

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 6 | Galatians 3:15–25

Lisa Scheffler, author

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Hiroo Onoda is probably not a name you're familiar with, but his story is both fascinating and tragic. Onoda was a Japanese Army intelligence officer stationed in the Philippines during World War 2. The first time he saw a leaflet announcing the end of the war in 1945, he and his comrades assumed it was Allied propaganda and continued engaging in armed skirmishes with locals. After a year of hiding in the mountains, leaflets were dropped with a message from former Japanese commanders, ordering their surrender. They didn't believe they were genuine.

Eventually, his companions either surrendered or died, but Onoda refused to come out of the jungle. In 1974, nearly thirty years after he first arrived in the Philippines, Onoda was discovered by Norio Suzuki, a Japanese adventurer and explorer who came to look for him. Suzuki tried to convince the former officer that the war was long over and it was time for him to come home. "Onoda-san," Suzuki reportedly said, "the emperor and the people of Japan are worried about you."

Onoda insisted that because he was a loyal soldier, he would remain true to his duty until he was relieved by his commanding officer. The Japanese government located the officer (who by then was an old man working in a book store) and sent him to the Philippines. At last, Onoda consented to go home to Japan.

The Allied victory in World War 2 changed the course of entire nations, but it changed nothing for Hiroo Onoda. For decades, he refused to accept this new world. He was being welcomed home, but he couldn't let go of the past.

As we saw in part one of our Galatians study, the Galatian Christians had been influenced by a group of Jewish Christians who also refused to believe that the world had changed. Christ had come and the war against sin was won, but Paul's opponents couldn't accept the victory and still wanted to wield the law as a weapon in their fight for righteousness and God's acceptance. They struggled to believe that all a person needed was faith in Christ, with nothing else added,

to be made right with God. In Christ, they, and all the Gentile believers, were welcomed home. Some of the Jewish Christians couldn't let go of their past.

We are in week 6 of our study of Galatians, and we will continue to see Paul press the Galatian Christians to return to the gospel he first preached to them. In this passage, Paul will help us understand how we should view God's law in light of our faith in Jesus and how God's covenant with Abraham also includes us.

Day 1

For people doing a "read the Bible in a year" plan for the first time, January goes pretty well because Genesis is full of gripping stories. The first half of Exodus is the same. But then, most people hit a speed bump mid-way through Exodus when the law is given. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better when they get to Leviticus, the book that derails many a Bible reading plan. The problem isn't the Bible, it's that as modern readers we aren't always sure what to make of all regulations and sacrifices. What do we do with the law? Do we follow it? Ignore it? Follow parts of it? If so which parts?

If we're confused, imagine what the Jewish Christians must have felt like. They'd grown up following the law. Observant Jews taught it to their children. It was a part of their daily life, and even more importantly, helped define who they were. Jewish Christians had accepted Jesus as their Messiah, but were struggling with how to understand the law in light of his death, crucifixion, and ascension. Many couldn't accept what Paul said and were living in the past. They were confusing the Gentile Christians and trying to drag them back to the old ways. Paul won't stand for it. In the passage we're looking at this week, he's dealing with questions about the law directly.

As you read the passage for the week, try and follow Paul's reasoning. There are some tricky sections that we'll delve into as we move through the week, but for today, decide what you think his main arguments are.

A good tool to help follow an argument, is to look for words that indicate a connection (and, for, so, so that, then), words that indicate a contrast (but, however) and those that show cause and effect (because, if/then, therefore, thus). Pay attention to those words as you read through the passage and see if they help you trace Paul's logic.

Read

Galatians 3:15–25 (NIV)

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law,

introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

¹⁹ Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. ²² But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus might be given to those who believe.

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

- How do you think Paul feels about the law? For Paul, is it a positive or negative thing? Why do you think that?

Respond

For Paul, going back under the Mosaic law with all its rituals and rites would be living in the past. Holding onto the law as a means of making you right with God is to act like the soldier who refused to believe that the war was over and it was time to go home.

Jesus paid the price and won the victory. While we are not yet experiencing all the benefits of sin's defeat, we can trust that they are ours. Whatever we are holding on to that is drawing us away from faith in Jesus needs to go. The promises of God are ours, guaranteed.

When God made his covenant with Abraham, we were part of that plan. In your prayer time this week, remember the promises of God. Promises of forgiveness, a relationship with the Creator of the universe, and eternal life with him. Promises that come from life in the Spirit — joy, love, faith, peace, hope and so many more. Meditate on that. Write a prayer of praise to God for all his promises that have been fulfilled in Christ and add to it each day this week.

Day 2

Lisa Scheffler, author

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A promise is only as trustworthy as the one making it. In the modern world, we have all kinds of ways that we formalize our promises so people are more likely to keep their word. Many agreements are backed up by the force of law. For example, when you get married you formalize your promise to love, honor, and care for your spouse by getting a marriage license that is filed with the state. When you sell a car, the title has to be transferred to the new owner, so the seller can't keep the payment, but then take the car back. When you download an app on your phone, you accept and agree to "the terms of service," (but who knows what we're agreeing to, because honestly, who reads them?)

Because these agreements are formalized, there should be consequences for breaking your word. At least that's how it's supposed to work. But because humans are well, human, lots of people try and look for loopholes to get out of their agreements so they can break their promises without consequence.

That's never true of God. He is the ever faithful one who can never break his word. God has to swear by himself because there is no higher authority. He is the ultimate authority — wholly truthful and good. What God promises will come to pass.

The Jewish people were born from a covenant God made with Abraham. They entered into another covenant at Mount Sinai, promising to obey the law that Moses had been given. God would never break his side of the covenant, but the people would. It's God's faithfulness to the descendants of Abraham that Jewish people relied on. He wouldn't abandon them. Yet, they saw keeping the law as a way to demonstrate their loyalty. It made sense to Paul's opponents, that if God was going to accept sinful Gentiles into this covenant community based on the work of Christ, they would still need to keep the law. This is the situation Paul is trying to deal with in Galatians.

In Paul's mind, his opponents had put so much emphasis on the Mosaic covenant that they were overlooking the promises that had been given to Abraham.¹ In this passage, Paul will once again return to the covenant God made with Abraham — a covenant that Abraham entered into by faith. It's also a covenant that all those who are in Christ are part of, whether they are Jew or Gentile.

Before you read our passage for today, you may also want to read [Galatians 3:1–14](#) to remind yourself of Paul's flow of thought.

Read

Galatians 3:15–18

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture

¹ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 168.

does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

- What does the inheritance depend on? Law or the promise? Why does this matter?

Reflect

Just as in our world, promises were also formalized into agreements in the ancient world. For example, kings would make treaties or covenants with other kings or even with their own people. As archaeologists have uncovered more and more treaties from biblical times, historians have discovered examples of these covenants, some of which resemble the covenants that God makes with his people.

One of these is a “royal grant” which were often gifts of land and dynasty that a ruler might give to certain privileged individuals. The Abrahamic covenant resembles one of these “royal grants.” In the covenant that God makes with Abraham, he promises to give him a fertile land and make him into a great nation. He also promised that through his descendants the whole world would be blessed. This was an unbreakable covenant because God can never go back on his word.

Paul sought to take the Galatians back to remember this covenant. He wanted to convince them that they are viewing the law of Moses in a way God didn’t intend. As commentator Scot McKnight explains, “the law of Moses is not God’s most important revelation; that revelation is God’s promise to Abraham. This means that the response demanded of Abraham is also more significant than the response demanded through Moses. That is, faith (Abraham’s response)—not works of the law—is the foundation of our relationship to God”²

After all, the Abrahamic Covenant was *the* covenant for 430 years. God wouldn’t add new stipulations to it or revise the promises he made. He will keep his word. What does that mean for the Galatians, and by implication you and I? It has always been and always will be faith that makes people right with God, not works of the law. The covenant of Abraham, one that was entered into by faith, was God’s original design for people.

Then and now, we all have a choice, we can choose Abraham, and all the blessings given to us by faith in Abraham’s seed, Jesus Christ — including righteousness, salvation, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Or we can choose Moses with his “works of the law” and the consequent “curse of the law.”³

Seems like an easy choice to me!

² McKnight, 165.

³ McKnight, 166.

Respond

“He took him [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” Genesis 15:5

Think of how much time has passed since Abraham stared up at the clear, desert sky. Because of Christ, God’s people — Jew and Gentile — were represented by more stars than Abraham could count. That includes you and me. God’s promises never fail. Which ones are you hanging onto today?

Day 3

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One hot summer day during a cookout with family and friends, the conversation took an interesting turn — to the Jewish law. My uncle, who was enjoying a bite of pork sausage, joked that he was grateful he didn’t live in Old Testament times, because pork was just too delicious to pass up. We were all nodding in agreement, when he suddenly turned serious.

“So what was it all for?” he mused. “All those laws and regulations? All the stuff they had to do? If Jesus was always the only way to salvation, why did God give all those laws in the first place?”

It’s a good question and one you may have asked yourself. And guess what, it’s one that Paul knew his opponents would want to ask him.

Read

Galatians 3:19–22

¹⁹ Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

- Why was the law given according to verse 19?

Reflect

To sum up where we are after yesterday's reading, Paul has insisted that the covenant of Abraham, one participated in by faith, was God's original design for people. The law of Moses, participated in by works of the law, was not the primary way God wants us to relate to him. God reconciles people to himself by grace through faith. ⁴

So what are we to think about the law? It's part of the Mosaic covenant, another agreement that God made with his people. At Sinai, Israel enters into a covenant with God that seems different from the covenant with Abraham because it is a covenant marked by conditions for both parties. For the Israelites, obedience leads to blessing and fullness of life; disobedience to curse and death.⁵

For an ancient people who'd been given access to the Creator of the universe, the law taught them who God was and what he expected from those who worshipped him. The restrictions and requirements that may seem strange to us, weren't necessarily strange to people in that time. The law was immensely practical for those living in the ancient near east. It also set this people apart as those who were in relationship with the true God and could reflect his image into the world. But, as Paul has so painstakingly showed us here, following the law did not make anyone right with God. So what point is Paul making?

Commentator Scot McKnight finds "three cords wound together" in the verses we looked at today. First, Paul gives the purpose of the law in verse 19. The law was given in order to reveal certain kinds of behavior as sinful. "The law, then, was a judging instrument for the people of God; through its written code they learned that certain behavior was contrary to God's will."⁶

Sometimes in parenting, we have to label something as wrong after the fact. My husband tells a story about how as boys, he and his cousins dug a tunnel into the side of a large dirt pile at his grandfather's farm. When Grandy saw how far they had dug, he went instantly pale. Their make-shift tunnel could have collapsed at any time, suffocating the boys. A new rule was announced that day, "No digging tunnels in the dirt pile!" Except it wasn't a new rule, it was common sense to those above the age of ten, but once it was codified into a rule, it was one that could be broken. God's people were perfectly capable of sinning before the law was codified, because we all are. The law revealed their sin.

After establishing the purpose of the law, Paul announces something that offended his opponents. The law was given to govern God's people for only a certain amount of time, until the Seed (Jesus) came. As we will see in just a few more verses, the law acted as a guardian over the people until Jesus came and sent the Holy Spirit to guide them. So cord number two is the law's time limit.

Finally, with cord number three, Paul speaks about the circumstances of the giving of the law when he says that the law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. According to McKnight, "The underlying assumption here is that an arrangement between a person and

⁴ McKnight, 169.

⁵ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 15, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 101.

⁶ McKnight, 179.

God that has mediators is inferior to an arrangement that has no mediators, because the latter arrangement is directly from God.”⁷

Respond

The law served its purpose, but when interpreted in light of the gospel, it can still show us who God is and what he expects from his people. Sure, we’re going to have to consider how to adapt the principles to our modern context, but the law still has much to teach us. It just can’t save us. It never could.

Today, we have the benefit of the completed Bible — we can look to Jesus and to those who, through their writings, can help us understand what he’s done for us and how we are to live in light of Jesus’ sacrifice. And we have the Holy Spirit to convict us when we stray, and guide us to be more like Jesus.

We have so much to be grateful for, whether or not you enjoy eating pork!

Day 4

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If you’re under thirty you may have never seen what I’m about to describe. For those of us who are older, we remember that every once in a while a large book with yellow pages would appear on our front step. In it was phone numbers and ads for local businesses. It was arranged by category so you could easily flip through and find anything from a dog groomer to a florist shop.

The reason younger people aren’t familiar with the yellow pages is because they were replaced by the Internet. Yet, while, the Internet made the Yellow Pages obsolete, the Internet is so much more than a Yellow Pages replacement.

It’s a crude analogy, but what the Internet did for the Yellow pages, Jesus did for the law. He not only made it obsolete, he did so much more.

In our passage from Galatians this week, Paul is helping the Galatian Christians to understand how they should view the Mosaic law. God gave the law to Israel to help them understand who he is and what he expects of his people. But following the law doesn’t save anyone. Paul is going to finish up his explanation of the purpose of the law in the passage we are looking up today.

⁷ McKnight, 180.

Read

Galatians 3:21–25

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. ²² But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus might be given to those who believe.

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Reflect

We're going to work backward from the final verse (verse 25), because it will help us make sense of Paul's argument. In the verses we read yesterday, Paul explained that the law was given in order to reveal certain kinds of behavior as sinful. Today he's going to give us another perspective on the law — he calls it a guardian. What does a guardian do?

N.T. Wright likens the law to a babysitter who takes care of children. He says:

“Paul's basic point is about the story of Israel between the time of Moses and the coming of the Messiah. During this time, *Israel was still a child and needed special looking after*. The fact that Israel needed a babysitter during the period of childhood did not mean that the babysitter should continue to do the job once the child had grown up.”⁸

But Paul also uses a much less nurturing image to describe the law. He speaks of the law as a captor. It binds, holds, and constrains. “Not only does the law declare us guilty before God, thus placing us under its curse, but it also locks us up in prison, preventing our escape.”⁹

Commentator Timothy George makes an excellent point:

“Jewish thought had developed the idea of the law as a fence, a protective wall designed to cordon off the people of Israel from the corruptions of the surrounding nations...Paul took the metaphor of the fence, however, and radicalized it by turning it into a barbed-wire prison wall.

⁸ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 40.

⁹ Timothy George, [*Galatians*](#), vol. 30, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 262.

Its purpose was not to make the unjustified sinner pure and holy, to “impart life,” but rather to condemn, enclose, and punish”¹⁰

Everything needed for salvation and God’s acceptance was established with the Abrahamic covenant and fulfilled in Christ. The law served its purpose by codifying what transgression against God’s will was. It acted as a guardian. But ultimately it imprisoned the people until Jesus came.

Respond

Jesus has brought us life and freedom! We can accept by faith all that he has done for us, and look forward with hope to what he will do for us in the future. Spend some time with him today! Finish your prayer of thanksgiving that you started at the beginning of the week. Praise God for being faithful to his promises to you.

Day 5

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Happy Friday!

What is God revealing to you through your time in Galatians? Spend some time with him in prayer today, asking him to guide you to apply what you’ve learned.

Reflect

This was a challenging passage! Read over it one more time, recalling what you’ve learned this week.

Take another look at [Galatians 3:15-25](#)

- In your own words, what point is Paul trying to make about the Abrahamic covenant and about the Mosaic law?
- What has stayed with you personally as you’ve studied this passage?

Connect

¹⁰

In another phase of life, I was a high school teacher. One of the things I discovered is that sometimes you had to find multiple ways of making the same point before your students really understood. That's the same tactic Paul is employing here.

So if you feel like in every week of our study of Galatians the main point is, God has saved us through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the law, you'd be right. And if you study Romans or Ephesians or other New Testament books, you'll see that point made just as clearly and forcefully. Why do you think God wanted that message featured so often and with such emphasis in his word? Must be because it's something that we need to hear over and over again.

God loves you and accepts you. You are welcome into the family of God, not based on anything to do with you — your accomplishments, your “goodness,” your rule-following, your giftedness — but because he is full of grace, love, and mercy. He created you, loves you, and through Jesus has formed a relationship with you that will last through eternity. The Son of God came to sacrifice himself for sin and to defeat the evil forces of this age, so you can spend eternity with him in heaven.

And you probably know that.

If you've been in church for a while, you've heard it before. But do you really believe it? Do you live like you are staking your life on this truth? Do you love and follow Jesus, spend time with the Father, and rely on the Spirit? Do you recognize the freedom you have in Christ? Freedom to live fully for God without fear? Because all that is yours, by faith, and without the law.

The number of times the New Testament repeats it would indicate that we all need the reminder.

Respond

Slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I've studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?
- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you've revealed?

Over and over we're hearing that by faith in Jesus, we are made right with God! That's not just a belief — it's a call to a life lived for the glory of God and the good of other people. Have a meaningful conversation with someone about what that means for you. What's going on in your life right now that is an invitation to deeper faith in God and actions that reflect that faith?

Coming up next week...

Next week we're coming up on a section that I think is the heart of Galatians. You won't want to miss it!