

## 20260322 Promise and Law in God's Redemptive Plan

(Galatians 3:15-29, NIV)

We continue our series on Galatians. Before we move to today's passage, I would like to briefly review the Gospel and some key words. Each time we focus on a short passage, if we do not remember the broader context, it's easy to lose balance and mistake a partial message for the whole truth.

### Recap of The Gospel and Key Words

At the very beginning of Galatians, the gospel is summarized this way: Jesus Christ gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. That is, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are freed from the bondage and curse of sin and restored to a right relationship with God.

Paul often uses the term "justification" to describe our salvation. It means being in right standing before God—God sees us as righteous and not guilty. This is the beginning of our salvation journey. After that, we gradually become righteous as we live out the new life within us by the Spirit. This is "sanctification." Finally, at Jesus' second coming, we will be fully transformed into the likeness of Christ. This is "glorification." In Galatians, Paul's focus is on "justification by believing the Gospel". Now, what does "believe" or "faith" mean?

In today's language, "believe" often means to accept something as true, or to agree with certain facts or evidence. But in the Bible, "faith" or "belief" carries a much deeper meaning. In the New Testament, faith is a conviction brought about by God, grounded in His self-revelation, and expressed in personal trust and obedience. It is not merely intellectual assent, but a whole-person commitment that manifests in action.

At this point, you may ask: Does this mean salvation is by works? Think about a branch cut off from a grapevine. It is withering and dying gradually. The only way to save it is to graft it back into the vine—this is exactly God's salvation plan for us. Now, when a branch is grafted back, is it because it already bears fruit? Or is it because of God's election and Christ's work? The answer is clear. Rotten fruit does not qualify the branch for grafting. But after it is grafted and life is restored, do we expect fruit? Of course we do. Otherwise, it will be cut off again. The same is true for salvation: good works are not the cause of justification—they are the necessary result of justification. So when someone asks, "Are good works necessary?" we must ask: are we talking about them as the condition for justification, or the result of justification?

So, the Gospel is this: God elects and justifies us in Christ—not on the basis of our good works, but because of His grace, and we receive it by faith.

### Paul Defends Justification by Faith Alone

Now we return to Galatians. This letter proclaims the gospel of Christ, with the core message of justification by faith alone. At Paul's time, false teachers were telling Gentile believers: believing in Jesus is

good, but it is not enough. Since only Jews are God’s people, if you want to be justified and receive the blessings of salvation, you must become Jewish through circumcision and the Mosaic law—only then can you be counted as God’s people.

Paul used two strategies to refute this false gospel: first, he appealed to the believers’ experience of the Holy Spirit; second, he appealed to Scripture. We have already seen how he used Scripture about the Abrahamic covenant as evidence. Today, we continue with Galatians 3:15–29, with the title: “The Promise and the Law in God’s Plan of Salvation.”

We have emphasized repeatedly that we are justified by faith alone, not by observing the law or by good works. But this raises an important question: is the law, then, something bad? After all, the law was established by God. Today’s passage gives us Paul’s answer.

Galatians 3:6–4:11 is Paul’s Scripture-based argument for justification by faith alone. Today, we focus on the position and purposes of the law, then we will see how God’s promise is fulfilled apart from the law.

### **I. Law’s Temporality**

Verses 15–16 say: “Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.”

Here, “covenant (διαθήκη)” refers to a binding agreement with terms set by the initiating party, and once it takes effect, it cannot be annulled or changed. The passage shows that this unchangeable covenant is God’s promise concerning Christ.

Paul uses this to argue that, in the matter of justification, the law is temporary. The Abrahamic covenant—God’s promise that the Gentiles would be justified by faith—cannot be annulled or altered by the law added 430 years later. In other words, justification by faith is permanent; the law is not.

Furthermore, the Abrahamic covenant is not only unchangeable but also unilateral, as shown in Genesis 15. In the ancient Near East, a solemn binding agreement was sealed by cutting animals in half and having both parties walk between them, declaring: “If I break this covenant, may I become like these animals.” But in Genesis 15, only one party passed between the pieces—God Himself—while Abram was put to sleep by God. This shows that God alone takes responsibility for the covenant. If it is broken, He bears the consequence. That is why Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for us on the cross.

In the Abrahamic covenant, God promised offspring and land, foreshadowing the blessings of salvation. Paul says that promises and laws are fundamentally different: promises are received by faith, while the laws require works. For example, if I tell a friend, “When you come to Auckland next month, you can stay at my place,” that is a promise—the friend receives it simply by trusting my word. But if your boss says, “If you

complete the project this month, I will give you a \$1,000 bonus,” that by nature is like a law—it requires your work.

We are justified by faith, not by the law. So then, “<sup>19</sup>Why, then, was the law given at all?” Paul answers, “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” In other words, the law serves a temporary purpose.

He continues, “The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. <sup>20</sup>A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.” Here, Paul shows that the promise is superior to the law. The law involves two parties and mutual obligations, but the Abrahamic covenant is God’s unilateral promise. Since we cannot fulfill our part, God’s unilateral promise is superior to the law.

At this point, we may ask: “Is the law then opposed to God’s promise?” The law requires works, while the promise calls for faith—are they in conflict? Paul answers: “Absolutely not!” The law cannot give life. Justification means that those who are spiritually dead because of sin are made alive. The law cannot do that. Therefore, even during the period when the law is in effect, it cannot justify us.

So to summarize this section: the law is important—but it is temporary. The promise is permanent. Therefore, justification by faith is not affected by the law.

## II. Law’s Purposes

Then why did God establish the law? Paul says: “<sup>22</sup>But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.”

“Locked up” carries the image of being imprisoned under sin. The law functions like a mirror—it shows us the kind of life God requires: holiness and love. But when we look into that mirror, we see our true condition—we are sinners, unable to meet God’s perfect standard. Worse still, we discover we are trapped—we cannot save ourselves and get out. So the law drives us into despair—not to destroy us, but to lead us beyond ourselves to seek salvation in Christ. Only then do we stop relying on our works and come to faith. We must recognize our total depravity before we can truly appreciate God’s grace.

So, the first purpose of the law is that it locks us in this reality so that it may lead us to grace and to faith in Christ.

Paul then gives the second function of the law: “Before this faith came, we were held under the law, locked up until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”

The second purpose of the law is to serve as a temporary guardian. It is like a learner driver who needs a supervisor. At first, the learner depends on instruction. But over time, the rules are internalized, and eventually, the learner gets a full license and drives independently. The supervisor is no longer needed. The

law functions in the same way—it restrains us and teaches us about God. But when Christ comes, everything changes. He fulfills the law perfectly, credits His righteousness to us, and gives us His Spirit to dwell within us. Now we live by the Spirit, not by the law supervisor. How to walk by the Spirit will be explained in chapter 5.

So the law has two purposes: 1) It reveals our depravity, leads us to Christ, and 2) it serves as temporarily guards to protect and teach us.

From the Abrahamic covenant to the law to Christ, God progressively reveals His plan of redemption. Salvation is not based on our works, but on God’s grace in Christ. He accomplished salvation and gives it freely, so that we are justified by faith and live a new life in Him. And today, each of us is on this journey too—from relying on works to relying on faith. We need the Spirit’s illumination to see our total depravity, to see Christ as the only salvation, and to live by faith each day.

### **III. The Promises Fulfilled**

Paul says, “<sup>26</sup>So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” Through faith in Christ, we are not only God’s people—we are His beloved children. And Paul shows us what that means: “<sup>27</sup>for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In Christ, all divisions are broken down. Race, status, and gender no longer divide us. We are one. Just as a school uniform expresses students’ unified identity and value, we “put on Christ” and share a new identity as God’s children, and live by the same faith in Christ.

Our faith is not only personal—it is communal. God calls us to live as one body in love.

### **Conclusion**

The law is temporary and cannot give life. It reveals sin and leads us to Christ. In Christ, we are justified by faith, united as God’s children, and called to live by the Spirit.

May God open our eyes to see our sin, lead us to Christ, and help us live as His children—not by the flesh, but by the Spirit.