

The covenant of promise remains untouched by law (Galatians 3:15–19)

Following rules to please a deity is a popular idea among non-atheists. Even though it is not biblical, Jews often followed that pattern and so have even some professing Christians. False brethren had entered the Galatian churches and were teaching this error that the Mosaic Law had to be followed, so Paul pointed out (3:1–14) that Abraham was counted righteous by God because he believed, and that in like manner even the Gentiles could be counted righteous before God. However, since his opponents might argue that the Law had been given after Abraham, Paul now addresses his brethren in Galatia and argues that God’s promise to Abraham is not voided by the law.

I. Human analogy supports the promise over law (3:15).

1. “Covenant” could refer either to a will or testament as in the Greco-Roman culture or to the unconditional covenants of God as in the O.T. The one-sided nature of God’s covenant with Abraham is seen in Genesis 15 where God alone “cuts” the covenant (cf. Genesis 22:16).
2. Wills or testaments could not be altered in the Greco-Roman world after having been registered and deposited (Greek law) or after the death of the one making the will (Roman law). Whether by death or by deposit, once ratified a human will could not be changed. Just as it was true for human testaments, God’s promise could also not be changed or made void.

II. The identity of the ultimate recipient supports the promise over law (3:16).

1. God made many promises to Abraham and to or about his offspring (or “seed”). The focus here is on God’s promise that in Abraham’s offspring “shall all the families (or nations) of the earth be blessed” (given to Abraham - Genesis 22:17; Isaac - Genesis 26:4; and Jacob Genesis 28:14).
2. Paul argues for the singular meaning of “offspring” though as a collective noun it can be plural, which he clearly knows. The logic of blessing in the Genesis narrative argues for the singular understanding: Abraham had more than one offspring (8 sons total), but the covenant blessing to his offspring was only to one, that is, Isaac (Genesis 17:19; 21:12). Similarly the covenant was to Isaac and his offspring (Genesis 17:19), but that “offspring” was only one, Jacob, and not Esau, Isaac’s other son. Therefore, Paul has correctly interpreted the intended meaning of God’s message: “in your offspring [not offsprings] will all the families of the earth be blessed.”
3. The one expected Offspring was and is Jesus Christ. The blessing to the nations focused on one person, Jesus the Messiah in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Since the promise finds fulfillment in Christ, then the law which comes between Abraham and Christ could not have voided the promise.

III. Chronology supports the promise over law (3:17).

1. Psalm 105:9–10 explains the chronological reference point for the start of the 430 years. The cutting of the covenant was with Abraham, but “ratified” with Abraham, Isaac, and finally with Jacob (Genesis 46:1–4), 430 years before the exodus and the giving of the law at Sinai.
2. The promise stood unaltered for over four centuries and without need of alteration or possibility of alteration. (As seen in Hebrews 11:4 God’s principle of salvation by faith extended beyond Abraham to the start of fallen mankind, because even Abel was commended as righteous because of his faith.)

IV. Principle supports the promise over law (3:18).

1. An inheritance is received because it is promised, not because the one receiving it kept certain regulations (law).
2. Abraham’s inheritance was graciously given by God on the basis of promise. Promise relies on God’s character which guarantees the promise. Law relies upon human obedience which fails.

God’s blessing to believers extends from Abraham through Abraham’s “Offspring”, Jesus Christ. The Law could not change or void the promise. Guard against thinking or acting as if it could.

For further thought, discussion, and prayer:

- What is the attraction to the law and striving to keep it?
- How does your response to sin in your life reveal a dependence upon law or a dependence upon grace?
- How do we discern that our desire to obey the Lord is a proper response to being saved rather than an attempt to win a righteous standing before God?
- Prayer: Thank God that your acceptance is not based upon your performance but by believing on Jesus Christ and what He has done. Ask God to reveal any tendencies in you to rely on performance rather than faith for your righteous standing before Him.