

# The Priority *of the* Promise



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Gal. 3:15–20, Gen. 9:11–17, Matt. 5:17–20, Exod. 16:22–26, Gen. 15:1–6.*

**Memory Text:** “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise” (*Galatians 3:18, ESV*).

Someone once asked a politician, “Have you kept all the promises that you made during the campaign?” He responded, “Yes . . . well, at least all the promises that I intended to keep.”

Who hasn’t, at one time or another, been at one end or the other of a broken promise? Who hasn’t been the one to break a promise or the one to have a promise made to him or her broken?

Sometimes people make a promise, fully intending to keep it, but, later, don’t; others make a promise, knowing—as the sounds leave their mouths or the letters their fingers—it’s all a lie.

Fortunately for us, God’s promises are of an entirely different order. God’s Word is sure and unchanging. “‘I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it,’” says the Lord (*Isa. 46:11, ESV*).

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 the relationship between the two be understood, and what implications does that have for the preaching of the gospel?

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 5.

## Law and Faith (Gal. 3:15–18)

Even if his opponents conceded that Abraham’s life was characterized primarily by faith, Paul knew that they still would have questions about why God gave the law to Israel about four centuries after Abraham. Did not the giving of the law nullify any previous arrangement?

**What** is the point of Paul’s analogy between a person’s final will and testament and God’s covenant with Abraham? *Gal. 3:15–18.*

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A covenant and a will are generally different. A covenant is typically a mutual agreement between two or more people, often called a “contract” or “treaty”; in contrast, a will is the declaration of a single person. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, never translates God’s covenant with Abraham with the Greek word used for mutual agreements or contracts (*syntheke*). Instead, it uses the word for a testament or a will (*diateke*). Why? Probably because the translators recognized that God’s covenant with Abraham was not a treaty between two individuals, where mutually binding promises are made. On the contrary, God’s covenant was based on nothing other than His own will. No string of “ifs, ands, or buts” was attached. Abraham was simply to take God at His word.

Paul picks up on this double meaning of “will” and “covenant” in order to highlight specific features of God’s covenant with Abraham. As with a human will, God’s promise concerns a specific beneficiary, Abraham and his offspring (*Gen. 12:1–5, Gal. 3:16*); it also involves an inheritance (*Gen. 13:15, 17:8, Rom. 4:13, Gal. 3:29*). Most important to Paul is the unchanging nature of God’s promise. In the same way that a person’s will cannot be changed once it has been put into force, so the giving of the law through Moses cannot simply nullify God’s previous covenant with Abraham. God’s covenant is a promise (*Gal. 3:16*), and by no means is God a promise-breaker (*Isa. 46:11, Heb. 6:18*).

Replace the word *covenant* with *promise* in the following passages. What is the nature of the “covenant” in each passage? How does understanding God’s covenant as a promise make the meaning of the passage clearer, and how does it help us understand better what a covenant is? (*Gen. 9:11–17, 15:18, 17:1–21*). What does this teach us, too, about the character of God, and how we can trust Him?

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## Faith and Law *(Rom. 3:31)*

Paul has argued strongly for the supremacy of faith in a person's relationship with God. He has repeatedly stated that neither circumcision nor any other "works of law" are a prerequisite to salvation, "because by works of the law no one will be justified" (*Gal. 2:16, ESV*). Moreover, it is not the works of the law but faith that is the defining mark of the believer (*Gal. 3:7*). This repeated negation of the works of the law raises the question, "Does the law have absolutely no value then? Did God do away with the law?"

**Because** salvation is by faith and not by works of law, does Paul mean to say that faith abolishes the law? What do the following texts tell us? (*Compare Rom. 3:31 with Rom. 7:7, 12; 8:3 and Matt. 5:17–20.*)

Paul's argument in Romans 3 parallels his discussion about faith and law in Galatians. Sensing that his comments might lead some to conclude that he is exalting faith at the expense of the law, Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" (*ESV*). The word translated as "overthrow" in Romans 3:31 (*ESV*) is *katargeo*. Paul uses the word frequently, and it can be translated as "to nullify" (*Rom. 3:3, ESV*), "to abolish" (*Eph. 2:15*), "to be brought to nothing" (*Rom. 6:6, ESV*), or even "to destroy" (*1 Cor. 6:13*). Clearly, if Paul wanted to endorse the idea that the law was somehow done away with at the cross, as some people today claim he taught, this would have been the time. But Paul not only denies that sentiment with an emphatic no, he actually states that his gospel "establishes" the law!

"The plan of justification by faith reveals God's regard for His law in demanding and providing the atoning sacrifice. If justification by faith abolishes law, then there was no need for the atoning death of Christ to release the sinner from his sins, and thus restore him to peace with God.

"Moreover, genuine faith implies in itself an unreserved willingness to fulfill the will of God in a life of obedience to His law. . . . Real faith, based on wholehearted love for the Saviour, can lead only to obedience."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 510.

**Think through the implications if Paul did, indeed, mean that faith nullifies the need to keep the law. Would adultery then, for instance, no longer be sin. What about stealing, or even murder? Think about the sorrow, pain, and suffering you could spare yourself if you merely obeyed God's law. What suffering have you or others gone through as a result of disobedience to God's law?**

## The Purpose of the Law

**In Galatians 3:19–29** Paul makes multiple references to “the law.” What law is Paul primarily referring to in this section of Galatians?

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Some, believing that the word *until* in verse 19 (*ESV*) indicates that this law was only temporary, have thought the passage must refer to the ceremonial law, because the purpose of that law was fulfilled at the cross and thus came to an end. Though this makes sense by itself, it does not appear to be Paul’s point in Galatians. While both the ceremonial and moral law were “added” at Sinai because of transgressions, we will see by considering the following question that Paul appears to have the moral law primarily in mind.

**Does Paul say that the law was added? To what was it added, and why?** (Compare Gal. 3:19 and Rom. 5:13, 20.)

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Paul is not saying that the law was added to God’s covenant with Abraham as if it were some sort of addendum to a will that altered the original provisions. The law had been in existence long before Sinai (see tomorrow’s lesson). Paul means, instead, that the law was given to Israel for an entirely different purpose. It was to redirect the people back to God and the grace He offers all who come to Him by faith. The law reveals to us our sinful condition and our need of God’s grace. The law was not intended to be some kind of program for “earning” salvation. On the contrary, it was given, Paul says, “to increase the trespass” (*Rom. 5:20, ESV*); that is, to show us more clearly the sin in our lives (*Rom. 7:13*).

While the ceremonial laws pointed to the Messiah and emphasized holiness and the need of a Savior, it is the moral law, with its “Thou shalt nots,” that reveals sin, that shows us that sin is not just a part of our natural condition but is, indeed, a violation of God’s law (*Rom. 3:20; 5:13, 20; 7:7, 8, 13*). This is why Paul says, “Where there is no law there is no transgression” (*Rom. 4:15, ESV*). “The law acts as a magnifying glass. That device does not actually increase the number of dirty spots that defile a garment, but makes them stand out more clearly and reveals many more of them than one is able to see with the naked eye.”—William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 141.

## The Duration of God's Law

**Does** Paul's statement about the law being added at Mount Sinai mean that it did not exist previously? If not, what was the difference before and after Mount Sinai? (Read *Gen. 9:5, 6; 18:19; 26:5; 39:7–10; and Exod. 16:22–26.*)

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God did not need to reveal His law to Abraham with thunder, lightning, and a penalty of death (*Exod. 19:10–23*). Why, then, did God give the law to the Israelites in that manner? It was because, during their bondage in Egypt, the Israelites had lost sight of God's greatness and His high moral standards. As a result, they needed to be made aware of the extent of their own sinfulness and the sacredness of God's law. The revelation at Sinai certainly did just that.

**What** does Paul mean when he says the law was added “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made”? *Gal. 3:16–19 (ESV).*

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Many have understood this text to mean that the law given at Mount Sinai was temporary. It entered 430 years after Abraham and then ended when Christ came. This interpretation, however, conflicts with what Paul says about the law in Romans, as well as other passages in the Bible, such as Matthew 5:17–19.

The mistake readers often make with this passage is to assume that the word *until* always implies a limited duration of time. This is not the case. 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.” Does this mean that when he triumphs 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 role of the law did not end with the coming of Christ. It will continue to point out sin as long as the law exists. What Paul is saying is that the coming of Christ marks a decisive turning point in human history. Christ can do what the law could never do—provide a true remedy for sin, that is, justify sinners and by His Spirit fulfill His law in them (*Rom. 8:3, 4*).

**Have you ever thought to yourself, *If only the Lord did this for me, or that, or the other, then I would never again doubt or question Him?* Think, though, about what happened at Sinai, about how powerful a manifestation of God's power the Israelites saw—and yet, still, what did they do? What should this tell you about what true faith is and how we get and maintain it? (See *Col. 2:6*.)**

## The Superiority of the Promise

“He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us” (*Acts 7:38, NIV*).

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

Although the details of Paul’s comments in Galatians 3:19, 20 are difficult, his basic point is clear: the law is subsidiary to the promise, because it was mediated through angels and Moses. The connection of angels to the giving of the law is not mentioned in Exodus, but it is found in several other places in Scripture (*Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2*). Paul uses the word *mediator* in 1 Timothy 2:5 in reference to Christ, but his comments here strongly suggest he has Deuteronomy 5:5 (*ESV*) in mind, in which Moses says, “I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord.”

As majestic as the giving of the law was on Sinai, with countless angels in attendance, and as important as Moses was in the presentation of the law at that time, the giving of the law was indirect. In stark contrast, God’s promise was made directly to Abraham (and, therefore, to all believers), for there was no need for a mediator. In the end, however important the law, it is no substitute for the promise of salvation through grace by faith. On the contrary, the law helps us better understand just how wonderful that promise really is.

**Describe** the nature of Abraham’s direct encounters with God. What benefit was there to such immediacy with God? (*Consider Gen. 15:1–6, 18:1–33, 22:1–18.*)

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Think about some of the other encounters people in the Bible had with God: Adam and Eve in Eden (*Genesis 3*), Jacob and the ladder in his dream (*Genesis 28*), and Paul on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9*). Maybe you haven’t experienced anything as dramatic, but in what ways has God revealed Himself to you? Ask yourself, too, whether anything in your personal life might prevent you from having the kind of intimacy and immediacy that Abraham experienced with God. If so, what steps can you take to change?

**Further Thought:** “In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God and of the principles of the Abrahamic covenant. In delivering them from Egypt, God sought to reveal to them His power and His mercy, that they might be led to love and trust Him. He brought them down to the Red Sea—where, pursued by the Egyptians, escape seemed impossible—that they might realize their utter helplessness, their need of divine aid; and then He wrought deliverance for them. Thus they were filled with love and gratitude to God and with confidence in His power to help them. He had bound them to Himself as their deliverer from temporal bondage.

“But there was a still greater truth to be impressed upon their minds. Living in the midst of idolatry and corruption, they had no true conception of the holiness of God, of the exceeding sinfulness of their own hearts, their utter inability, in themselves, to render obedience to God’s law, and their need of a Saviour. All this they must be taught.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 371.

“The law of God, spoken in awful grandeur from Sinai, is the utterance of condemnation to the sinner. It is the province of the law to condemn, but there is in it no power to pardon or to redeem.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1094.

### Discussion Questions:

① Think about promises, especially broken ones. How have you felt about those who have broken their promise to you? How much difference did it make whether a person intended to keep his or her promise and then either couldn’t or changed his or her mind, or if you realized that the person never meant to keep it? 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 corrupted by our environment to the point that we lose sight of the important truths God has given us? How can we make ourselves aware of just what those corrupting influences are, and how can we counteract them?

**Summary:** The giving of the law on Sinai did not invalidate the promise that God made to Abraham, nor did the law alter the promise’s provisions. The law was given so that people might be made aware of the true extent of their sinfulness and recognize their need of God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants.