

## STAY ON THE COURSE OF FAITH

**3** <sup>15</sup>Brothers, I am speaking in terms of human contracts: even though it is [only] a covenant made by man, when it has been ratified, no one can ignore it or add conditions to it. <sup>16</sup>Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. He does not say, "And to your offsprings," as referring to many, but as referring to one, "And to your offspring," which is Christ. <sup>17</sup>Now this is what I mean: A covenant that was previously ratified by God cannot be cancelled by the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, so as to nullify the promise—<sup>18</sup>for if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise. But God has granted it to Abraham by promise.

<sup>19</sup>What then is [the purpose of] the law? It was added because of the transgressions—until the offspring had come to whom the promise had been made—being instituted through angels by the hand of a mediator. <sup>20</sup>Now a mediator is not [a representative] of one [party], but God is one. <sup>21</sup>Is the law then in opposition to the promises of God? God forbid! for if a law had been given that was able to give life, [then] certainly righteousness would have been by the law. <sup>22</sup>But the Scripture has confined all things under the dominion of sin, so that what was promised, being [received] by faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. <sup>23</sup>But before the [one in whom we place our] faith came, we were held prisoner by the law, confined for the faith that was destined to be revealed. <sup>24</sup>So then, the law became our guardian for Christ, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that the [one in whom we place our] faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. (Gal. 3:15-25)

### **Introduction**

The Demilitarized Zone at Panmunjum is a narrow, well-guarded strip of land that separates North and South Korea.

If you were to tour the DMZ, a military guide would point out to you the propaganda signs posted in North Korean territory: advertisements urging the South Koreans to cross the line and come into the North. The guide would inform you that every evening, by means of a loud speaker, the North Korean government blasts its propaganda into the South, urging the South Korean soldiers and villagers to cross the line and join them in North Korea.

If anyone was ever so foolish as to accept the North Korean invitation, he would cross the Bridge of No Return and enter into a wholly different world on the other side—a world of tyranny and famine. Despite the incessant efforts on the part of the North Korean government, the citizens of South Korea have rejected the offer to cross the line and have stayed on the course of freedom and prosperity.

In the Epistle to the Galatians the Apostle Paul is addressing Christian people who were being urged to cross a spiritual line: to depart from the way of salvation by faith in favor of accepting the way of salvation by obedience to the law. In this present passage he is demonstrating the foolishness of crossing over that line and is

urging these Christian people to stay on the course of salvation by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must never lose sight of the fact that salvation by obedience to the law (i.e.; salvation by human effort) and salvation by faith in Christ are two mutually exclusive religions that cannot be intermingled. Because the Word of God informs us that salvation is by faith in Christ, let us be sure to stay on the course of faith and not deviate from that course, let us not cross the line and venture into the realm of salvation by works.

### **I. Stay on the Course of Faith, ...Because the Law Cannot Replace Faith as the Way of Salvation (3:15-18)**

In verses 15-18 the Apostle Paul is dealing with God's covenant of promise originally made with Abraham, and the fact that the law given at Mt. Sinai cannot replace that covenant as a new way of salvation.

Genesis 15 records for us the making of that covenant with Abraham (who at that time was known as Abram):

*After these things the word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, and your reward shall be exceedingly great. <sup>2</sup>And Abram said, O Lord Jehovah, what will you give me, seeing that I am childless, and the one who shall inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, To me you have given no offspring; so a servant born in my household is my heir. <sup>4</sup>Then the word of Jehovah came to him, saying, This man shall not be your heir; rather, he who shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir. <sup>5</sup>And [Jehovah] brought him out [to the open field] and said, Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. <sup>6</sup>And **he believed Jehovah; and [Jehovah] credited it to him as righteousness.** (Gen. 15:1-6)*

Abram's relationship with the LORD was based on faith—faith in the LORD's word and His ability to fulfill His word (Gen. 15:6.) Based upon this faith relationship, the LORD promised to give Abram the Promised Land of Canaan: *"And he said to him, I am Jehovah who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, in order to give you this land to inherit"* (Gen. 15:7.) Note: The Old Testament land of Canaan was a spiritual model or type of the kingdom of heaven.

Abram now asked for a sign of confirmation, a pledge from the LORD: *"And he said, O Lord Jehovah, how shall I know that I shall inherit it?"* (Gen. 15:8.)

In response to Abram's request the LORD established His covenant with Abram:

*And he said to him, Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat and a three-year-old ram, also a turtledove and a young pigeon. <sup>10</sup>Abram*

*brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. <sup>11</sup>Then the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. <sup>12</sup>And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and a horror of great darkness fell upon him. <sup>13</sup>And he said to Abram, Know for sure that your descendants shall be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and they shall serve the inhabitants of that land; and that nation shall afflict your descendants for four hundred years. <sup>14</sup>But also know that I will judge that nation whom they shall serve; and afterward shall they come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup>But you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup>And in the fourth generation your descendants shall come back here again; because the iniquity of the Amorite has not yet reached its full measure. <sup>17</sup>When the sun went down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces [of the divided animal carcasses]. <sup>18</sup>On that day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your descendants have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the Euphrates. (Gen. 15:9-18)*

The fact that only the LORD walked between the divided carcasses signifies that the LORD would assume the responsibility of guaranteeing the fulfillment of the covenant, Abram must simply trust the LORD and rest in His work.

Thus the LORD made a covenant with Abram: a covenant of grace, one in which Abram would trust the LORD to do the work of fulfilling the requirements of the covenant; a covenant that was established 430 years before the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.

With this as background, we can come to Galatians 3:15-18 and understand how that original covenant of promise (or, covenant of grace) continues to be the one and only way of salvation—it cannot be arbitrarily replaced by a new covenant of works, one in which human effort replaces the role of faith as man’s responsibility in the covenant.

In verse 15 the apostle reminds the Galatians of the binding character of a covenant. Once a covenant has been ratified it becomes legally binding: it cannot be annulled; it cannot be altered by the addition of new terms that would conflict with the basic structure of the original covenant. If this holds true with regard to a man-made covenant, how much more is this true with regard to God’s covenant! In Numbers 23:19 there is revealed to us the unchangeable integrity of God: *“God is not a man, that he should lie; nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”* The point being made in Galatians 3:15 is this: God’s covenant was established with Abraham; as such, it is a binding covenant that must be fulfilled and cannot be annulled or altered.

In verse 16 the Apostle Paul points out that God made this covenant with Abraham and Christ. The promises were spoken to Abraham and his offspring

(or, seed.) Paul is alluding to Genesis 13:14-15, *“After Lot had separated himself from him, Jehovah said to Abram, ‘Now lift up your eyes from the place where you are and look northward and southward and eastward and westward; <sup>15</sup>because I will give to you and to your offspring forever all the land that you see.’”* In so doing Paul is teaching that even before the LORD made a formal covenant with Abraham He had already made His promise to Abraham and his offspring (Abraham’s one singular offspring)—the covenant recorded in Genesis 15 was merely a formalizing of God’s sure promises for Abraham’s sake.

Paul emphasizes the fact that the offspring referred to is not plural (“*offsprings*,”) but singular (“*offspring*”)—one singular descendant of Abraham. Note Genesis 22:16-18, a passage in which the LORD distinguishes a singular offspring of Abraham:

*I have sworn by myself, declares Jehovah ... <sup>17</sup>I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of the heavens and as the sand of the seashore. **Your offspring** shall take possession of the city of **his** enemies. <sup>18</sup>By your offspring shall all the nations of the world be blessed.* (Gen. 22:16-18)

Paul is emphasizing is the fact that God’s covenant of promise was established with Abraham and Abraham’s one great Descendant; and that one great Descendant is Jesus, the Christ (the Messiah.)

The point of Galatians 3:16 is this: Since the covenant was made with Abraham and his one great Descendant, Jesus Christ the Messiah, it was not possible for the covenant to be fulfilled prior to the coming of Christ into the world—and it certainly could not be nullified.

In verse 17 Paul concludes that the law given at Mt. Sinai cannot nullify the original covenant of promise. The law was given 430 years **after** the covenant of promise was ratified; but it was given centuries **before** Christ came into the world. So then, the law given at Mt. Sinai could not possibly replace the covenant that had been previously ratified but was not yet fulfilled.

Verse 18 points out the radical difference between the law as a possible way of salvation and the way of salvation by means of the covenant of promise. Salvation by the law requires trust in one’s self and one’s own personal ability to fulfill the perfect requirements of the moral law of God. Salvation by the covenant of promise requires trust in the LORD that He will provide the means of salvation—He will provide the necessary works to fulfill the covenant and grant salvation to all who trust in Him. Thus the law cannot be viewed as a later edition to the original covenant of promise, because the law introduces such new and different conditions for salvation that it would amount to nothing less than an annulment of the original covenant and the establishment of a completely new and different covenant. The law cannot possibly be a new and different covenant that the LORD introduced at a later date, because so long as the original covenant of promise

was not yet fulfilled the LORD was under obligation to maintain that covenant and bring it to its fulfillment with the coming of Christ and His work of redemption.

The Apostle Paul's whole argument in Galatians 3:15-18 is this: Stay on the course of faith, because the law cannot replace faith as the way of salvation. Do not let anyone tell you that, while it is true that Abraham was saved by faith, now that the law has been given at Mt. Sinai you are under a new and different type of covenant, one in which you must seek to save yourself by means of your own personal fulfillment of the law.

The covenant of promise was made with Abraham and Christ; therefore, nothing that came between the time of the making of that covenant with Abraham and the coming of Christ—not even the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai—can replace or alter that original covenant. By way of illustration: The city has made a covenant with your father specifying that through the third generation his family may farm a particular piece of land free of charge. The city cannot now come to you (who represent the second generation down from your father) and change the rules, demanding that you pay rent for the land. By way of application: Do not forsake the way of faith in order to pursue the way of the law, because the law cannot and has not replaced faith as the way of salvation:

*Therefore they said to him, What must we do so that we may perform the works God requires? <sup>29</sup>Jesus responded to them by saying, This is the work God requires, [namely,] that you believe in the one whom he has sent. (Jn. 6:28-29)*

## **II. Stay on the Course of Faith, ...Because the Law was Not Intended to Replace Faith as the Way of Salvation (3:19-25)**

In verses 15-18 the Apostle Paul has explained that the law can neither abolish nor alter the covenant of promise. This quite naturally raises the question, What exactly is the purpose of the law? Why did God give the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai? Paul provides some answers to this question in Galatians 3:19-25.

What is the purpose of the law? According to verses 19-20, the law was given to illustrate the way of salvation. *"The law ... was added because of the transgressions."* That is to say, the (sacrificial) law was instituted by God to deal with the transgressions of the people. The law reveals that God's justice demands that sin be punished—the Old Testament sacrificial laws gave the prescribed sacrifices that were required for atonement during the Old Testament era. The law reveals that God Himself provides the atoning sacrifice for sinners—the Old Testament sacrificial laws prescribed animal sacrifices instead of the sacrifice of the sinner himself, and those Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to the ultimate sacrifice for sins provided by God: His own Son, Jesus Christ. John the Baptist testified of Jesus, *"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (Jn. 1:29.)

*“The law ... was added because of the transgressions until the offspring had come to whom the promise had been made.”* The sacrificial laws were in effect until the Messiah came to offer Himself as the truly acceptable sacrifice for sin. The Book of Hebrews emphasizes the inadequacy of the Old Testament sacrificial laws as the means of truly cleansing the sinner from sin. The sacrifices of the Old Testament, prescribed by the sacrificial law, could never make the sinner *“perfect,”* (i.e.; those animal sacrifices could never truly atone for a man’s sins and truly satisfy the justice of God):

*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves; for this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. <sup>2</sup>If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? for the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.* (Heb. 10:1-2)

The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins: *“those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, <sup>4</sup>because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins”* (Heb. 10:3-4); animal sacrifices can never be a truly adequate substitute for men.

The Old Testament priests could never provide a perfect sacrifice to atone for sin—as is evidenced by the fact that they repeatedly offered the same animal sacrifices: *“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins”* (Heb. 10:11.)

The Book of Hebrews also emphasizes the perfection of Christ’s work of atonement. By the one offering of His own body, Christ perfected forever those who trust in Him: *“by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy”* (Heb. 10:14.) Christ has put away sin—that is to say, He has once and for all dealt with sin—by the sacrifice of Himself: *“[Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself”* (Heb. 9:26.) Christ offered one sacrifice forever: *“when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God”* (Heb. 10:12); His act of sitting down indicates that His work is completed.

What is the purpose of the law? According to Galatians 3:21-22, the (moral) law was given to show our need for salvation. Verse 21 presents a hypothetical situation: If a law had been given that was able to impart life, then righteousness would have come by the law. That is to say, if God had given a law that would not only declare to man what is right, but would also have caused us to do what is right, then righteousness and acceptance with God would have come by that law.

Verse 22 presents the actual state of affairs: the Scripture *“has confined all things under the dominion of sin.”* The law of God proclaims the righteous demands of

our holy God, exposes all men to be sinners, and renders us all liable to the righteous judgment of God; as Paul testifies in Romans 7:7-8,

*I would not have known what sin was except through the law; for I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."<sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. (Rom. 7:7-8)*

The Scripture *"has confined all things under the dominion of sin so that what was promised, being received by faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe."* So it is that the moral law shows us our need for salvation and points us away from ourselves to Christ as the only One who can meet our need and provide for our salvation.

What is the purpose of the law? According to verses 23-25, the (ceremonial) law was given to stimulate the desire for salvation. *"The law became our guardian."* In Greek society a guardian (παιδαγωγός) was a slave who was put in charge of his master's son during the years of the child's adolescence—from 6-14 years of age. This slave was not a teacher but a guardian, responsible for the child's safety, protecting him from the evils of society. The guardian had constant and total supervision over the child, regulating all of the child's activities and acquaintances. Throughout antiquity such guardians were known for their sour disposition and severity—the child longed for the day when he would come of age and be released from the custody of his guardian. But until that day, the guardian's main function was to keep the child under constant surveillance, protecting him from evil and making him stay in line with his father's requirements. Paul informs us that the Old Testament law, especially the ceremonial law with all of its regulations, served the function of being a spiritual "guardian:" through its multitude of ordinances and regulations, the Old Testament law kept the people of Israel under constant surveillance and separation from the Gentile world.

*"The law became our guardian for Christ."* The Old Testament law served this function of "guardian" in order to guard the people for Christ (so that they would not drift into paganism.) At the same time creating in their hearts the desire for the salvation Christ would bring.

The message of Galatians 3:19-25 is this: The law was never intended to replace the covenant of promise—the law was never intended to replace faith as the way of salvation. On the contrary, the sacrificial law was intended to illustrate the way of salvation; one purpose of the moral law was to show our need for salvation; and the ceremonial law was intended to stimulate a desire for the salvation that only Christ Himself could accomplish.

## **Conclusion**

There are always voices urging us to cross the line and forsake the way of salvation by faith in Christ in order to pursue the way of salvation by our personal efforts to obey the law. But the Scripture informs us that the law cannot replace faith as the appointed way of salvation, nor was the law ever intended to replace faith.

Because the Word of God informs us that salvation is by faith in Christ, let us stay on the course of faith and not depart from it.