

The Most Important Part of the Promise



SABBATH—JULY 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 the promise. But God gave it to Abraham as a free gift through a promise” (Galatians 3:18, NIV).

A TOP ADVISER to a president was asked, “Has the president kept all the promises that he made during his campaign?” The adviser answered, “The president has kept all the promises he intended to keep.”

At one time or another, who has not broken a promise? And who has not had a promise made to him or her broken?

Sometimes people make promises, and they fully mean to keep them. But later on, they break them. Others make promises they never mean to keep at all. It is all a lie.

But we are very blessed, because God's promises are different. The Bible is sure. So, we can trust God to do what He says. “I will bring about what I have said. I will do what I have planned” (Isaiah 46:11, NIV).

In this week's lesson, Paul points our attention to a special relationship. It is the relationship between God's promises to Abraham and the law given to Israel 430 years later. What is the relationship between God's promises and the law? And how does that relationship change the way the gospel is preached?



The Bible is sure. We can trust God to do what He says.

LAW AND FAITH (Galatians 3:15–18)

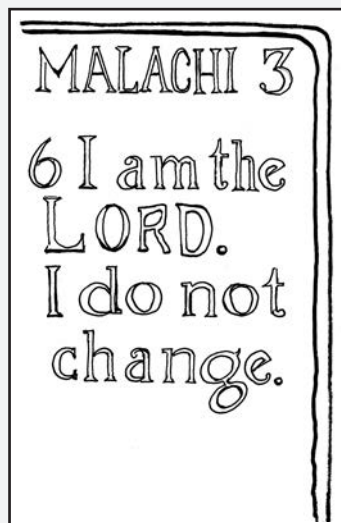
God gave the law to Israel more than 400 years after Abraham lived. But did the giving of the law cause the promises of God to Abraham to lose their value?

In Galatians 3:15–18, Paul explains the meaning of God’s covenant. A covenant is an agreement. So, to explain what a covenant is, Paul uses the word picture of a person’s final will. A will is a legal paper. It says who should receive what a person owns after that person dies. Why does Paul use this comparison to help explain God’s covenant? What point is Paul making?

For the most part, a covenant and a will are very different. A covenant often is called a contract or a treaty. But a will is a statement made by one person. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) never uses the Greek word for contracts (*syntheke*) to mean God’s covenant with Abraham. Instead, the Septuagint uses the word for a will (*diatheke*). Why? Maybe the translators understood that God’s covenant with Abraham was not a treaty. In a treaty, both sides make promises that they must keep. But God’s covenant is not set up on anything Abraham promises. It is set up only on what God wants to do. And Abraham is to take God at His word.

Paul is aware that “will” is used to mean “covenant.” He uses this double meaning to explain parts of God’s agreement with Abraham. For example, both a will and God’s promise are made to someone. In this case, it is Abraham and his children (Genesis 12:1–5; Galatians 3:16). A will also names who shall receive goods or money (Genesis 13:15; Genesis 17:8; Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:29). Most important to Paul is the fact that God’s promises do not change. In the same way, a person’s will cannot be changed once it has gone into effect. This fact helps explain that the law God gave to Moses did not end the agreement made earlier with Abraham. For God is not a promise breaker (Isaiah 46:11).

Replace the word “covenant” with “promise” in Genesis 9:11–17; Genesis 15:18; and Genesis 17:1–21. What does each covenant include? God’s covenant is a promise. How does that idea make the verses clearer? How does it help us understand what a covenant is? What does the covenant teach us about who God is and why we can trust Him?



Most important to Paul is the fact that God’s promises do not change.

FAITH AND LAW (Romans 3:31)

Paul argues strongly for the importance of faith in a person's relationship with God. No works of the law are needed to save us. Paul is clear on this point. For "No one is made right with God by obeying the law" (Galatians 2:16, NIV). Works of the law do not show clearly what a believer is. Instead, faith does. But we must ask: Does that truth mean the law has no value? Did God get rid of the law?

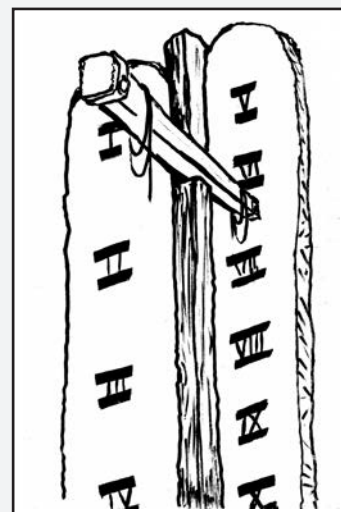
Salvation is by faith. It is not by doing the works of the law. So does Paul mean to say that faith destroys the law? How do these verses help answer that question: Romans 3:31; Romans 7:7, 12; Romans 8:3; and Matthew 5:17–20?

Paul's argument in Romans 3 is the same as the one he makes about faith and law in Galatians. Paul knows that his words might lead some to think he is putting faith above law. So, Paul asks a question, "Does faith make the law useless?" (Romans 3:31, NIV). The wording "make the law useless" comes from the Greek word *katargeo*. Paul uses this word often. It can be translated as "cancel" (CEB), "brought an end to" (Ephesians 2:15, GW), "set aside" (NIV), "brought to nothing" (Romans 6:6, ESV), or even "destroy" (1 Corinthians 6:13, NIV). Suppose Paul wanted to support the idea that the law was set aside at the Cross. Some people accused Paul of doing this very thing. But Paul says the law was not set aside. Instead, he says his gospel "sets up" the law (see Romans 3:31)!

"The plan of being saved by faith shows God's love for His law. His law demanded and provided an offering for sin. Suppose being made right with God set the law aside. Then there would be no need for the cleansing death of Christ to free the sinner from sin and set him at peace with God.

"Also, true faith means fully following God and obeying His law. Real faith starts with loving God with one's whole heart. Such faith can lead only to obedience."—Adapted, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 510.

Suppose that faith did do away with the law. Would that mean that stealing or murder or sex outside of marriage no longer would be sin? Think of all the sorrow, pain, and suffering you could avoid if you obeyed God's law. What suffering have you and others experienced as a result of breaking God's law?



Paul says that the law was not set aside at the Cross. Instead, the gospel "sets up" the law.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW (Galatians 3:19–29)

In Galatians 3:19–29, Paul mentions “the law” many times. Which law does Paul mean?

Some think the word “until” in verse 19 (NIRV) means the law mentioned here was not lasting. So, they believe these verses must be talking about the ceremonial law. The ceremonial law governed the law of animal sacrifices and other offerings made in the temple. The need for that law came to an end with Jesus’ death on the cross. But Paul is making a different point here. It is true that sin made two laws necessary: the ceremonial law and the moral law. The moral law is the Ten Commandments. And as we shall see, Paul has the moral law mostly in mind in these verses.

Read Galatians 3:19 and Romans 5:13, 20. Why does Paul say the law was added? And what was the law added to?



The law was given to bring people back to God and His grace.

Paul is not saying the law was added to God’s covenant with Abraham in the same way that new requirements are added to a will. The law was around long before Sinai. So the law was given to Israel for a completely different purpose: to bring people back to God and His grace. Grace is God’s gift of mercy, forgiveness, and power over sin. God offers this grace to all who come to Him by faith. The law shows us how sinful we are. It shows us our need of grace. The law was not meant to be a way of “earning” salvation. Instead, Paul says the law was given “so that sin would increase” (Romans 5:20, NIRV). What do those words mean? They mean the law was given to show us more clearly the sin in our lives (Romans 7:13).

The ceremonial law pointed to Jesus. It showed the need for holiness and for a Savior. But the moral law, with its “You shall nots,” shows us sin. It shows sin is a part of us. And sin breaks God’s law (Romans 3:20; Romans 5:13, 20; Romans 7:7, 8, 13). That is why Paul says, “Where there is no law, the law [cannot] be broken” (Romans 4:15, NIRV). “The law works like a magnifying glass. A magnifying glass does not add to the number of dirty spots on a piece of clothing. No. It makes the spots stand out more clearly. It shows many more of them than one is able to see with the eye alone.”—Adapted, William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition [Explanation] of Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), page 141.

HOW LONG THE LAW LASTS (Galatians 3:16–19)

Read Genesis 9:5, 6; Genesis 18:19; Genesis 26:5; Genesis 39:7–10; and Exodus 16:22–26. Paul says the law was added at Mount Sinai. Does that mean there was no law before this time? If not, what was the difference in the law before and after Mount Sinai?

God did not need to show His law to Abraham with thunder, lightning, and the punishment of death (Exodus 19:10–23). So, why did God give the law to the people of Israel in this way? Because Israel forgot how great God and His law were. So, the people needed to be reminded of how sinful they were and how holy God’s law was.

Read Galatians 3:16–19. Paul says the law was supposed to control us “until the promised Seed [Christ] had come” (verse 19, NIV). What does Paul mean?

Many believe this verse means the law given at Mount Sinai would last only for a limited time. So, they say the law came 430 years after Abraham and ended when Christ came. But this idea goes against what Paul says about the law in Romans and what Jesus says in Matthew 5:17–19.

The mistake readers make with Galatians 3:16–19 is to think that the word “until” always means a limited amount of time. But that idea is not true. For example, Jesus says, “‘Just hold on to what you have until I come’” (Revelation 2:25, NIV). Does Jesus mean that once He comes we no longer need to be faithful? Of course not!

The importance of the law did not end with the coming of Christ. He is the “Seed” Paul talked about. The law always will point out sin. So Paul is saying that the coming of Christ marks an important turning point in history. Christ can do what the law never could. He can “cure” the disease of sin. He can make sinners right with God. Through His Spirit, Christ can honor His law in us (Romans 8:3, 4).

Think of all the signs of God’s power the Israelites saw at Mount Sinai. But what did they still do? What should their sin tell us about what true faith is? How do we get true faith and keep it? Read Colossians 2:6 for a hint.



Christ can do what the law never could. He can “cure” the disease of sin.

HOW VERY GREAT GOD'S PROMISE IS (Genesis 15:1–6)

In Galatians 3:19, 20, Paul continues to talk about how the law does not destroy the first agreement made between God and His people. This point is important. Why? Suppose Paul's attackers were right. Then the law would destroy the covenant. But let us take that possibility one step further. Suppose the agreement were destroyed. Then we would need to obey the law to be saved. And then we would be without hope.

Paul's basic point in Galatians 3:19, 20 is clear. The law supports the promise of grace. The law was given through angels and Moses (Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2). So, Moses was a go-between. He received God's law and gave it to the people. In a letter to Timothy, Paul uses this word "go-between" (1 Timothy 2:5, NIV). He uses it to mean Christ. But what Paul says in Galatians 3:19, 20 strongly leads many Bible thinkers to believe he has Moses and his words in Deuteronomy 5:5 in mind. In this verse, Moses says, " 'At that time I stood between the LORD and you. I announced to you the LORD's message' " (NIV).

Now, what happened when the law was given was powerful. Many angels attended. God gave the law to the people through Moses. But God made His promise to Abraham (and to all believers) without a go-between. There was no need for one. And in the end, the law cannot take the place of God's promise that we are saved by grace through faith. Instead, the law helps us better understand just how wonderful God's promise really is.



The law was given through angels and Moses. It helps us understand just how wonderful God's promises are.

Read Genesis 15:1–6; Genesis 18:1–33; and Genesis 22:1–18. What kind of meetings did Abraham have with God? What profit did those meetings with God have for Abraham?

Think about some of the other meetings God had with people in the Bible. For example, God met with Adam and Eve in Eden (Genesis 3). And what about Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28) or Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)? Maybe you have not experienced anything so exciting. But in what ways has God shown Himself to you? What things in your life might be holding you back from having the kind of experience with God that Abraham had? What steps can you take to change that?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “The people of Israel had lost much of their knowledge of God and His covenant during their time as slaves in Egypt. But God set them free. He wanted to show them His power and His mercy so that they would love and trust Him. God brought them to the Red Sea. There the Egyptians chased them down. Escape seemed impossible. God wanted them to realize how completely helpless they were and how much they needed His help. And then He saved them. They were filled with love for God and thankfulness. They trusted in His power to help them. He tied Himself to them as their Deliverer from their slavery on earth.

“But there was still a greater truth the people needed to learn. They had lived among those who worshiped idols. These idol worshipers sinned greatly against God. So God’s people had no real idea of how holy God was or how sinful their own hearts were. They did not realize they had no power to obey God’s law on their own. They did not know how much they needed a Savior.”
—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and leaders] and Prophets [Special messengers]*, page 371.

“The law of God was spoken in great majesty from Sinai. The law pointed to the sinner’s guilt. The law is meant to point out sin. But there is no power in the law to forgive or save.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 6, page 1094.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Think about the topic of promises. How do you feel toward people who break their promises to you? How much difference does it make when someone makes you a promise he or she cannot keep or when someone changes his or her mind about keeping it? How well are you able to trust either person afterward? What does it mean to you to know you can trust God’s promises? How can you learn to trust His promises in the first place?

② In what ways do the things around us cause us to lose sight of the important truths God has given us? How can we protect ourselves from this danger?

SUMMARY: The giving of the law on Sinai did not do away with the promise God made to Abraham. Nor did the law change the agreement. The law was given so that people might see how truly sinful they are and how much they need Christ’s promise to Abraham and his children.



The Egyptians chased the people of Israel down. God wanted the people of Israel to realize how completely helpless they were and how much they needed His help. Then He saved them.