

KEY

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Parsing Verbs and Declining Nouns

Verbs:

ποιμανατε (ποιμαινω = to tend, shepherd || Verb: Aorist Active Imperative, Second Person Plural).
ἀποκαλυπτεσθαι (ἀποκαλύπτω = to reveal, disclose || Verb: Present Passive Infinitive).

Nouns (gender before case):

πατημάτων (παθημα = suffering || Noun: Neuter Genitive Plural).

Participles (gender before case):

μελλουσης (μελλω = to be about to || Participle: Feminine Genitive Singular Present Active).

Adjectives (gender before case):

(ἐπιεικης = gentle, kind || Adjective: Masculine Dative Plural).

Independent Personal Pronouns:

ἡμιν (ἐγώ = I || First Person Independent Personal Pronoun: Dative Plural).
ὕμιν (σύ = you || Second Person Independent Personal Pronoun: Dative Plural).
αὐτῷ (αὐτός = He, Him || Third Person Independent Personal Pronoun: Masculine Dative Singular).

Near Demonstrative Pronoun (gender before case):

(τοῦτο = this || Near Demonstrative Pronoun: Neuter Nominative Singular).

Far Demonstrative Pronoun (gender before case):

(οὗτος = those || Far Demonstrative Pronoun: Masculine Nominative Singular).

Reflexive Pronouns (only masculine and feminine - the genitive is the lexical form as there is no nominative case):

(ἐμαυτοῦ = myself || First Person Reflexive Pronoun: Masculine Genitive Singular).
(σεαυτοῦ = yourself || Second Person Reflexive Pronoun: Masculine Genitive Singular).
(ἐαυτοῦ = himself, herself, oneself || Third Person Reflexive Pronoun: Masculine Genitive Singular).

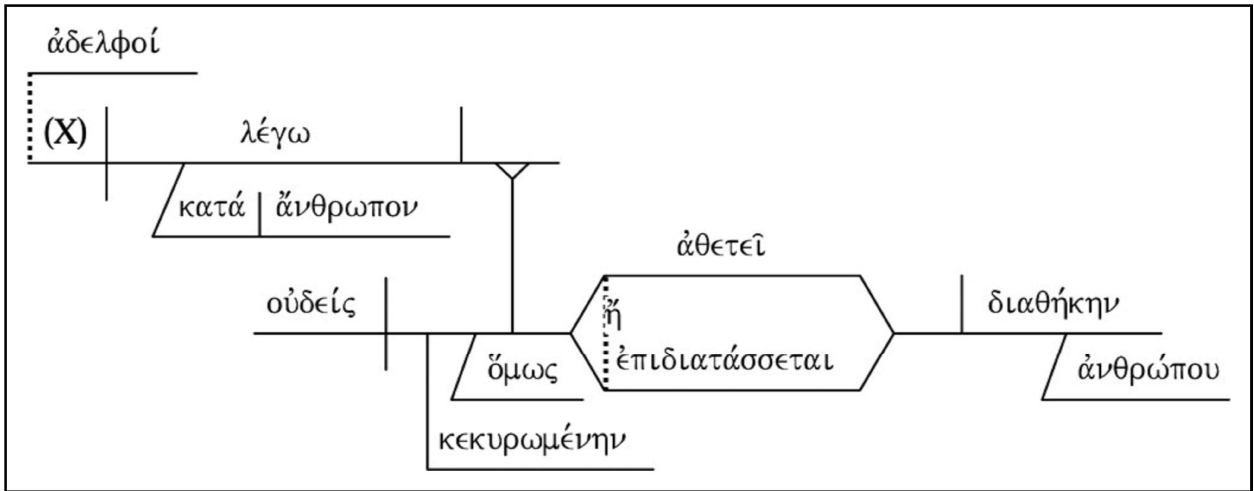
Relative Pronouns:

(ὅς = who/that, of whom, to whom, whom [referring to people]; that/which, of which, to which, which [referring to things] – Translation depends on case || Relative Pronoun: Masculine Nominative Singular)

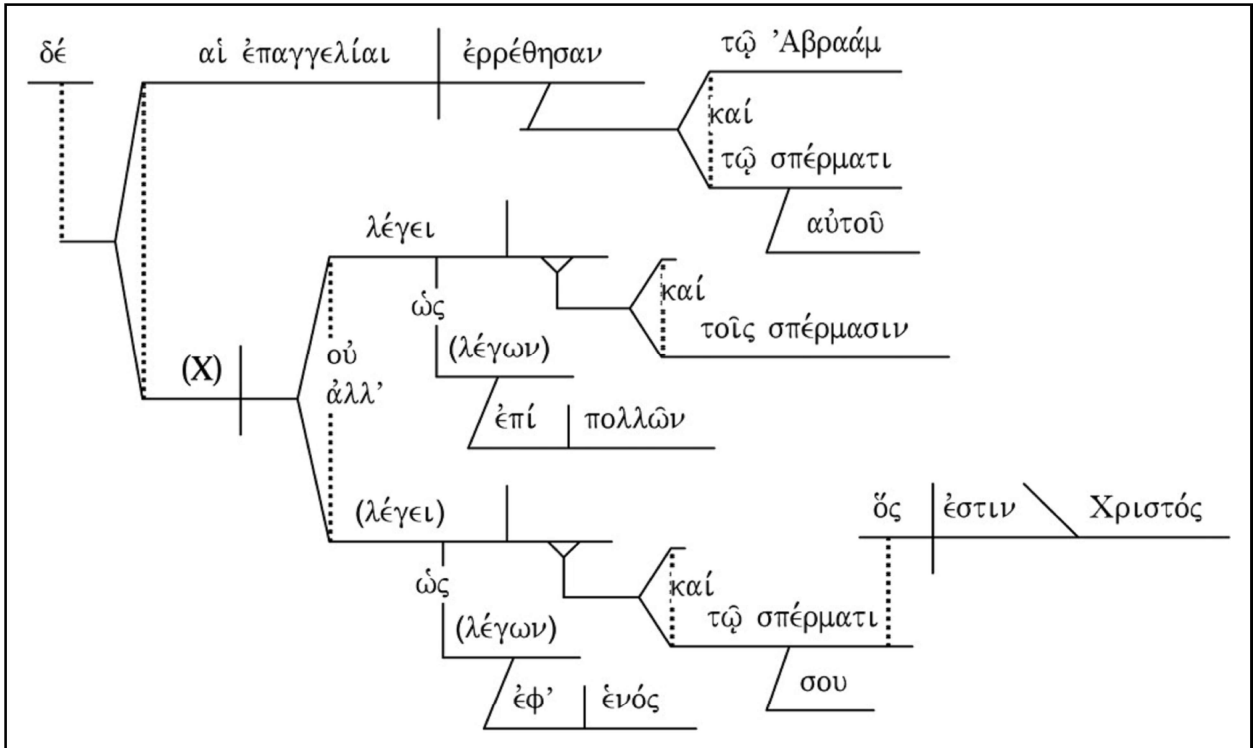
Sentence Structure

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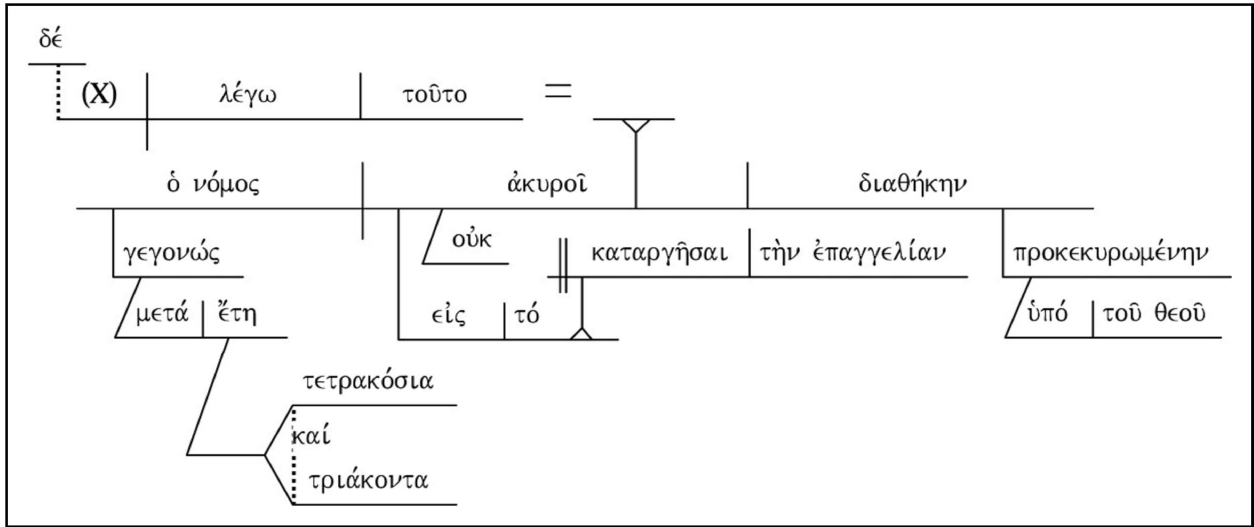
Verse 15:



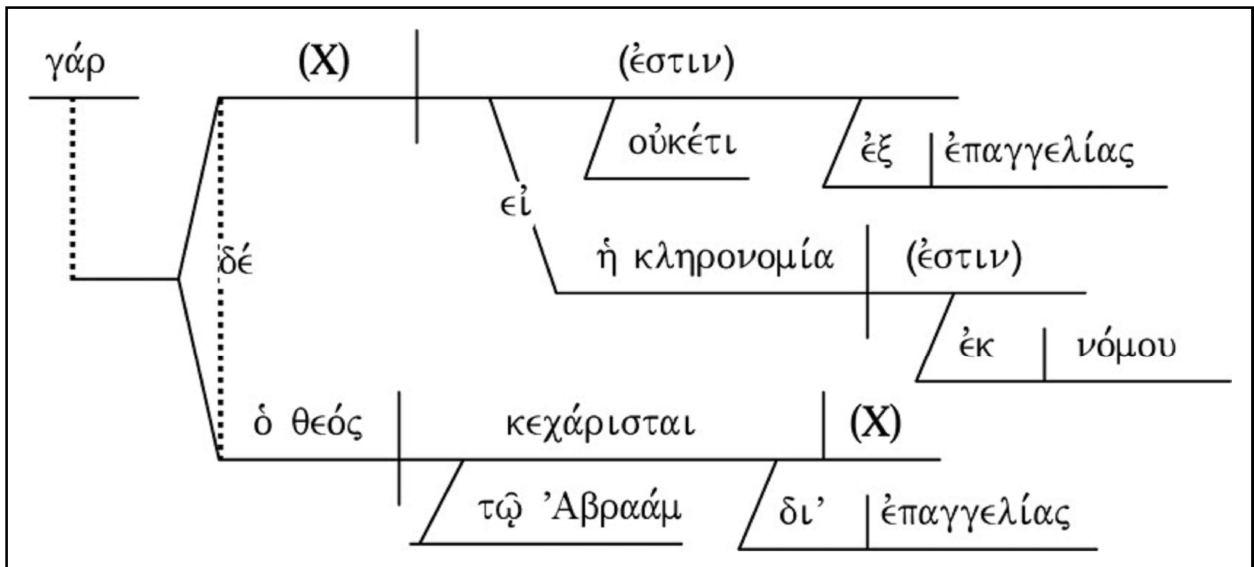
Verse 16:



Verse 17:



Verse 18:



TRANSLATION, OUTLINE AND CENTRAL PROPOSITION

GREEK TEXT:

Galatians 3:15–18 (UBS4)

15 Ἀδελφοί, κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω· ὅμως ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεται. 16 τῷ δὲ Ἀβραάμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ. οὐ λέγει, Καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν ἄλλ' ὡς ἐφ' ἑνός, Καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστός. 17 τοῦτο δὲ λέγω· διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ μετὰ τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτη γεγωνώς νόμος οὐκ ἀκυροῖ εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν. 18 εἰ γὰρ ἐκ νόμου ἡ κληρονομία, οὐκέτι ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας· τῷ δὲ Ἀβραάμ δι' ἐπαγγελίας κεχάριται ὁ θεός.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

15 Brethren, I speak in human terms: even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it. 16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ. 17 Now this is what I am saying: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the Law, it no longer comes from a promise; but God graciously gave it to Abraham by a promise.

PASSAGE SUBJECT/THEME (what's t/passage talking about): The promise to Abraham

PASSAGE COMPLEMENT/THRUST (what's the passage saying about what it's talking about): Cannot be changed by the Mosaic Law

PASSAGE MAIN IDEA (central proposition of the text): The conditional Law does not abrogate the prior promise

CENTRAL PROPOSITION OF THE SERMON: Our salvation from sin is based on a promise not our performance.

SERMONIC IDEA/TITLE: The Priority of the Promise: Paul's Fourth Defense of Justification by Faith

SERMON OUTLINE:

I. The Pattern of the Human Covenant (v. 15)

Key word: A Fortiori

II. The Person of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 16)

Key word: Christ

III. The Permanence of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 17)

Key word: Promise

IV. The Priority of the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 18)

Key word: Grace

HISTORICAL/CULTURAL/GRAMMATICAL CONTEXT

This is part of a larger parenthetical section:

On one level the passage can be analyzed in terms of four major propositions, each of which is confirmed and elucidated by a citation from the Old Testament. Thus (1) those who rely on observing the law are under a curse. Why so? The Bible says that those who do not continue to do everything written in the book of the law are cursed (Deut 27:26); (2) no one can be justified by means of the law anyway. Why not? The Scripture declares that the righteous ones live by faith (Hab 2:4); (3) law and faith are not mutually compatible ways to God. How can you be so sure? Because the law itself says that those who keep the commandments will live by them (Lev 18:5); (4) Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law. How did this happen? He became a curse for us by hanging on a tree (Deut 21:23). A closer examination of these propositions will show that (1) and (4) are closely related as problem and solution, while the two scriptural texts cited in support of (2) and (3) stand in apparent contradiction to each other. The entire passage is brought to a concluding crescendo in v. 14, which reaffirms the key element in proposition (4), Christ redeemed us, and then adds two purpose clauses—in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles and that by faith we might receive the promised Spirit.

Before looking at these verses in greater detail, it is important to recognize that, from another perspective, 3:10–25 constitutes a long parenthesis in the overall structure of Paul's argument concerning the true children of Abraham. As we saw earlier, Paul had been arguing from the continuity of the covenant of grace with Abraham cited as the paradigm of justification by faith. The blessing he received was not only for the Jews but for "all nations" (*ethnē*, "Gentiles"). Thus today those who believe as Abraham believed are declared righteous before God just as he was. From a strictly logical point of view, it would have made good sense for Paul to move directly from 3:9 to 3:26—"Those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham.... You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul deliberately did not do this but rather indulged in an intricate digression on the law, a passage that, as N. T. Wright has observed, must surely rank high on any list of "the most complicated and controverted passages in Paul." [Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 227–228]

Paul could not ignore the law because it was crucial for his understanding of salvation and Christ—not, however, as the source of obtaining righteousness but rather as the gauge of damnation. The law tells us what we are being saved from—the curse. This takes us to the heart of Pauline soteriology. "The faith that justifies comes only through deliverance from the curse. Those who know nothing of the curse also know nothing of the blessing. Only the Christ who bears the curse can be the bearer of the blessing."^{fn}

^{fn}. Ebeling, *Truth of the Gospel*, 171. Ebeling's reading of Galatians reflects Luther's interpretation. For example, Luther referred to "the chief and proper use

of the law” as the revelation of “sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.... The law is a hammer that crushes rocks, a fire, a wind, and a great and mighty earthquake that overturns mountains.” Nonetheless, “this use of the law is extremely beneficial and very necessary” [Timothy George, Galatians, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994).

In Gal 3:15–18 Paul constructs an argument based on two factors: (1) that the covenant with Abraham represents God’s pristine and irrevocable will, and (2) that the promise of the Abrahamic covenant has a singular recipient in mind, viz., Christ. In effect, Paul is here going behind the teaching of his opponents to remind his converts that God’s promise was given long before the Mosaic law appeared and to assert that it was given not to observers of that law but to Christ (and, as he says later, to those who are Christ’s own, cf. v 29). If Paul is to be charged with denigrating the law, his opponents are to be charged, he insists, with denigrating God’s promise, the inheritance of that promise, Christ, and the Spirit—for these are matters associated with the Abrahamic covenant long before and apart from the law. Thus the law has no part in their receiving the inheritance promised to Abraham. [Richard N. Longenecker, Galatians, vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 125–126]

... it may be assumed that the Judaizers were teaching (1) that the Mosaic law was meant by God to be a fuller expression of and a supplement to the Abrahamic covenant, and (2) that the promise to Abraham had in view as its recipients only Abraham’s biological descendants and those related to the Jewish nation by Torah observance. [Richard N. Longenecker, 126]

Paul’s experiential, biblical, and theological arguments in the first half of his probatio (3:1–18) develop what he said in brief in the first half of his propositio (2:15–16). They are directed against all attempts to use the Mosaic law as a means to gain acceptance before God, i.e., “legalism.” The Judaizers of Galatia themselves might have claimed that this was not the thrust of their endeavors; that all they wanted was for Gentile Christians to supplement their faith in Christ with Torah observance, just as God directed Abraham to do and so to experience a more perfect Christian life. For Paul, however, any mingling of faith and law, even if it is claimed that this has only to do with a proper lifestyle and not justification, is a discrediting of the Abrahamic covenant, the work of Christ, the ministry of the Spirit, and the principle of faith, and so brings one right back to the issue of legalism. ... For he is convinced that neither a true Jew (cf. 2:15) nor a true Christian can embrace legalism and still be acceptable before God. [Richard N. Longenecker, 134–135]

While the agitators placed the law and God’s promise to Abraham on the same level, viewing the law as an addition to the promise, Paul saw the law as operating on a different plane entirely. He insisted that the law could not alter the terms of the

relationship that God had established with Abraham. “What the Galatians perceive as a necessary supplement to their faith Paul views as a radical break with faith” (Beker 1980: 53). [Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 224]

In 3:1–14 Paul proves from Old Testament Scripture that Abraham was justified by faith and not by law and that every other believer, whether Jew or Gentile, is likewise saved only by faith, made effective by Christ’s taking sin’s curse upon Himself.

Now the apostle anticipates the probable argument his adversaries, the Judaizers, would likely make against what he has just proved. “Very well,” they would argue. “But granted that Abraham and his pre-Sinai descendants were saved by faith, it is obvious that when God gave the law to Moses, the basis of salvation changed. A new covenant was made and a new means of salvation was then established. After Moses, the basis of salvation became law in place of faith or at least as a necessary supplement to faith. The covenant with Moses annulled and supplanted the covenant with Abraham, a temporary measure God provided until He gave Moses the more perfect and complete covenant of law. Abraham and others who lived before the law were saved by faith only because they did not have the law. Why else would God have given the Mosaic covenant of law?” [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 81–82]

Throughout this chapter he has been proving that justification and the Holy Spirit come by faith and not by works. First he argued from experience—the experience the Galatians had when they received the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:1–5). Next he argued from Scripture—the biblical record about Abraham, the man of faith (Gal. 3:6–14). But when it comes to making a theological point, it always helps to have a good illustration, so next Paul takes “a human example” (Gal. 3:15). His illustration comes from the world of jurisprudence. According to standard legal practice, “with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified” (Gal. 3:15). The covenant is permanent. [Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 120]

The word promise is used eight times in these verses, referring to God’s promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). This promise involved being justified by faith and having all the blessings of salvation (Gal. 3:6–9). It is obvious that the promise to Abraham (and, through Christ, to us today), given about 2000 B.C., preceded by centuries the Law of Moses (about 1450 B.C.). The Judaizers implied that the giving of the Law changed that original covenant of promise. Paul argues that it did not. [Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 701]

3:15 EXEGESIS

GREEK TEXT:

Ἀδελφοί, κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω· ὅμως ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεται.

Ἀδελφοί, (— || Noun: M.N/V.P).
κατὰ ἄνθρωπον (— || Noun: M.A.S.).
λέγω· (— || Verb: Pres. Act. Ind. 1S).
ὅμως (ὅμως = nevertheless, even though || Adverb).
ἀνθρώπου (— || Noun: M.G.S.). Possessive, modifying διαθήκην.
κεκυρωμένην (κυρόω = to confirm, ratify, validate, make legally binding || Participle: Fem. Acc. Sing. Perfect, passive). Attributive. Note the perfect tense. “The will that ‘has been ratified’ remains in force and binding.” [David A. deSilva, Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text, ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 65]
διαθήκην
οὐδεὶς (οὐδεὶς = No one || Adjective: M.N.S.).
θετεῖ (ἀθετέω = to reject as invalid || Verb: Pres Act. Ind. 3S).
ἢ (ἢ = or || Conjunction: local disjunctive).
ἐπιδιατάσσεται. (ἐπιδιατάσσομαι = to add to || Verb: Pres. Mid/Pass. Ind. 3S). To add to, with implication of supplementary or modifying instructions, legal t.t. add a codicil to a will Gal 3:15. [William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 370]

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Brethren, I speak in human terms: even though it is a human covenant, when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it.

CONTEXTUAL, GRAMMATICAL, THEOLOGICAL, APPLICATIONAL ANALYSIS:

Brethren, (Ἀδελφοί,)

Paul writes to t/Galatians as fellow-Christians (cf. use of ἀδελφοί in 1:11). Note also 6:18. Also the tension between calling them “foolish” (3:1) and calling them brothers and sisters.

We are struck by the fact that Paul addressed the Galatians here as “brothers,” a term of endearment he had not used since 1:11, although it would occur again seven other times in the letter (4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18). Although the Galatians were confused, foolish, and bewitched, and although Paul felt betrayed, perplexed, and forlorn about

them, still they were adelphoi, “brothers.” This term of relationship is especially appropriate at the beginning of a passage that will seek to answer the questions: “What makes a family a family? Who are the true children of Abraham, the heirs of the promise, and thus entitled to call one another brothers and sisters?” [Timothy George, Galatians, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 244–245]

I speak in human terms: (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω·)

I am going to use an everyday example is literally “I speak according to man” or “as men do.” The meaning here is simply that Paul is going to talk about something that is of common knowledge to his readers (JB “compare this with what happens in ordinary life”; NEB “let me give you an illustration. Even in ordinary life ...”). One may also translate as “I’m going to compare God’s promise with something that happens all the time,” or “What I have been talking about is similar to what you yourselves know about.” [Daniel C. Arichea and Eugene Albert Nida, A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1976), 68–69]

The phrase κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω is somewhat difficult to interpret since it appears in Paul’s letters only four times (here; Rom 3:5; 6:19 [variant form]; and 1 Cor 9:8), and nowhere else in the NT, the LXX, or other Greek literature. [Richard N. Longenecker, 127]

The idea is that Paul is speaking from an example found in everyday life.

even though it is a human covenant, (ὅμως ἀνθρώπου . . . διαθήκην)

ὅμως — Paul uses this word only twice, both times to introduce a comparison (1 Cor 14:7).

As to διαθήκη (covenant || Noun: F.A.S.):

Does this word mean “will” (“testament”) and involve only one man (RSV “a man’s will”; JB “a will”; NEB “a man’s will and testament”)? Or does the word get its meaning from the Hebrew concept of “covenant” (“contract”) and accordingly involve two participants (compare Phps “once a contract has been properly drawn up and signed ...”)? The biblical usage of the term and the overall context favor the latter alternative. [UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1976), 69]

In the LXX, the Hebrew word for covenant is rendered with the same Greek word here. “There is little doubt that even in the New Testament, with one or two exceptions, the word used is equivalent to the Hebrew word for “covenant.” [UBS Handbook, 69]

The word can refer to a “covenant” or to a “testament,” the latter in the sense of a prescription for the disposal of one’s property after death (preferred by John Chrysostom, ad loc.; Matera, 126; Witherington, 240–41). The hearers would have been familiar with

“testaments” as a feature of their everyday legal world, and thus might naturally think in this direction after Paul’s announcement that he is drawing an analogy from human practice (Bruce 1982, 169). . . . There were both “revocable” and “irrevocable” wills under Roman law, and Paul would have the latter in mind. [David A. deSilva, *Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, ed. Martin M. Culy, *Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 66]

[Paul] . . . inserts διαθήκη by way of an example or illustration drawn from human affairs, and the common understanding of the term in the ancient world was that of “testament” or “will.” Josephus, for example, who was both a man of his day and one trained in Jewish thought, always uses διαθήκη to mean “testament” or “will,” and never in the thirty-two appearances of the term in his writings to mean “covenant” . . . [Richard N. Longenecker, 128]

The translation “covenant” in the NIV (also in ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, HCSB) reflects the usual meaning of διαθήκη in Biblical Greek, where it has become virtually a technical term for contracts entered into between God and his people. All eight of Paul’s other uses of this word have this meaning (Rom. 9:4; 11:27; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Eph. 2:12), including the two other occurrences in Galatians (3:17; 4:24; for this meaning here, see Lightfoot 1881: 141; Burton 1921: 179; and esp. S. Hahn 2005: 80–88). However, the fact that Paul explicitly claims he is citing the example of a “human” arrangement makes it more likely that διαθήκη in verse 15 has its other, “secular” meaning: “will” or “testament” (see RSV, NRSV, NAB, NJB, CEB; see, e.g., Bruce 1982b: 169; Eckstein 1996: 172–76). [Douglas J. Moo, 227]

A decision on the referent of διαθήκη is difficult, but the translation “covenant” should be preferred for a number of reasons.⁹

(1) Context is always the most important factor in determining the meaning of a word, and Paul in this context clearly refers to the covenants with Abraham and Moses.¹⁰ It is possible, of course, that Paul moves from the idea of a “will” in human society to a “covenant” when referring to Abraham and Moses, but it is more likely that he retains the same term throughout instead of requiring his readers to switch back and forth between “will” and “covenant.”¹¹

(2) Wills could be altered, whereas covenants were considered to be immutable.¹² There are several examples of covenants between human beings in the OT that were considered to be unbreakable (Gen 21:22–32; 26:26–31; 31:44–45; 1 Sam 18:3; 20:8; 22:8; 23:18; 2 Sam 3:12).¹³

(3) In both the LXX and the NT the usual referent for the noun used here (διαθήκη) is “covenant.”¹⁴

(4) The use of legal terms does not indicate that the reference is to a will, for legal language is used with covenants as well. [Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 227]

“Paul uses the example from secular affairs of a last will and testament and explains that the will cannot be amended once the testator has died and the will is in effect.” [R. Lance Murphy, 123]

Illustration:

A woman died and left all her property to a Christian university. Or so it seemed. According to the precise terms of her will, all her “worldly goods” were “bequeathed” to a particular educational institution. The woman’s children, who lived on the other side of the country, were surprised to discover that they had been left out of their mother’s estate. “Surprised” is hardly the word for it. They were outraged that the college had “taken advantage” of their mother in this way.

The children decided to contest the will in a court of law. They tried to claim that their mother’s bequest applied only to personal effects and not to real estate. But in the end they lost their case and, with it, any chance of gaining an inheritance. There was nothing they could do to change the terms of the will. As far as the law was concerned, the matter had been settled when the old woman died. [Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 119]

This illustration is taken from the realm of human promises, not a business contract but a will, what we sometimes call a man’s ‘last will and testament’. The Greek word in verses 15 and 17 (diathēkē) is translated ‘covenant’ in the Authorized Version because it is used in the Septuagint for the covenants of God. But in classical Greek and the Papyri it was in common use for a will, and is so translated here by the Revised Standard Version. (Cf. Heb. 9:15–17, where the two ideas of a covenant and a will are also linked together.). [John R. W. Stott, The Message of Galatians: Only One Way, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 87–88]

Hebrews 9:15–17 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. 16 For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. 17 For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.

when it has been ratified no one rejects it or adds conditions to it. (κεκυρωμένην . . . οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεται.)

For the legal debates surrounding the irrevocability of ancient covenants / wills, see Longenecker.

E. Bammel, however, has pointed to a procedure of Jewish inheritance laws known as *mattenat bāri* by which a person could make an irrevocable testament to another prior to death. It was precisely this kind of legal transaction Jesus alluded to in the parable of the

prodigal son, where the father prematurely divided his property between his heirs, an act all the more momentous because it was unalterable. Assuming that Paul had some kind of legal procedure such as this in mind, another problem comes into view: When was God's covenant with Abraham ratified? Ordinarily a last will and testament is validated, or probated as we say, only after the death of the testator. But since the living God cannot die, the only kind of irrevocable will he could make was something analogous to the *mattenat bāri*.⁸⁰

Commentators on Galatians have spent a great deal of time trying to sort out the legal background of Paul's covenant analogy in this text. Some have attempted to link his presumed reliance on Roman jurisprudence to the North Galatian theory of destination, whereas others have argued for the South Galatian hypothesis on the basis of his alleged acquaintance with Greek legal practice. After surveying several of these theories Longenecker concludes: "It may be that Paul felt no compulsion to speak in precise legal parlance, and that his readers would have felt the same. We today often use terms pertinent to a particular discipline with less precision than purists rightly called for, even though we might know better.... The point of Paul's example in its application is clear: that God established his covenant with Abraham in an irrevocable manner, so it can never be annulled or added to." [Timothy George, *Galatians*, 245–246]

The problem is that there are no clear examples of Greek or Roman "wills" or "testaments" that could not be revoked or modified after being put into effect. Various options have been suggested,⁶ but the precise situation that Paul has in view is really not important for his purposes. What is important is the unchangeable nature of the agreement.

Several scholars (Betz 1979: 155; Mussner 1988: 237) have followed the suggestion of Bammel (1960) that Paul may have been thinking of a Jewish ritual called the *mattenat bari*, a legal agreement by which a person, before death, could transfer property to someone else and which, purportedly, could not be revoked. There are problems with this identification, however, and so it has been noted that there is some evidence in the papyri for a custom among the Greeks somewhat similar to this Jewish *mattenat bari* which could provide the background for Paul's reference (NewDocs 6:44–47). Lim (1997: 59–62), on the other hand, has cited such a document from Cave of Letters in Nahal Hever, just west of the Dead Sea (PYadin 19). In his lengthy discussion of the matter, R. Longenecker (1990: 128–30) concludes that we cannot identify the exact situation that Paul has in view. [Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, 227–228]

Agree and sign render a Greek legal word which could be translated "ratified" (RSV) or whatever is done to an agreement in order to give it legal force (NAB "legally validated"; NEB "duly executed"; Phps "properly drawn up and signed"). [UBS Handbook, 69]

No one could be understood either as referring to an outside party (Phps “can neither be disregarded nor modified by a third party”) or to anyone, including the parties to the agreement. Mutual agreement for either annulment or amendment is, of course, always possible, but is not important to the force of the illustration. In order to emphasize the fact that one person on his own initiative cannot alter such an agreement, one may say “no one alone can break the agreement,” or “no one person just because he wants to can break the agreement.” [UBS Handbook, 69–70]

But perhaps the apostle was thinking in terms of Jewish inheritance law. The Jews had a special procedure for making an irrevocable testament prior to death.² This was called *mattenat bari*, and there is a good example in the story Jesus told about the prodigal son: “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me’ ” (Luke 15:11–12). The younger son asked for his inheritance before his father died. In other words, he was asking for *mattenat bari*, an irrevocable testament that could be neither added to nor annulled. [Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians*, 121]

Paul argues from lesser (human experience) to greater (God’s economy).

The tense and mood of the participle *κεκυρωμένην*, from the verb *κυρόω* (“establish,” “confirm,” “ratify,” or “validate”), highlight the features of irrevocability (perfect tense) and unilateralness (passive mood) that Paul wants to stress in the case of the Abrahamic covenant. [Richard N. Longenecker, 127]

An argument from the lesser to the greater is called an "a minori ad maius" argument. It is a type of a fortiori argument, which means "from the stronger". This type of argument suggests that if something is true for a smaller or less likely case, it must also be true for a larger or more likely case . . . [Google AI]

3:16 EXEGESIS

GREEK TEXT:

τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ. οὐ λέγει, Καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν ἀλλ' ὡς ἐφ' ἑνός, Καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὃς ἐστὶν Χριστός.

τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ (— || Noun: M.D.S.).
ἐρρέθησαν (εἶπον = to speak, say || Verb: Aor. Pas. Ind. 3P).
αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι (ἐπαγγελία, ας = promise || Noun: F.N.P.).
καὶ τῷ σπέρματι (σπέρμα || Noun: N.D.S.). Dat. of indirect obj.
αὐτοῦ. (αὐτός || 3P Indep. Personal Pronoun: M.G.S.). Gen. of source.
οὐ λέγει, (— || Verb: Pres. Act. Ind. 3S).
Καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, (σπέρμα || Noun: N.D.P.). Dat. of indir. obj.
ὡς (ὡς = as || Conjunction: adverbial comparative).
ἐπὶ πολλῶν (πολύς, πολλή, πολύ || Adj: N.G.P.).
ἀλλ' ὡς ἐφ' ἑνός, — strong adversative sense.
Καὶ τῷ σπέρματί (σπέρμα || Noun: N.D.S.).
σου, (σύ — || 2P Indep. Personal Pronoun: G.S.).
ὃς (ὃς, ἥ, ὅ = who || Relative pronoun: M.N.S.).
ἐστὶν (εἰμί || Verb: Pres. Ind. Act. 3S).
Χριστός. — Predicate nominative.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ.

Verse 15 may picture a will, unalterable once the person in question is dead. Verse 16 pictures a promise made to One who personifies life: Jesus Christ. This promise is eternally unalterable. The ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant was the New Covenant.

CONTEXTUAL, GRAMMATICAL, THEOLOGICAL, APPLICATIONAL ANALYSIS:

As we have seen already in v. 8, Paul had interpreted this last promise to mean that the message of the gospel, that is, justification by faith, would be preached to the Gentiles as well as to Abraham's natural descendants. However, here in v. 16 Paul's main point was that all of these promises applied not only to one man, Abraham, but also to his “seed.” Now here is the hairsplitting point: the word “seed,” he observed, is singular, not plural; therefore in its deepest and fullest meaning it refers to one person, not to many. And that

one person, Paul contended, Abraham's true seed, is Christ himself. [Timothy George, 247]

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. (τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ.)

Of course, Paul was aware that the word “seed” (sperma), in Hebrew and Greek as well as English, could be used as a collective noun as he himself employed it elsewhere (cf. Rom 4:13–18). It was not uncommon in rabbinic exegesis for a theological argument to be based on the singular or plural form of a particular word in the scriptural text. Paul may well have been responding here to the popular Jewish claim that they alone, along with a few proselytes, were the “true sons of Abraham.” Paul wanted to show that the greater fulfillment of the promise is not biological but Christological. [Timothy George, Galatians, 247]

Contrast with the word “covenant” as in a human contract. This is a “promise” (ἐπαγγελία) which is unconditional. Specif. the Abrahamic Covt. Review from Genesis 12:1-3; chapt. 15.

“Promises” = Gk. plural. References to the repeated occasions on which the promise was made to Abraham, and the various forms expressed (Gen 12:2 ff.; 13:14 ff.; 15:1, 5, 18; 17:2 ff.). Elsewhere Paul uses the singular form (Cf. verses 17, 18, 22, 29; Rom 4:13, 14, 16, 20). No significant difference of meaning between the singular and the plural.

“Spoken” does not have a subject. May be that Paul is referring to the Scripture (which is the promise of G.) or to God himself.

The singular noun σπέρμα is generally understood in a collective fashion (as in the English “offspring,” which can refer to a single descendent or the collective body of descendants; BDAG, 937.2.a). God's promise to Abraham in each of the passages named above clearly has in view a great multitude of offspring or descendants (God regularly tells Abraham that his “seed” will be in number comparable to the stars of heaven or the sand by and in the sea). The Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible (the Targums) also tend to explain the singular, collective “seed” (Hebrew zarah) as “sons and daughters” or some other plural noun (Wilcox). Paul, however, insists here upon the significance of the singular form of the noun. This is not an entirely idiosyncratic reading, however, as other Jewish authors are known to have applied the promises to Abraham and David concerning their “seed” to the figure of the Messiah (Wilcox, 16). [David A. deSilva, Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text, ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 66–67]

Jews, of course, prided themselves on being “true sons of Abraham,” and therefore on being the recipients of the promises made to Abraham. The Targums, in fact, take this corporate understanding of the promise so much for granted that they uniformly and unequivocally cast the expression into the plural: “and to your sons” (cf. M. Wilcox, JSNT 5 [1979] 2–20). Paul, however, for whom physical descent was no guarantee of

spiritual relationship (cf. Rom 9:6b–7a), and with a possible swipe at the targumic plural, argues that Christ is the “seed” in view in the Abrahamic covenant, and then goes on in v 29 to speak of those “in Christ” (or “of Christ”) as also being “Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.” [Richard N. Longenecker, 131]

Paul’s commentary shows that the phrase “[and] to his seed” is a quotation from Scripture. The phrase “and to your seed” occurs in Gen. 13:15; 17:8; and 24:7 (LXX), while the phrase “to your seed” is found in 12:7; 15:18; 22:18; and 24:7. It is difficult to know which of these texts Paul might have had in mind, although the focus on “testament/covenant” in verses 15 and 17 suggests either Gen. 15:18 or 17:8, since in the context of these two passages both “seed” and “covenant” are found. [Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, 228]

3:8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”

Note that Abraham did not make a covenant with God; God made a covenant with Abraham! God did not lay down any conditions for Abraham to meet. In fact, when the covenant was ratified Abraham was asleep! (see Gen. 15) It was a covenant of grace: God made promises to Abraham; Abraham did not make promises to God. [Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1, 701]

He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, (οὐ λέγει, Καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, ὥς ἐπὶ πολλῶν)

Note verbal, plenary inspiration extends to this nuance in meaning. The words “salvation” and “salivation” differ in one letter, but t/meaning is changed dramatically.

In numerous Old Testament passages the term obviously applies to but one person. In Genesis 4:25 (“offspring”) it refers to Seth alone, in Genesis 21:13 (“descendant”) to Ishmael (see 16:11) alone, in 1 Samuel 1:11 (“son”) to Samuel alone, and in 2 Samuel 7:12 (“descendant”) to Solomon (see 12:24) alone. On the basis only of grammar and context, the meaning of seed in Genesis 22:18 could be either singular or plural. But in interpreting His own Word through the apostle, the Holy Spirit makes clear it is singular, referring ... to one. . . . In an even earlier promise, a clearly singular use of seed also refers to Christ. To the serpent in the Garden of Eden, God said, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He [singular, referring to “her seed”] shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen. 3:15). [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, 84]

Note that I can say “plant this seed” and I could have one seed in my hand, or many.

but as referring to one, “and to your seed,” who is Christ. (ἀλλ’ ὥς ἐφ’ ενός, Καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστός.)

Paul treats “seed” as a collective, as he does also in Rom 4:13–18. So, it seems that Paul is here invoking a corporate solidarity understanding of the promise to Abraham wherein the Messiah, as the true descendant of Abraham and the true representative of the nation, is seen as the true “seed” of Abraham—as are, of course, also the Messiah’s own, as v 29 insists.

The Judaizers in Galatia were undoubtedly proclaiming that God’s promises were given only to Abraham and his “seed,” the Jewish people (understood as a generic singular), or possibly, as Daube suggests, to Abraham and his “seed” Isaac (understood as a specific singular). Some of the Galatian Christians seem to have been taken in by their argument. Paul, however, in what appears to be an argument directly *ad hominem* in nature, “deliberately furnishes them with a deeper application” of the promise of God made to Abraham and his “seed” (D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 441). Based, it seems, on a corporate solidarity understanding of relationships in the divine economy, and coupled with the previous argument of v 15, Paul’s point here is that not only was the promise to Abraham established on the principle of faith before the law was introduced but also that God had in mind in the Abrahamic promise not those who observe the law but primarily Christ (and, as we shall see in v 29, Christ’s own). [Richard N. Longenecker, 132]

The term for seed in Hebrew in the Pentateuch in this quote is singular grammatically but it is also a collective. It can refer to one seed or many. Paul seems to be aware though that the author of the Pentateuch intentionally and strategically composes his book to show the readers that the seed of note is an individual king of the tribe of Judah who will fulfill the promise to Abraham and Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15. [Murphy, 127]

Of course, Paul was aware that the word “seed” (*sperma*), in Hebrew and Greek as well as English, could be used as a collective noun as he himself employed it elsewhere (cf. Rom 4:13–18). It was not uncommon in rabbinic exegesis for a theological argument to be based on the singular or plural form of a particular word in the scriptural text. Paul may well have been responding here to the popular Jewish claim that they alone, along with a few proselytes, were the “true sons of Abraham.” Paul wanted to show that the greater fulfillment of the promise is not biological but Christological. [Timothy George, 247]

But four things need to be noted about what Paul is doing here. First, what may be forced or unconvincing to a modern reader would not necessarily have been perceived that way in Paul’s context. In fact, what Paul does here is quite in line with certain kinds of rabbinic interpretation. Second, Paul makes clear in this very context that he understands the collective sense of *σπέρμα*; see verse 29: “If you [plural *ὑμεῖς*, *hymeis*] belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed [*σπέρμα*], heirs according to the promise.” Third, there is good reason to think that some of the promise texts in Genesis do, in fact, use *σπέρμα* as a semantic singular, referring to Isaac, Abraham’s immediate “seed,” or “descendant.” Fourth, Paul’s application of the “seed” language to Christ may also reflect

the later traditions about a “seed” of David; for example, see 2 Sam. 7:12, where σπέρμα refers to David’s immediate descendant, Solomon, but ultimately to the Messiah who would come from David’s line. [Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, 229–230]

We might think that the promises were to us as believers, but they are ultimately grounded in “one seed,” that is, Christ.

Paul in Romans contrasted Adam with Christ as the two heads of the human race. Adam as the head of sinful humanity doomed to die, Christ as the head of the new humanity with the promise of eternal life (Rom. 5:12-21). Here the contrast is between Moses and Christ: those who base their hope in the Law versus those who ground their hope through faith alone in Christ.

All humanity is “in Adam.” The Judaizers were attempted to find righteousness by being “in the Law.” However, true righteousness is only found when one by faith believes and as a result is “in Christ” (cf. 2:20).

This is about solidarity. The seed is “one” (v. 16); God is one (v. 20); and the body is one (v. 28).

. . . the original covenant with Abraham envisaged one seed, that is, a single family of faith, a unitary people of God. This is why Paul was so upset over the issue of table fellowship at Antioch. To assume that the “works of the law” have an abiding validity after Christ has come is to divide the church permanently into Jew and Gentile . . .
[Timothy George, Galatians, 248]

Cf. 3:28.

The one and only heir of every promise of God is Christ. Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ. Therefore the only way a person can participate in the promised blessings to Abraham is to be a fellow heir with Christ through faith in Him.

Whether before or after Christ came to earth, salvation has always been provided only through the perfect offering of Christ on the cross. Believers who lived before the cross and never knew any specifics about Jesus were nevertheless forgiven and made right with God by faith in anticipation of Christ’s sacrifice, whereas believers who live after the cross are saved in looking back to it. When Christ shed His blood, it covered sins on both sides of the cross. The Old Covenant goes to the cross; the New Covenant comes from it. On the one hand faith pointed forward, whereas on the other it points back. [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, 84–85]

The Bible concept of “the seed” goes back to Genesis 3:15, after the Fall of man.

Scriptures show this conflict: Cain versus Abel (see 1 John 3:10–12); Israel versus the nations; John the Baptist and Jesus versus the Pharisees (Matt. 3:7–9; 23:29–33); the true believer versus the counterfeit (see the Parable of the Tares, Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Satan’s goal in the Old Testament was to keep the Seed (Christ) from being born into the

world, for Satan knew that God's Son would one day crush his head. [Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 701]

Puritan William Perkins: "The promises made to Abraham are first made to Christ, and then in Christ to all that believe in him." [William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, *Pilgrim Classic Commentaries*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (London, 1617; repr. New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 184]

3:17 EXEGESIS

GREEK TEXT:

τοῦτο δὲ λέγω· διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ μετὰ τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτη
γεγονῶς νόμος οὐκ ἄκυροί εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν.

τοῦτο δὲ (τοῦτο = this || Near demonstrative pronoun: M.N.S.).
λέγω· (— || Verb: Pres. Act. Ind. 1S).
διαθήκην (διαθήκη, ης = covenant || Noun: F.A.S.). Accusative of direct object.
προκεκυρωμένην (προκυρόω = to ratify in advance || Participle: F.A.S., Perf. Pass.).
ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ — Ultimate agency.
ὁ — Nominative subject of ἄκυροί.
μετὰ (μετά = after || Preposition).
τετρακόσια (τετρακόσιοι, αι, α = four hundred || Adj: N.A.P.).
καὶ τριάκοντα (τριάκοντα = thirty || Indeclinable).
ἔτη (ἔτος, ους, τό = years || Noun: N.A.P.).
γεγονῶς (γίνομαι || Participle: M.N.S., Perfect, Active). Attributive.
νόμος —
οὐκ ἄκυροί (ἄκυρόω = to make void, revoke || Verb: Present, active, indicative, 3S).
εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι (καταργέω = to nullify, render inoperative || Verb: Aor. active infin.).
τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν (ἐπαγγελία, ας = promise || Noun: F.A.S.). Accus. of direct. obj.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Now this is what I am saying: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.

CONTEXTUAL, GRAMMATICAL, THEOLOGICAL, APPLICATIONAL ANALYSIS:

As to verses 17-18: “The Greek of these two verses is rather complicated; it may be interpreted as one sentence with a number of embedded clauses.” [UBS Handbook, 71]

Now this is what I am saying: (τοῦτο δὲ λέγω·)

Cf. to the “what I am saying” statement in v. 15.

the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, (. . . ὁ μετὰ τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτη γεγονῶς νόμος)

Four hundred and thirty years is derived by Paul from the Hebrew text of Exodus 12:40, where it denotes the number of years the people of Israel spent in exile in Egypt. In

Genesis 15:13 (which Stephen uses in Acts 7:6) the period of Israel's sojourn in Egypt is designated as four hundred years. The Septuagint text of Exodus 12:40 designates four hundred and thirty years as the length of Israel's stay in Canaan and exile in Egypt. The important point, however, is not whether Paul is correct in his arithmetic, or how he got his figures, but that the Law was given some four hundred years after the covenant, and during all those years before the Law God's promise to Abraham had been in effect. [UBS Handbook, 72]

The most perplexing feature of v 17 is the statement that the law appeared in history "430 years" after God's covenant with Abraham. The exact figure, of course, whether 430 years or 400 years, is of no great importance for Paul's argument, though, of course, the impact would be slightly increased with the larger number. Yet it has often seemed strange to many that in working extensively from the Genesis accounts, Paul should speak of 430 years from Abraham to Moses, which is the figure given in Exod 12:40 for Israel's captivity in Egypt, whereas Gen 15:13 has 400 years for that same period of enslavement.

The rabbis found the difference between Gen 15:13 ("400 years") and Exod 12:40 ("430 years") somewhat perplexing as well, and there are many places in their writings where the matter is dealt with. Usually they solved the problem by taking 430 years as the time between God's covenant with Abraham and Moses' reception of the law and 400 years as the period Israel spent in Egypt (cf. Str-B, 2:670, citing such diverse references as Tg. Ps.-J. on Exod 12:40; Mek. on Exod 12:40; Gen. Rab. 44.18; Exod. Rab. 18.11; S. 'Olam Rab 3; etc.). And Josephus handles the time spans in much the same way: 400 years for Israel's sojourn in Egypt (Ant. 2.204; J. W. 5.382) and 430 years from Abraham's entrance into Canaan to Moses' leading the people out of Egypt (Ant. 2.318). It seems, therefore, that this was the traditional way in Paul's day of treating the discrepancy between Gen 15:13 and Exod 12:40 and of understanding the respective time spans. And so Paul here is probably not relying on Exod 12:40 versus Gen 15:13, but only repeating the traditionally accepted number of years for the time span between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic law. [Richard N. Longenecker, 133]

The four hundred and thirty years refers to the time elapsed between God's last statement of the Abrahamic covenant and His giving of the Law to Moses. The Lord repeated the promise to Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 26:24) and then to his grandson Jacob (28:15). The Law came 645 years after Abraham, but 215 years later God repeated the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob, exactly four hundred and thirty years prior to the Mosaic covenant at Sinai. [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, 85]

The 430 years of Galatians 3:17 has puzzled Bible students for many years. From Abraham's call (Gen. 12) to Jacob's arrival in Egypt (Gen. 46) is 215 years. (This may be computed as follows: Abraham was 75 years old when God called him and 100 when Isaac was born, Gen. 12:4; 21:5. This gives us 25 years. Isaac was 60 when Jacob was born, Gen. 25:26; and Jacob was 130 years old when he arrived in Egypt, Gen. 47:9.

Thus, $25 + 60 + 130 = 215$ years.) But Moses tells us that Israel sojourned in Egypt 430 years (Ex. 12:40); so the total number of years from Abraham's call to the giving of the Law is 645 years, not 430. The length of the stay in Egypt is recorded also in Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6, where the round figure of 400 years is used.

Several solutions have been offered to this puzzle, but perhaps the most satisfying is this: Paul is counting from the time Jacob went into Egypt, when God appeared to him and reaffirmed the covenant (Gen. 46:1–4). The 430 years is the time from God's confirmation of His promise to Jacob until the giving of the Law at Sinai. [Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 701–702]

does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, (διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ)

προκεκυρωμένην (προκυρώω = to ratify in advance || Participle: F.A.S., Perf. Pass.). Note perfect tense.

When God made the covenant with Abraham, whose name was then Abram, He promised, “ ‘I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.... This man [Eliezer] will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.’ And He took him outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. And He said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it’ ” (Gen. 15:1, 4–7).

When Abram asked, “O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?” (v. 8), God ratified the covenant by a ceremony common to the ancient Near East. On the Lord's instructions, Abram took a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon, then cut them in half and laid the two sides of each animal opposite one another, with a path in between. At sunset, God caused a deep sleep, as well as “terror and great darkness,” to fall on Abram. After reassuring Abram of His promises, the Lord symbolically passed between the animals in the form of “a smoking oven and a flaming torch” (vv. 12–17).

Ordinarily, both parties to a covenant would walk between the slain animals, whose blood would symbolically ratify the agreement. But in this case, God alone walked through, indicating that the covenant, though involving promises to Abraham and his descendants, was made by God with Himself. The covenant was unilateral and entirely unconditional, the only obligation being on God Himself. [John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, 83]

so as to nullify the promise. (οὐκ ἄκυροί εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν.)

That is, the promise to Abraham (v. 16).

εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι (καταργέω = to nullify, render inoperative || Verb: Aor. active infin.).

Paul uses the verb to connote a “release” from a power or obligation (Rom. 7:2, 6; Gal. 5:4), the destruction of something (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:13; 15:24, 26), or less strongly, “render inoperative” or “make powerless” (e.g., Rom. 3:3; 6:6; Gal. 5:4, 11; Eph. 2:15). This last meaning fits in the present context . . . [Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, 231]

In v. 17 the substance of the covenant itself comes into view with the word “promises,” clearly an allusion to the blessings God promised to Abraham in Gen 12 and reiterated in greater detail in Gen 17. Specifically the promises embraced the gift of the land, a multitudinous progeny, and making Abraham a channel of blessing for all the nations. [Timothy George, Galatians, 247]

Also back to v. 8:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”

Land, seed, blessing. Will the land promise be fulfilled literally, and in what way? Cf. 1 Peter 2:9:

1 Peter 2:9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

Man cannot succeed in perfectly keeping the law, and God cannot fail in perfectly keeping the promise. Because the covenant of promise is complete, the covenant of law can in no way improve or change it. [John F. MacArthur Jr., Galatians, 86]

It is almost as if there is only one party to the covenant: Jesus Christ. But this is exactly what the Galatians were in danger of forgetting. By trusting in the works of the law, they were dividing the church along racial lines: Jews on one side, Gentiles on the other. They were not united in Christ. Paul used the promise to the offspring, therefore, to remind them that God’s eternal plan is for one family in one Christ. By the time he gets to the end of chapter 3, this will be the climax of his argument: “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:26, 29). [Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, 124–125]

In the final analysis, God made this covenant of promise with Abraham through Christ, so that the only two parties who can make any changes are God the Father and God the Son. Moses cannot alter this covenant! [Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1, 701]

3:18 EXEGESIS

GREEK TEXT:

εἰ γὰρ ἐκ νόμου ἡ κληρονομία, οὐκέτι ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας· τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ δι' ἐπαγγελίας κεχάριται ὁ θεός.

εἰ — “Introduces the protasis of a first-class condition (probably to be understood as of the “equivalency” type). The effect of the second half of the verse will be to turn this, essentially, into a contrary-to-fact condition by presenting evidence that shows the protasis to be impossible.” [David A. deSilva, Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text, 68]

γὰρ ἐκ νόμου = “For if from the Law”

ἡ κληρονομία, (κληρονομία, ας, ἡ = inheritance || Noun: F.N.S.).

οὐκέτι (οὐκέτι = no longer, no more || Adverb: negative).

ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας· (ἐπαγγελία = promise || Noun: F.G.S.).

τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ (— || Noun: M.D.S.). Dative indirect object of κεχάριται, or possibly advantage.

δι' ἐπαγγελίας (ἐπαγγελία = promise || Noun: F.G.S.).

κεχάριται (χαρίζομαι = to give graciously, freely || Verb: Perfect, middle/passive, ind., 3P).

ὁ θεός. —

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

For if the inheritance comes from the Law, it no longer comes from a promise; but God graciously gave it to Abraham by a promise.

CONTEXTUAL, GRAMMATICAL, THEOLOGICAL, APPLICATIONAL ANALYSIS:

In verse 18, there is a direct contrast between Law and promise. Paul strongly asserts that if God's blessing depended on following the Law, then it cannot depend on God's promises. (The converse is also true: if what God gives depended on his promises, then it cannot depend on the Law.) What happened in Abraham's case is clear: God bestowed his blessing on Abraham because he promised it. [UBS Handbook, 72]

For if the inheritance comes from the Law, (εἰ γὰρ ἐκ νόμου ἡ κληρονομία,)

εἰ — “Introduces the protasis of a first-class condition (probably to be understood as of the “equivalency” type). The effect of the second half of the verse will be to turn this, essentially, into a contrary-to-fact condition by presenting evidence that shows the protasis to be impossible.” [David A. deSilva, Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text, 68]

I.e. “based upon” the Law.

What is “the inheritance?” The notion of “inheritance” will be prominent throughout the remainder of the letter (3:29; 4:1, 7, 30; 5:21).

Paul at this juncture introduces into the discussion for the first time, the concept of inheritance, which he will build upon later when he speaks of heirs and inheriting (3:29; 4:1, 7; 4:30; 5:21). The literal meaning of *κληρονομία* is legal portion or inheritance. [Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 245]

Here inheritance is connected to the promise to Abraham.

it no longer comes from a promise; (οὐκέτι ἐξ ἐπαγγελίας·)

“The force of the argument is that God’s blessing was given to Abraham, not because Abraham did anything to deserve it, but by virtue of God’s promise alone.” [UBS Handbook, 73]

In fact, Paul’s logic in this verse is very similar to his logic in Rom. 4:4–5, where he argues that Abraham could not have been justified by works because, if he had, his status before God would not be based on grace. [Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, 232]

Rom. 11:6: “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace”

but God gave it to Abraham graciously by a promise. (τῷ δὲ Ἀβραάμ δι’ ἐπαγγελίας κεχάρισται ὁ θεός.)

Paul recalls the historical evidence that connects the “inheritance” with God’s promise as opposed to the giving of the Torah (see 3:8–9, 16), thus refuting the condition in the protasis of the preceding conditional sentence. [David A. deSilva, *Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, 69]

χαρίζομαι = to give graciously, freely (Verb: Perfect, middle/passive, ind., 3P). Ongoing.

The verb is cognate to the noun *χάρις*, which plays such a crucial role in the argument of Galatians (as in Pauline thought generally). The promise to Abraham, the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit, was the fruit of God’s disposition to be generous (*χάρις*), hence to be met with trust (that God would give, that the gift would be good and sufficient, and the like). The tense is significant: God’s act of kindness has ongoing, indeed irrevocable, effects. [David A. deSilva, *Galatians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, 69]

Abraham simply believed that God would do what he had promised. Then comes Exodus, Mount Sinai, and Moses, who delivered a new and different covenant, one encumbered with burdensome requirements, a code of behavior that makes demands and issues threats. [Timothy George, *Galatians*, 245]

The law demands, “Do this!” The promise gives, “believe this!”

And we will let Calvin (1854: 63) have the last word: “Let us carefully remember the reason why, in comparing the promise with the law, the establishment of the one overturns the other. The reason is, that the promise has respect to faith, and the law to works. Faith receives what is freely given, but to works a reward is paid. And he immediately adds, God gave it to Abraham, not by requiring some sort of compensation on his part, but by the free promise; for if you view it as conditional, the word gave (κεχάρισται) would be utterly inapplicable.” [cited in Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, 232]

Still, the Mosaic covenant promises that the inheritance (the promise of the land) would be gained by obedience, whereas the Abrahamic covenant pledges that God would save his people by virtue of his promise. [Thomas R. Schreiner, Galatians, 233]

Note the arguments of the previous section, esp. the quote of Hab. 2:4.

Poem of John Bunyan that beautifully captures the difference between the law and the gospel:

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.

Salvation in Christ does not rest on a law that we inevitably break; it rests on a promise that God cannot break. God has promised forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has promised eternal life to everyone who comes to Christ in faith. God will not—indeed, he cannot—go back on his promise. His covenant is an irrevocable will and testament. It stands firm forever.

Salvation in Christ is not a commercial transaction. My relationship with God is not based on my ability to make a deal or strike a bargain. The Christian life is not a quid pro quo, so that if I do what God wants, then God will do what I want. God simply does not operate this way. Instead, my relationship with God is based entirely on believing his gracious promise. [Philip Graham Ryken, Galatians, 128]

At this point one may wonder why the Law was given in the first place. That is addressed in the next section.

Paul’s take on salvation history raises two key questions, which set the agenda for verses 19–25.2 The broad, overarching question is obvious: if the law did not materially add anything to the promise, then why did God give the law to his people? After asking just this question in verse 19a, Paul devotes verses 19b–25 to answering it. He makes two basic points. First, the law and the promise serve distinct purposes: the law was given to

exacerbate and reveal sin (vv. 19b, 22a) and was not intended to, or able to, give the life that only the promise and faith could achieve (v. 21). Second, all along the law was intended to last only until the promised Messiah came (vv. 19b, 23–25). [Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, 225]