

The Gospel in Galatians
The Priority of the Promise

Lesson #6 for November 5, 2011

Scriptures: Galatians 3:15-20; Genesis 9:11-17; Matthew 5:17-20; Exodus 16:22-26; Genesis 15:1-6.

1. This lesson will focus on the relationship between faith and obedience to the law as described in Galatians 3:15-20. What is suggested by the idea that the law was “added”? Was there ever a time when the law did not exist? This passage, of course, focuses on the story of Abraham and God’s promise to him. Isn’t the law a transcript of God’s character? What is implied by Mark 2:27,28? (Compare Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7) Haven’t the principles of the law been there for all eternity?
2. In what form did Abraham have a law? Did he know anything about the Ten Commandments? What is implied by the statement Abraham “kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws”? (Genesis 26:5, *NRSV*)
3. Read Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:1-8. Who was doing all the promising in these verses? Was Abraham making any promises to God? Or, was God making all the promises to Abraham? Compare Jeremiah 31:31-34. This passage in Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the new covenant. How does it compare with the promises made to Abraham earlier in Genesis?
4. What is the difference between a covenant and a will? A covenant is an agreement between two or more people and is sometimes referred to as a contract or a treaty. By contrast, a will is a declaration by a single person of what he would like to have done with his property after his death. As you read these verses in Genesis, would you describe it more like a will or more like a covenant? One Person is doing all of the promising. In what sense was Abraham a part of this covenant? Did God ask him to do anything? How do you understand Genesis 17:9-16?
5. Abraham had been asked to follow God’s covenant. He had left Ur of the Chaldees and had traveled to Haran and later proceeded on from Haran to Canaan. He had no official property of his own. Wouldn’t you say that there must have been a significant relationship?
6. There are several very important points that Paul wanted to make about this agreement and about the later commandments given from Mount Sinai. First of all, he wanted to make it clear that the promises God made to Abraham were in no way modified or nullified by anything that happened later, including the giving of the commandments at Sinai. Genesis 13:15; 17:8; Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:29; Isaiah 46:11; Hebrews 6:18.

Christ came to our world to represent the character of God as it is represented in His holy law, for His law is a transcript of His character. Christ was both the law and the gospel. . . . (*Christ Triumphant* 339.2)
7. If the law is a transcript of God’s character and if the angels in heaven found it surprising that there ever was such a thing as a law, (*Mount of Blessing* p. 109) doesn’t that imply that the law is everlasting? Why wasn’t the law spelled out at least in the days of Noah? Or, at least early in the experience of Abraham? See *Patriarchs and Prophets* 364; *Spiritual Gifts* Vol. 3, 299.2 (1864). We keep failing and God keeps adding laws and commands. Did Adam and Eve have any laws before they sinned?
8. If God’s plan of salvation is based on justification alone and has nothing to do with observance of law, why was the giving of a law necessary? Does the law have only a temporary application or jurisdiction? (Galatians 3:24) Many of our Christian friends believe that the law given at Sinai—otherwise known as the Ten Commandments—was only applicable from the time of Sinai until the death of Christ. How does that fit with our understanding that the law is everlasting and eternal in its application?
9. Review your understanding of what happened at Sinai. There was a great ball of fire that came down on the mountain, and there was black smoke and probably thunder and lightning and a powerful voice speaking out of the dark cloud with an earthquake that shook everybody. The children were terrified and stood at a distance. What was God trying to do?

10. What was God trying to teach the children of Israel by that experience? Would you be comfortable having an intimate relationship with a God who would do such a thing? Why did God do that? When Jesus came down to this earth some 1500 years later:

The poorest and humblest were not afraid to approach Him; even little children were attracted to Him. They loved to climb upon His lap and to kiss that pensive face, benignant with love. (3T 422.1; GW92 261.3)

11. Why was there such a wide discrepancy in behavior by the same God?
12. Abraham had several very open and relatively friendly and intimate conversations with God. What do we know about them? See Genesis 17:1-22; 18:1-33. Were those encounters common? Did those conversations prepare Abraham for what took place later in Gen. 22:1-2?
13. Let us return to the major question: What is the purpose of the law? If you had been in God's place trying to establish a new government for the children of Israel, would you have left out any of the Ten Commandments? Which one of them do you think we could do without today? It is interesting to notice that our Christian friends want to keep nine of the Ten Commandments, but they are not comfortable with what we call the fourth commandment or the Sabbath commandment. Why do you think that is? Is this command arbitrary? There are death decrees mentioned in the Bible for disobeying each of the Ten Commandments except the tenth.
14. There are two kinds of laws that we know about. Laws such as the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology are called *descriptive* laws. For example, the law of gravity was formulated mathematically simply to describe how gravity affects everything we know about. The other kind of laws are *proscriptive* laws. They include things like the speed limit on roads and on which side of the road one is supposed to drive. These laws are more or less arbitrary and decided by some governing authority. Which of these types of laws—descriptive or proscriptive—best describes God's Ten Commandments? Does that change your attitude toward God?
15. Does understanding the true nature of the law help us develop a better relationship with God Himself? Is it true that God only asks us to do things which are for our own good?
16. Does keeping the commandments change us? Does it make us happier, healthier, and holier? Does justification change us? In what way are we supposed to be changed by the plan of salvation? Are we saved by accepting the righteousness and redemption that Christ has prepared for us? Or, must some change take place in us?
17. Are we saved by justification alone? Or, do we need some sanctification as well? Is it possible to receive justification alone? Or is receiving justification the first step in receiving sanctification? Is faith the only true requirement for salvation? (Acts 16:31) If so, what does that imply? What does the law have to do with faith? Or, does faith do away with the law? (Romans 3:31)
18. Would it be fair to say that the Ten Commandments have virtually nothing to do with our salvation? Does having faith abolish the need for the law? (Romans 3:31; Romans 7:7; 7:12; 8:3; Matthew 5:17-20)
19. There are many circumstances under which following God's commandments literally preserve us from destruction.

Moreover, genuine faith implies in itself an unreserved willingness to fulfill the will of God in a life of obedience to His law. . . . Real faith, based on wholehearted love for the Saviour, can lead only to obedience.—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 510.

20. If, in fact, justification by faith means that we no longer need the law, would it then be alright to commit adultery, murder, steal, tell lies, etc.? Wasn't the law given to protect us from just such things happening until we became mature enough to realize it is best to do right because it is right? Does this help us to understand why James calls it the "law of liberty"? (James 1:25; 2:12)
21. When the Jews in Jesus' day referred to the Law and the Prophets, what were they talking about? The traditional Jewish understanding of the word *Law* referred to the Torah or the five books of Moses. But sometimes, they would use the word *Law* to refer to the entire Old Testament. (John 10:34; Psalms 82:6)

22. Modern-day Christians often use the word *law* to refer strictly to the Ten Commandments. This is sometimes called the “law of God” or sometimes the “law of Moses.” By contrast, the ceremonial law refers to the large collection of requirements given to the children of Israel after the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai to guide them in all of their daily activities as well as in their worship activities.
23. Did Paul tell us specifically what law he was speaking about? (Compare Galatians 3:19 and Romans 5:13,20) Ellen White wrote quite clearly on this subject. (*1SM* 233,234; *3SG* 299.2-3; *ST*, June 17, 1880 par. 2-3; *1SP* 264.2-265.1; *PP* 364.2; *SR* 148.3-149.1)
24. Surely, Paul was not trying to suggest that the law was added to the Abrahamic covenant in such a way as to modified it in some way. The law had been in existence long before Sinai. But, the relationship that God had with Abraham when He gave His covenant was very different from the relationship He had with the ex-slaves just coming out of Egypt. They needed more clear and specific directions. The law was never intended to be a recipe for salvation. However, it does clearly point out sin.
25. So, is it the moral law or the ceremonial law that more specifically points out sins? Clearly, it is the moral law. (Romans 3:20; 5:13, 20; 7:7,8,13) The ceremonial law simply adds many detailed instructions about how different portions of the moral law are to be carried out.
- The law acts as a magnifying glass. That device does not actually increase the number of dirty spots that defile a garment, but makes them stand out more clearly and reveals many more of them than one is able to see with the naked eye.—William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 141. (As quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, November 1, 2011)
26. It seems that the Galatians—and especially the Judaizing Christians who had gone to Galatia—needed to reorient their thinking. What about us? Do we need a paradigm shift?
27. So, coming back to the question of which law is being specifically referred to as being added, what should be our answer? We need to understand that since the days of Alexander the Great, the Greeks had been telling the world that to be civilized they needed to adopt Greek culture, speak the Greek language, make cities that looked like Greek cities, etc. In general, that split people into two large categories. Some believed that everyone should cooperate with the Greeks and just get along and get on with their lives.
28. Others believed that they should do everything possible to resist this Hellenization—which is the technical term for that Greek civilization orientation. Among the Jews there were numerous groups, all of whom took different approaches. The Essenes were so strict in their attempts to follow what they believed were the correct Jewish codes that they even moved out of Jerusalem to establish a center near the Dead Sea. They did not want to be contaminated even by the teachings of the Pharisees.
29. On the opposite extreme, were the Sadducees. While they purported to be religious leaders, in general, they favored cooperation with the Greeks and, later, the Romans. They accepted only the five books of Moses as their guiding light. By contrast, the Pharisees believed that the only solution was to resist every influence that might take them away from their Jewish heritage. It was the Pharisees that most often resisted Jesus. They had spelled out in hundreds of detailed laws such things as how to keep the Sabbath.
30. Who is the most famous Pharisee of all? While you may not have thought of him in this way, it is Paul the apostle! Other Pharisees that are known my name from the Bible include Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Simon the former leper, and probably Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The Pharisees clearly taught that a detailed observation of all the rules was what was needed.
31. In this context the most famous ex-Pharisee, Paul, surely was in an excellent position to point out the problems with that approach.
32. Does the fact that Paul suggested that the law was added mean that it did not exist prior to Sinai? That certainly cannot be true in light of Genesis 9:5,6; 18:19; 26:5; 39:7-10; and Exodus 16:22-26. Ellen White suggested that the angels were surprised to find that there was a law.

(Mount of Blessing 109.1,2)

33. God who regarded Abraham as His friend did not believe it was necessary to approach him with a black cloud, thunder, lightning, and fire. But, the children of Israel who were almost completely ignorant about God and His requirements needed all of that.
34. But, many of our Christian friends reading these verses interpret them to mean that the law came into effect at Mount Sinai and ended when Christ died on the cross. This certainly conflicts with much of what Paul says in the book of Romans and also conflicts with Matthew 5:17-19.
35. Are they suggesting that after the death of Christ it is okay to commit adultery, kill, steal, and lie? Of course not! They only want to do away with the Sabbath commandment. So, what did Christ actually do to deal with sin? (Romans 8:3,4) Did Christ provide a true remedy for sin? Was it that He paid the price for our sins? Did He provide for our justification? Did His death make it possible for God to forgive us? Or, did His life and death teach us the truth about God and about sin so our choices are clear?
36. No one can doubt the impressive display that God put on at Mount Sinai. Did it convince the children of Israel to carefully observe all of His requirements for years to come? Of course not! Six weeks later, they were dancing drunk and naked around the golden calf. (Exodus 32)
37. There are a number of places in the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, suggesting that love is the fulfillment of all the law. See Leviticus 19:18; Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:8,10, etc. If we truly love God and love our fellow men and women, would we intentionally break any of the Ten Commandments? If the law of God were established in our hearts as a guiding principle for our lives, how would that impact our Christianity? Does the law have anything to do with the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22?
38. Many Christians make a great deal out of the fact that Jesus is our Mediator. Where did this idea come from? Who was it that first pleaded for a mediator in the Old Testament? (Exodus 20:18-20) While angels are not specifically mentioned in Exodus, it is very interesting to notice that in Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:38,53; and Hebrews 2:2, the Bible writers suggest that they were involved along with Moses in mediating between God and the children of Israel.
39. How did Abraham manage to develop such a good relationship with God at a time when there were no churches, no pastors, the Bible had not yet been written, and apparently, he was surrounded by pagans?
40. What is our relationship to the law in our day? When we think of its provisions and directions, do we immediately feel condemned? Are we thankful that God grades on the curve? Do we think that the Ten Commandments are a wonderful goal toward which we strive but which no one can ever reach? Do we need to rethink our understanding of God's law? If we receive the Spirit of God and manifest the fruit of the Spirit, would that mean that we are obeying the principles of law?
41. Finally, we must agree with Paul that the giving of the law of the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial laws some 430 years after the original agreement with Abraham did not invalidate that agreement or modify it in any way. We should also agree with Paul that the law still serves as an excellent guide for human behavior. When held up like a mirror alongside our behavior, it quickly points to areas where we need help.
42. For those of us who believe and accept the great-controversy, trust, healing model of the plan of salvation, the life and death of Jesus Christ have given us a clear picture of the kind of Person God is and the devastating results of sin. God's law spells out the nature of sin in more detail. It is only by studying and meditating on the life of Christ and by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives to transform us into His nature that we have any chance of becoming more like Him so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

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