

# **A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS**

## **(LESSON FORTY-TWO)**

### **“A GOD-MADE COVENANT”**

#### **GALATIANS 3:15-16**

#### **(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)**

*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.*

*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.*

In verse **14**, Paul informed his readers that the blessing of Abraham—the provision of justification, including the receiving of the promised Holy Spirit, is now available to all believers, Jew and Gentile, on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. In verses **15-18**, he will argue that this provision was covenanted to Abraham **before** the Law was given. Therefore, the Law cannot annul that which was done by God **prior** to its introduction.

In this section, Paul addresses a probable argument of the Judaizers that since the Law came later, it took precedence over the Abrahamic Covenant. Some may even have gone to the extreme of claiming that the Mosaic Covenant annulled and therefore replaced the Abrahamic Covenant. They would have reasoned that God would not have given another covenant, if the Abrahamic Covenant was still to be considered valid. At the very least, they were of the opinion that the Law had been added to the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul proceeds to address the arguments of these legalists, showing that the Law which came later than the Abrahamic Covenant could not alter it.

Commenting on **Galatians 3:15-18**, **John MacArthur** writes the following:

"The heart of his answer is to show that the covenant with Abraham was an **unconditional** covenant of **promise** relying solely on **God's** faithfulness, whereas the covenant with Moses was a **conditional** covenant of **law** relying on **man's** faithfulness. To Abraham, God said, '**I will.**' Through Moses He said, '**Thou shalt.**' The promise set forth a religion dependent on God. The law set forth a religion dependent on man. The promise centers on God's plan, God's grace, God's initiative, God's sovereignty, God's blessings. The law centers on man's duty, man's work, man's responsibility, man's behavior, man's obedience. The **promise**, being grounded in **grace**, requires only sincere **faith**. The **law** being grounded in **works**, demands perfect **obedience**."

In verse **15** Paul writes, "*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 this verse, Paul contends that the covenant that God made with Abraham is still in force, and he bases his argument upon the fact that it is a preeminent and unalterable covenant. He uses human logic and makes an illustration from everyday life in order to argue his point. He states that it is common knowledge that when individuals make a contract that is agreed upon by all the parties, it cannot be modified or changed except by the mutual consent of all the parties. Paul applies this rule to God's covenant with Abraham, contending that the Mosaic Covenant cannot modify the Abrahamic Covenant since it was given centuries later.

One commentator explains that,

"Within courts of law a covenant agreed to and signed by both parties cannot be changed later by the will of only one participant. The sealed word of both men is binding upon both parties. These men must respect the legal requirements of such a contract. Quite often a person may orally agree to a contract, shake hands on it, and later back out on it.

Once the contract has been ratified or “confirmed” in writing, with both signatures affixed, it becomes obligatory to both people to maintain their respective part of the bargain. At no time in the future can one party unilaterally impose upon the covenant any new restrictions. He cannot ‘disannul’ the contract. He cannot render it to be null and void. He cannot get out from under his obligations simply because he wants to. Also, he cannot ‘add’ any new restriction to the responsibilities of the other party. What was written originally must stand. If contracts could be broken easily, the worlds of business and politics would be full of chaos.”

Brothers and sisters, if a **man-made** covenant is legally binding, how much more is a **God-made** covenant legally binding?

The word “*covenant*,” is a translation of the Greek word, **diathéké**: (**dee-ath-ay’-kay**) which in its verb form means, “to place between two.” A covenant is something placed between two. It is an arrangement between two parties. It refers to the act of two individuals placing between them something to which they obligate themselves. A covenant is a solemn, binding arrangement between two parties and entails a variety of responsibilities, benefits and penalties depending on the specific covenant which is being entered into.

The Hebrew word for “covenant” is **beriyth**: (**ber-eeth’**), which refers to a “cutting”-a binding agreement made by passing between pieces of flesh.

In the context of **Galatians 3:15**, the “*covenant*” refers to the agreement in which God enters into covenant relations with Abraham, and in which He promises to justify him on the basis of his faith in the atonement which He Himself would some day offer. We read of the actual enacting of this covenant in **Genesis 15**:

*1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”*

*2 But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”*

*3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”*

*4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”*

*5 And he brought him outside 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.”*

*6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

*7 And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”*

*8 But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”*

*9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”*

*10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.*

*11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*

*12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.*

*13 Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.*

*14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.*

*15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.*

*16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*

*17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*

*18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,*

*19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,*

*20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,*

*21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”*

**(English Standard Version)**

In order to interpret the Bible correctly, it is very important for us to understand the concept of a biblical covenant. The covenants that God made with His people, closely follow the structure of the ancient Near East treaty covenant documents. As we noted earlier, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. One party is the **suzerain** or ruling party and the other is the **vassal** or the party who is ruled. The suzerain is the one who dictates the terms and conditions of the covenant. The covenant documents contain the promises made by the suzerain to the vassal, as well as the requirements, or obligations of the suzerain to the vassal and vice-versa.

These Near East treaty covenant documents very often included a preamble outlining the historical context of the covenant. We see this formula in the structure of biblical covenants where God, the suzerain or ruling party, introduces the terms of the treaty by giving a preamble in which He identifies Himself, and makes known, or reminds the vassal or party who is ruled, of what He has done for them. This is exactly what

God does in verse 7: “*And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”*” This preamble indicates that God is making a covenant with Abraham.

In verse 8, Abraham asks God for some token, some assurance, some proof, some guarantee that He will indeed make good on His promises. God’s response to him was to request that he bring to Him a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon! But how are these animals going to help Abraham to have confidence in the promises of God? What is Abraham to do with the animals?

Verse 10 indicates that Abraham was aware of the significance of what was happening. He seems to have understood what the animals signified. God did not instruct him as to what to do with the animals, but he proceeded to slaughter them, cut them in half, except for the birds, and lay each half over against the other, and one bird opposite to the other. He seems to have understood that the assurance that he was seeking from God would come through a binding covenant in which both God and himself would swear to fulfill certain obligations to each other, recognizing that death would be the certain consequence of their failure to accomplish their binding commitment faithfully. He knew that God was going to make a covenant with him and that the slaughtered animals would be a part of the covenant ratification ceremony.

When we today desire to make a covenant, we sign a document. For example, in order to ratify their covenant, a bride and groom sign a marriage certificate. They are saying in effect to each other, “I have made promises and taken vows that I will love you, and be faithful to you, and so on. My signature on this document is my guarantee that the promises I have made and the vows I have taken will be honoured.”

We do this because we live in a **written** culture. Abraham however, lived in an **oral** culture. He lived in a culture where covenants were not written but spoken, and the consequences were dramatized. When two parties made a covenant, the consequences of a failure on the part of the

parties to adhere to the terms of the covenant were acted out. Abraham was familiar with this, and that is why he slaughtered the animals, cut them in pieces, except for the birds, placed the corresponding pieces opposite to each other, and one bird opposite to the other, leaving a passage between. This was the usual form of agreement. The two parties would then walk in procession along the pathway, between the pieces, thereby signifying their agreement.

By slaughtering the animal or animals, cutting them in pieces, laying them on the ground and walking between the pieces, the parties were acting out the curse of the covenant. They were saying in effect, “If I fail to honour my word as it relates to this covenant we have made; if I fail to do everything I have vowed to do, may I be slaughtered and cut in pieces; may my body parts be scattered on the ground to feed the fowls of the air.”

In verse **12** we are told that, “*As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.*” What was all this about, this dreadful and great darkness?

I believe that God used the symbolism of this covenant ratification ceremony to convey to Abraham a sense of what was to occur on the Cross of Calvary. I believe that in some deep, and mysterious way the slaughtered animals, cut in half and laid on the ground, together with the birds of prey that sought to devour the sacrifice, somehow brought Calvary to bear upon Abraham’s life. The mystery of Calvary was somehow brought home to his heart. He caught a glimpse of the tragedy of the Cross, the slaughter, the tearing, the blood, the pain, the agony. Abraham saw it; he saw the dark shadows of the Cross falling across the ages and he experienced some of the horror and terror that our Lord experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross.

Of course, he could not have fully understood all of the implications of the great and terrible sacrifice of Christ, but, in some measure, he did understand the mystery of Christ’s death, which was the basis of his

faith. This in part explains the “*dreadful and great darkness*” that overwhelmed him.

Verse 17 says, “*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*”

Clearly, the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch that passed between the animal parts was a theophany of God—an outward, visible manifestation of the invisible God that is tangible to the human senses. Many theologians believe that these theophanies are nothing less than pre-incarnational appearances of Jesus Christ. Abraham saw the Lord God walking between the pieces, in order to ratify the covenant.

Brothers and sisters, here we have the Gospel dramatized for Abraham and for us, by God Himself. It is doubtful that there is any place in the entire Bible where the Gospel is more graphically acted out than it is in **Genesis 15:17!**

When God passed between the animal parts, He was acting out the terms and conditions of the covenant. He was saying in effect to Abraham, “Abraham, you have asked me to give you some token, some assurance, some proof, some guarantee that I will keep my promise to you. Well Abraham, I am making a covenant with you and I am confirming it, I am signing my name to it as it were, by walking through the midst of these animal parts. If I fail to keep my promise to you Abraham, may I, like these animals that you have slaughtered, be cut in half and laid on the ground to feed the birds of the air. May the impossible become possible; may I, the eternal God be reduced to the temporal; may I, the immortal God become mortal; may I, the omnipotent God be reduced to impotence; may I, the immutable God, experience mutation; may I, the infinite God be reduced to the finite. Is that enough of a guarantee for you Abraham?”

Earlier I said that it was my opinion that God used the symbolism of the covenant ratification ceremony to give Abraham a sense of what was to occur on the Cross of Calvary, and that this explains in part, the “*dreadful and great darkness*” that overwhelmed him. I said “in part,”



because I believe that there was something else that contributed to the dreadful and great darkness that fell upon Abraham. I believe that Abraham knew that whatever God required of **him**, relative to the terms and conditions of the covenant, he would be unable to fulfill it. When God walked between the pieces in the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, Abraham was convinced that God would fully adhere to the terms and conditions of the covenant. But Abraham also knew that he, Abraham, would not be able to adhere to the terms and conditions of the covenant. He knew that if he walked between the pieces, he would be signing his own death warrant.

You see, brothers and sisters, if we are honest, we will admit that there is a huge problem that we encounter when it comes to our trusting God and living in full assurance of faith. Our problem is not so much that we think that God will fail to keep His promises to us, but that we know that we will fail to keep our promises to Him. Abraham encountered “*dreadful and great darkness*” when he considered himself. And so do we!

We know we are too weak, too foolish, too perverse, to faithfully discharge our covenant responsibilities. We know, like Paul that we are, “*of the flesh, sold under sin*” (**Romans 7:14**). We know, like Abraham that if we walk between the pieces, we will be signing our own death warrants.

Brothers and sisters, God knows this too. That is why He did not require Abraham to walk between the pieces, and neither does He require us to do so! God walked through the pieces **alone**. He passed between them by **Himself**.

This was a unique situation because whenever a suzerain entered into a covenant with a vassal, either both the suzerain and the vassal would walk through the animal parts, dramatizing their willingness to suffer the consequences of failing to adhere to the terms and conditions of the covenant, or the vassal would have to walk between the pieces by himself. But when God passed between the pieces by Himself, He was

saying to Abraham, “I know how weak and foolish and perverse you are. I know that you are *“of the flesh, sold under sin.”* And so, Abraham, I have walked through for both of us! I am taking upon myself the full responsibility to deal with any failure on your part! I know that **I** will not fail to adhere to the terms and conditions of the covenant, but I know that **you** will fail to do so, and when **you** fail, **I** will suffer the consequences on your behalf. I will be slaughtered; I will be cut in pieces; I will be mutilated; I will become accursed; I will be abandoned; I will experience dreadful and great darkness. I prefer to die than let you have to suffer the consequences of your own failure!”

You ask, “Has this ever happened?” Yes, it did! It happened once for all time on Golgotha’s hill. Isaiah prophesied about it in **Isaiah 53**. The **English Standard Version**, translates verses **4-6** and **9-12** as follows:

*4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

*6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

*10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.*

*11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.*

*12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

Brothers and sisters, this is indeed what happened. On the Cross of Calvary, the impossible become possible; the eternal was reduced to the temporal; the immortal became mortal; the omnipotent became impotent; the immutable experienced mutation; the infinite became finite; God died in the person of Jesus Christ!

Because we continually sin and fall short of the glory of God, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was slaughtered; He was cut in pieces; He was mutilated; He become accursed; He was abandoned; He experienced dreadful and great darkness. He suffered all these things so that we never have to.

He suffered all these things once for all time. He never has to suffer them again. **Hebrews 10:14**, tells us why: *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified”* (**English Standard Version**).

In Genesis **15:18** we read, *“On that day **the LORD** made a covenant with Abram.”* It was not Abraham who made a covenant with God. It was God Who made a covenant with Abraham. In fact, **Genesis 15:12** indicates that Abraham was in a deep sleep when the covenant was ratified! Abraham made no promises to God. God made promises to Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant was not a covenant of works, but a covenant of grace. God’s covenant with Abraham was unilateral and unconditional and its integrity depended entirely on God! It was not a **man-made** covenant, but a **God-made** covenant!

Brothers and sisters, the same is true of the New Covenant, inaugurated in the Upper Room and ratified and dramaized on Calvary. Let us consider the terms and conditions of the New Covenant as outlined in **Jeremiah 31:31-34** and **Ezekiel 36:24-28**:

### **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

*31 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,*

*32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.*

*33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

**(English Standard Version)**

### **Ezekiel 36:24-28**

*24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.*

*25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*

*26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

*27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

*28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

**(English Standard Version)**

The New Covenant, like the Abrahamic Covenant is not a covenant of works, but a covenant of grace. It is unilateral and unconditional and its integrity depends entirely on God! It is not a **man**-made covenant, but a **God**-made covenant!