



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Chapter 3, Verses 15-20

by Tim Kelley

As we continue our study of Paul's epistle, it's important to keep in mind both Paul's purpose in writing the letter as well as the basis for his frustration:

- Paul was outraged that the Galatian congregation(s) had accepted a different understanding of the gospel message, that being that non-Jews had to be ritually circumcised in order to be considered a part of the people of God.
- Paul's understanding of the gospel was simply – because Messiah Yeshua had redeemed His people by paying the penalty of Israel's sins, God had begun to call back those He had sent into captivity nearly 2700 years earlier.
- Paul had received his understanding of the Gospel by direct revelation from Yeshua and had confirmed it by the prophets.
- The “pillars” of the messianic believers had confirmed his message, since they had witnessed what God was doing themselves.
- Never-the-less, the influence of the Judaism of the day was such that it caused even the leaders to stumble at times.

So in chapter 3, Paul began to show the Galatians how foolish it is to believe that a person can justify himself before God by what he does. Instead, (as he references by the prophet Habbukuk), deliverance and justification come about by faith in what God has said and by what God does.

Paul continued his argument by referring to the fact that Israel has a covenant with God – one that cannot be broken.

^{ESV} **Galatians 3:15** 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.

In an apparent effort to help the Galatians see how the perpetrators of the new “twist” on the gospel were teaching against even secular understanding, Paul referred to the common legal code of his day, simply being that when two or more people enter into a contract, or if a person makes out a will, it's binding and cannot be altered without the consent of those who are party to it.

The Greek word Paul used that's translated “covenant” is “diatheke” (Strong's 1242), and it simply means “an arrangement”. In the New Testament it's translated as “covenant” 20 times and “testament” 13 times. It's also the same word that the Septuagint (LXX) uses to translate the Hebrew word “beriyth” (בְּרִית) – Strong's 1285) in Genesis 9 (the flood), Genesis 15 (cutting the covenant with Abraham), and in Exodus 19 (the covenant at Mount Sinai). Thus we know that Paul is making a reference to the covenants God had made with Abraham and Israel, and since the Galatian problem revolved around the fact that certain Jews believed there were unwritten requirements a person had to perform before that person could be considered part of the covenant with Abraham, we'll focus on that. Since in the judicial system of the day, changing or adding to a covenant or a will (after the death of the testator) was not allowed, it would seem clear that without God's consent, there could be no changes to the covenant, and that a later covenant could not change a prior covenant, and because God made it clear in Malachi that He does not change . . .

^{NKJ} **Malachi 3:6** "For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

. . . we can rest assured that the covenants have not changed.

In regards to the Galatian problem, the question was not whether God had nullified the covenant, it was whether things could be added to it, specifically certain tenets of Oral Law pertaining to conversion to Judaism. In Paul's view, adding something to the covenant would be the same as adding requirements to a legally established secular contract. In a law-centered society, you just don't do that.

In addition to the obvious, Paul may have had a hidden meaning that may have been picked up by some of his more scripturally astute readers, specifically those who were causing problems in the congregation. Remember how Paul began this passage. He said –

^{NKJ} **Galatians 3:15** Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though *it is* only a man's covenant, yet *if it is* confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.

Why did Paul say "in the manner of men"? Obviously, they were all men, and the point he was making would have been the same for both secular and religious people of his day, so why say "of men"? The answer may be found in the prophets.

Ezekiel 34 and 35 speak specifically of the bad shepherds who had lead Israel astray, culminating in Israel's banishment from the land; but then it talks about the time when He would save his flock, raise up a good shepherd for them (34:22 & 23), and begin to gather them back to the land - just as was happening in Paul's day. Speaking to those who turn back to God and begin to follow His way, He says –

^{NKJ} **Ezekiel 34:31** "You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you *are men*, and I *am* your God," says the Lord GOD.

In this prophecy, God called those of His flock "men", or more specifically "adam" (אָדָם – Strong's 120). Maybe Paul was using his Biblical expertise to show the perpetrators of the "different" gospel that what he was saying was about them specifically . . . that are the bad shepherds of this prophecy.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 3:16-18** Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. ¹⁷ And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance *is* of the law, *it is* no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise.

This is a reference to Genesis 12:7 which, along with vs. 1-3 begin a series of promises made to Abraham. These promises include (among other things) a multitude of descendants, land, wealth, and a Messiah, all of which would stem from Abraham's yet to be born son, Isaac. But according to what Paul wrote, the promises were made to Abraham and his one seed – the Messiah, which would lead one to believe that in fact the promises were not given directly to any other offspring of Abraham but the Messiah. How could that be? Were they not handed down through Isaac, then to Abraham's offspring through him?

The Hebrew word for "seed" is "zera" (זֵרָא – Strong's 2233). Zera is a collective singular noun, which means that is a word that can mean only one, or more than one. Similar words in English are "deer" and "fish". When it is used in regards to a individual man's offspring, it always has the singular form. By making this statement, Paul indicated that it is his understanding of scripture that the true offspring of Abraham is Messiah Yeshua and that any inheritance must pass through Him -

^{KJV} **Genesis 12:7** . . . (and) unto thy seed will I give this land . . .

This implies that – contrary to common belief – the land was not given to the physical offspring of Abraham, but only to those who claim it through Messiah Yeshua. Without Him, you have no real claim to the land. It's interesting to note that there's no record of Abraham passing the blessing onto Isaac. Instead, YHWH gave the blessing to Isaac. When this thought is coupled with the passages in Ezekial (as well as numerous passages throughout the Bible), it's clear that Israel can only claim the promises given to Abraham when they begin to honor and emulate Messiah Yeshua.

So if the promise given to Abraham was indeed given to the "one seed" – Messiah Yeshua, then it stands to reason that it was through that one seed that all the promises were to be fulfilled, even this one –

^{NKJ} **Genesis 22:18** "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

This blessing is understood to be that salvation that leads to eternal life would come through Abraham's descendant – the Messiah.

Paul went on to say that the promises (plural) made to Abraham (and passed on to the Messiah) were not negated by the Torah. Why not? Because unlike the covenant God made with Israel, the covenant with Abraham had no terms.¹ The promises are the contract made with Abraham (actually, a one-sided covenant) and cannot be negated by Israel's obedience or disobedience to the Torah. The promises are not derived from the Torah, nor are they predicated on it. The Greek word in verse 18 for "of" as in "of the law" is "ek" (Strong's 1537) and means "out of", "from", "by". Thus Paul said that the inheritance is not from or by the Torah, and thus is not dependant on it. The promise was given to Abraham because God wanted him to have it. He did not "earn it", it was given to him by the grace of God.

In regards to the "430 years", there is much discussion. Mr. Cowan gives a good teaching on that which can be found on our web site.² We won't discuss it here.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 3:19-20** What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. ²⁰ Now a mediator does not *mediate* for one *only*, but God is one.

Based on what Paul has said from the beginning of this letter, it's evident that the perpetrators of the "other gospel" believed that Torah observance (to whatever level a fellowship, church, or corporation deemed necessary) was required before one could have fellowship with God. In the case of the Galatians, it was ritual circumcision for the purpose of conversion to Judaism. But is that what the Bible says? Is the Torah simply a set of initiation steps to being a child of God? And if not, what purpose does it serve . . . if any?

According to Paul, the Torah was given for transgressions. What does that mean? Let's take a look . . .

First we see that the Torah was "added". Added to what? It was added to the covenant, the same covenant Paul was talking about earlier, the one between God and Abraham, the one that was passed on to his descent, Messiah Yeshua. Are we contradicting ourselves here? No! Though the covenant stands on its own without the Torah, the Torah is built on top of the covenant as a way to bring the covenant to fruition. Keeping in mind that the covenant promises included land, a multitude of people, wealth, and other blessings, there were going to have to be laws that would help the people live happily and peaceably in the land He was giving them. God was not going to simply put them in the land and let them go their own way. No – He gave them a Torah, a broad set of instructions that would guide them in how

¹ Circumcision was not a term of the covenant, instead – it was the sign of the covenant.

² <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/Cowan%20-%20430%20Years.mp3>

to get along with each other as well as with Him. So the Torah is laid on top of the covenant, not to do away with it, but to fulfill it.

In his explanation, Paul focuses on one aspect of the Torah – that part dealing with transgressions – violations of the Mosaic law. Much of the Torah deals with sacrifices and well as repentance and restitution, all things that bring you back into fellowship with God and your fellow man. The sacrifices and the priesthood were daily reminders that sin had penalties, and that God was going to provide an innocent lamb by which those penalties could be paid. This was a major part of the Torah . . . one of its purposes.

Actually, the phrase “because of transgressions” is not the best rendering of Paul’s words. The English word “because” is translated from the Greek word “charin” (Strong’s 5484) and comes from the word “charis” (Strong’s 5485). “Charis” is the word we translate as “favor” or “grace”. In other words, the law was added for the sake of transgressions . . . so that Israel would have a way to work through their problems. You could say that the law was given to Israel by grace.

Immediately following his reason for adding the Torah, Paul states that it was given “till the Seed should come . . .”. This is another puzzling part of Paul’s discourse. Is he saying that once Messiah arrived there would no longer be a need for the Torah? Not at all! Over and over again, Paul reiterates the importance of the Torah³, so what does he mean? There again, we find the answer by looking at the Greek definitions.

In this passage, the English word “till” is the Greek word “achri” (Strong’s 891) which in Strong’s means “until” or “unto”. These definitions imply a termination point, a point when what was is no longer or vice-versa. This word is used in a number of passages in the New Testament, and in some translations is rendered differently in order to make sense of what is being said. One example is the English Standard rendition of a verse in Revelation –

^{ESV} **Revelation 12:11** And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

In this verse is John saying that they didn’t love their lives until they died? Obviously not. In this passage, the word “until” would make little sense, so the translators use the term “even unto” to translate the Greek word “achri”. Another passage is the first place the word is used –

^{ESV} **Matthew 24:38** For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,

Here the translators did not correct the translation, but think about it. Noah had been building this giant boat in the middle of dry land for a number of years. All that time the people reviled him. Then on a bright sunny day, Noah and his children, along with hundreds of pairs of animals go into the ark. Did Yeshua suggest that once Noah went in the ark everyone went on a fast; that they stopped eating and drinking simply because Noah went in the ark? I don’t think so. Instead, if we use the corrected translation “even unto” or “even when” we see that the people continued their ways for the seven days Noah was in the ark, and probably until they realized that the flood was actually upon them.

One last passage to illustrate this point is in Paul’s writing themselves –

^{NKJ} **Romans 5:13** (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

Is this saying that there was sin in the world until God gave the Torah, then suddenly all sin stopped? Obviously not. We know that sin continued after Sinai and is still continuing today. A better rendition would be “for even unto the law, sin was in the world . . .”. The English Standard reads this way –

³ Romans 7:12;16, 1 Timothy 1:8

^{ESV} **Romans 5:13** for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

If we apply this same reasoning to Paul's statement about the Torah, it would read like this –

^{TKV (Tim Kelley Version)} **Galatians 3:19** . . . It was added because of transgressions, even when the Seed should come to whom the promise was made . . .

This rendition satisfies the context of Paul's letter as well as that of the Tnakh, the apostles, and The Messiah. It also satisfies the fact that the sacrifices did not end when Yeshua was crucified. Though He is the one to whom the sacrifices point, His death did not end the need for sacrifices, since sacrifices were merely a reminder of sin, not an atonement for sin.⁴

To further substantiate the importance of the Torah, Paul went on to say that the Torah was put in place by angels through a human mediator – Moses.⁵ So Paul is in no way indicating that Torah had little value when compared to the covenant. He was simply putting each in their proper place.

The next verse (vs. 20) is somewhat puzzling, but when taken in context is quite clear. Paul is simply saying that whereas Moses was the mediator of the Torah (since it was a covenant that was dependant on the performance of both parties), God alone is the mediator of the covenant made with Abraham – a unilateral covenant that's 100% dependant on God to bring to fruition.

To summarize what we've seen in these 6 verses:

- God's covenant with Abraham is not dependant on Torah observance. One can come to Messiah without the knowledge and understanding of the Torah.
- Yeshua is the true inheritor of the promise given to Abraham, and thus if a person wants a part in that promise, they must come through Messiah Yeshua.
- Israel's disobedience to the Torah did not nullify the promise. It just meant that God was going to bring it about another way.
- The Torah had a purpose that it filled in ancient Israel. It's purpose was to reveal the need for salvation via a willing sacrifice.

We'll attempt to get to the end of the chapter next time.

Shalom Alecheim

⁴ Hebrews 10:3; 9:13; 10:4

⁵ Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2; Deut.33:2; Ps. 68:17