

Introduction

Context

Before, we look at [Galatians 3:15-22](#), it is helpful to consider the flow of thought so far in [Galatians 3](#). Chapter 3 begins with a debate about salvation by faith in Christ or works of the Law. No one was made right with God by works; why then would you rely on works to continue to be right with God (3:1-5)? Verses 6-9 gives Abraham as an example. Abraham was justified by faith, not works. All who share in Abraham's faith share in God's covenant relationship. Verses 10-14 move back to the law. Anyone who attempts to be justified by works of the law is under a curse. Jesus, however, died to free those of faith, becoming a curse on our behalf.

All of chapter 3 points back to [Galatians 2:21](#) "21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." That is the entire contrast of chapter 3 - righteousness by the law or by Christ's death. If salvation is by works, then Christ's death was pointless.

What about the law?

However, there is a question that the false teachers in Galatia would likely raise - a question we might also ask. ***Why did God give the law?*** *If Abraham was saved by faith alone, then why did God decide to **add** the law? Doesn't this imply that while we are **saved** by faith alone, we **remain** in a relationship with God by works? Otherwise, did God give the law for no purpose?*

Main Idea

[Galatians 3:15-22](#) answers the question - *Why did God give the law?* It answers the question negatively and then positively. First, **God did not give the law to replace the covenant**. Second, **God gave the law to point to Christ**.

The law does not add works to salvation by faith; it points to salvation by faith alone.

Law vs promise

Verses 15-18 explains why the law was **not** given. **The law was not given to replace the covenant**. The covenant with Abraham lacked **nothing**. God did not decide that His covenant with Abraham needed improvement. The law was given to **clarify** the covenant, not **replace** it. There are three pieces of evidence for this claim.

Human covenants

First, **even human covenants are binding**. [Galatians 3:15](#) “15 To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.”

A covenant is more than a contract or agreement. **A covenant is a devoted relationship**. God’s covenant with Abraham was that He would be Abraham’s God.

For example, **marriage** is a covenant. When a man and woman marry, they do not merely set out a list of agreements (e.g., who will do the housework, who will pay the bills, where will we live). Scripture says that when two people marry, they become **one flesh**; marriage is a relationship. ([Gen 2:24](#)). [Galatians 3:15](#) points out that human covenants (e.g., marriage) are **binding** ([Rom 7.1-3](#)). People do not (usually) marry with the **goal** of ending the marriage.

The point of verse 15 is that *if we enter into **human** covenants expecting a binding commitment, how much more should we expect God to be faithful to **His** covenant?* It stands against God’s character to say that He made a covenant with Abraham by his faith alone, then decided that faith was not enough; therefore, He added the law. That is unacceptable for humans and even more unacceptable for a faithful God.

Delayed fulfillment

Second, God’s covenant was not completed with Abraham. **God’s covenant was with Christ**. [Galatians 3:16](#) “16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.”

Notice that verse 16 says that the promise was not made to “the many;” that is, it was not made to **all** of Abraham’s descendents (see [Rom 9:6-8](#)). For example, God’s blessing was through Isaac, not Ishmael. God’s blessing was through Jacob, not Esau. Being born as a descendant of Abraham does not give you a relationship with God (see [John 1:12-13](#); [3:3-6](#); [Matt 3:9](#)). In the same way, being born to Christian parents does not give you a relationship with God.

God made the covenant with Abraham and **one** of His descendents, Jesus. Jesus **fulfilled** the covenant that God made with Abraham. This does not exclude “the many” from salvation; it defines “the many.” That is, this verse does not claim that no one can have a relationship with God **except Jesus**. It explains that no one can have a relationship with God **apart** from Jesus. The only way to know God is **in Christ**.

God’s covenant with Abraham was that he would have a **relationship** with God by faith alone. He would be regarded as **righteous** by his faith alone ([Gal 3:6](#)). He would receive life by the **Holy Spirit** by faith alone ([Gal 3:2](#), [5](#), [14](#)). If God’s covenant was fulfilled in Abraham, then **his faith** would be sufficient for all of his descendents. But even Abraham could not

keep the covenant. *How did Abraham participate in the covenant?* He had faith. *How do you participate in the covenant?* You have faith. But someone must **fulfill** the covenant. Therefore, the covenant promise was made to Christ. Those who have faith in Him, including Abraham, share in that covenant relationship.

The point of verse 16 is this. If the covenant was made with Christ, *why would God **add** anything?* Christ does not **supplement** the covenant; the covenant was **always** with Christ. The only way to claim that the law replaced the covenant is to deny that Jesus was sufficient for fulfilling the covenant faithfulness.

The promise

Third, God gave the covenant by His promise. [Galatians 3:17-18](#) “17 This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. 18 For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”

You see the emphasis. The covenant stands on God’s **promise**. This point rests on God’s faithfulness ([Heb 11:11](#)). God made a **promise** to Abraham. God made that promise (a covenant relationship) **before** He gave the law (the Mosaic covenant). If the law **replaced** the covenant, then the law **voided** God’s promise. That is, if God gave the law (righteousness by works) to replace the covenant (righteousness by faith alone), then God was **unfaithful to His promise** ([2 Tim 2:13](#)).

Summary

Why did God give the law? Verses 15-18 give one part of the answer. God did **not** give the law to replace the covenant. *How do we know that was not the **purpose** of the law?* First, even human covenants are binding. If we expect humans to remain faithful to the covenant, how much more should we expect God to be faithful to His covenant. Second, God’s covenant was with Christ. If the law replaced the covenant, then Christ died for no purpose. Third, God made the covenant by a promise. If God gave the law to replace the covenant, then He turned His back on His promises. - the promise was void.

God is faithful. He promised a covenant relationship with all who have faith. That covenant promise is fulfilled in Christ. God did not give the law to replace the covenant.

Pointing to Christ

Verses 19-22 explain why the law **was** given. **The law was given to point people to Christ.**

Sinful humanity

First, verses 19-20 explain that the law was given to **point us to faith**. That is, the law teaches us to **trust God** for salvation, **not ourselves**. [Galatians 3:19-20](#) “19 Why then the law? It was

added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. 20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.”

Why did God give the law if salvation is by faith alone? Verse 19 says that the law “was added because of transgressions.” This does not mean that the law was given to **make** people sinners. [Romans 5:13–14](#) “13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses...” The law did not make people sinners and it did not make people guilty. Everyone who lived before the law sinned and died.

The law was given to **show** us that we are sinners ([Rom 4:15](#)). [Romans 3:20](#) “20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes **knowledge** of sin.”

Look at the contrast between the law and the covenant in [Galatians 3:19–20](#) “... it [the law] was put in place through angels by an intermediary [Moses]. 20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.”

This is the heart of the debate between justification by faith alone or by works of the law. If we are righteous by the law, then righteousness depends on humanity. God gave the law through angels by an intermediary - Moses. Furthermore, blessing under the law only comes by human faithfulness. [Deut 28](#) explained to Israel that **if** they obeyed God, He would be with them and bless them, but **if** they disobeyed God, He would be against them and curse them. *In which category would you be? Would God be with you because you are faithful or against you because you are a sinner?* Scripture says repeatedly that all people are sinners ([Rom 3:10, 23](#)).

Salvation by the law required faithfulness from both sides - if men were faithful to God’s command, God would be faithful to His promise to be with them and bless them. **No one** has kept their side of faithfulness.

The covenant depends on the **faithfulness of God**. God is one. By the way, this is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. If God is not Triune, then there is no salvation. Salvation depends on the deity of Jesus. God alone forgives sin. God alone can atone for sin. God alone can bear the guilt of our sin. God **made** the promise of an eternal relationship and God **kept** the promise by Christ’s faithfulness.

By faith alone

So, verses 19-20 makes the point that the law was given to show our inability to be righteous by works. *How hopeless is that?* If the law was **only** given to tell me I am a failure, *how hopeless am I?* I am lost in my sins.

But the law has another purpose. The law leads us to look beyond ourselves for salvation. **The law points us to faith in Jesus.** [Galatians 3:21-22](#) “21 Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. 22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

The law was given to **imprison** us under sin ([Rom 3:9](#)). The false teachers in Galatia were insisting on obedience to the law (righteousness by works) to remain in a covenant relationship with God. That is, they claimed that although you **enter** a relationship with God by faith, you **remain** by works. This is still taught today (e.g., N. T. Wright). Verses 21-22 responds to that false teaching by saying “If you **can** be righteous by the law, then do it. If you think that God requires righteousness by the law, then show me the righteous person.”

When the law forbids coveting, it shows me by my coveting that I am a slave to sin ([Rom 7:7-12](#)). When the law forbids lying, it shows me by my lying that I am a slave to sin. When the law tells me to love my neighbor as myself, it shows me by my self-centeredness that I am a slave to sin.

Scripture imprisoned everyone under sin so that we would learn to rely on faith alone. [Galatians 3:22](#) “22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

A common misunderstanding is that people were saved in the OT by works and saved in the NT by grace. Salvation was **never** by works ([Rom 4:1-8](#)). *Who would be saved by works in the OT?* They were all sinners. Even God’s promise to Abraham was dependent on Christ’s incarnation, sinlessness, and death. Abraham was not righteous; Christ was righteous. God did not overlook Abraham’s sin; God atoned for Abraham’s sin on the cross. No one has **ever** been saved by works; salvation is by faith alone.

Conclusion

Summary

Why did God give the law? Here is the timeline from the **perspective of the false teachers** in Galatia. God made a covenant with Abraham that required faith alone. However, something else was needed. Therefore, God gave the law to **define** how a person can be righteous and know God. That is, these teachers did not deny the necessity of faith for initial justification, but they argued that works must be **added** for final justification.

[Galatians 3:15-22](#) refutes this idea, precisely because it rejects the nature of God and the necessity of Christ. Here is the timeline from the **perspective of Gal 3:15-22**. God made a covenant with Abraham that required faith alone. Nothing else was needed **because** that covenant was also with Abraham’s offspring, Christ. God gave the law, not to **replace** the

covenant, but to **reinforce** the covenant. The law was given to show how **desperately** we need God to fulfill the covenant **for us**. That is, the law did not **add** to the covenant; the law showed me that I could **contribute nothing**. **Christ fulfilled everything in my place**. The law points to Christ.

Response

[Galatians 3:15-22](#) argues that the only right response to God is faith in Christ - complete dependence. As we read this passage one last time, reflect on the purpose of the law, which points solely to Christ. Believe in Him.