separate. Since the inheritance of God’s blessing in Christ is provided under the covenant of promise, the covenant of law has no part in the transmission or realization of that inheritance. This is something the Galatians needed to understand. The promises were given to Abraham in trust for his ultimate seed, namely Christ.

For next time: Read Galatians 3:19-29.